



# MAGIC'S DAWN

L.L. FROST

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MONSTERS AMONG US: HARTFORD COVE

BOOK FOUR

# L. L. FROST



## **MAGIC'S DAWN**

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# SYNOPSIS

**A town on edge. A secret heritage revealed. No pie in sight.**

Rowe thought putting the feud between the wolf shifters and the huntsmen to rest was the hard part, but learning to control her magic turns out to be a whole new monster. In true Rowe fashion, nothing is going right, and the expectations of the witch community only make it worse.

She wants nothing more than to eat pie and take it easy with her mates, but with so many newcomers to Hartford Cove, Rowe's time is stretched thin between magic classes and integrating the new witches and vampires into the once quiet town.

Not everyone is happy with the changes, and when a body is found mauled in the woods, fingers start pointing. The wounds hold an eerie familiarity to those that killed Rowe's mother, but Owen is the only werewolf who can shift outside of the full moon.

Is the curse taking control of her gentle love? Or is something more sinister going on? Rowe must uncover the truth before the uneasy peace falls apart. But can she bring herself to step back into the woods where her life ended as a child and face the nightmares waiting there?

## NOT MY GUEST

**W**hen destiny knocks, my witchy mentor, Mel, runs for the hills.  
Or, rather, the stairs, her boots echoing hollowly the entire way up the steep flight to the second floor.

After waiting all day for the new addition to our coven to arrive, we'd finally given up on seeing him before tomorrow. Mel had changed out of her *professional* attire back to her basic self, which is *way* better, in my opinion.

Who needs floaty skirts and blouses when punk exists in the world?

But apparently, she relaxed too soon, and her thumping around upstairs echoes through the house. Good thing she left some clothes in Tris's room after her move to her new house, or she'd be forced to expose her glory to her unwanted-fiancé, who should have been here three hours ago.

"A bit late for visitors." Haut considers the cards in his hand and sets a five in the discard pile. "Kind of rude at this point."

Excited, I pluck a five from my hand, too, set it on top of his, then slap them. "Uno!"

"We're playing gin rummy, Rowe." With a wolfish smile, he nudges my hand aside and takes my five, slipping it into the fan of cards he holds.

I mournfully eye the untouched slice of peanut butter pie at his elbow. "Does this mean I don't win?"

Ros used his vampiric culinary skills to make a pie for dessert. He claims being a vampire has nothing to do with it, but there's definitely something paranormally delicious about his baking skills that made my slice vanish right off my plate and into my stomach.

Haut had resisted gobbling his up, even though we all know how much dogs like peanut butter, and now he's taunting me with his slice.

The knock sounds again, echoing through the house.

Ros lifts his gaze from the old journal he holds to peer toward the front door. “Is no one going to answer that?”

“I’m not the one who invited him.” Haut slaps the hand I sneak toward his pie. “Bad puppy. Take your turn.”

I raise my knuckles to my lips and suck on them before answering Ros. “That’s Mel’s problem.”

With a sigh, Owen pushes up from his spot at the kitchen table. “It’s going to be your problem, too, if you upset him.”

As Owen passes behind Haut, he glances at the other man’s cards and holds up four fingers.

A growl rumbles from Haut. “I can see you helping her cheat in the window’s reflection, Mayor.”

“That’s Alpha Mayor to you.” Owen walks backward, his pajama pants riding low on his lean hips and his T-shirt hugging his chest. “And what are you going to do about it? Arrest me, Sheriff?”

The taunt pulls another growl from Haut, and his moss-green eyes flash with his inner wolf.

Grinning, I slap a four down on the discard pile. “Bajina!”

Haut’s focus shifts to me. “That’s not even a card game.”

Tris sweeps into the room. “It can be if we make it one.”

Water still glistens in his sandy-blond hair from his evening shower, and he wears a pair of my pink sweatpants, which are tiny on him and ride low enough on his hips to expose a neatly trimmed line of golden hair.

He had skipped a shirt, putting his torso on full display, which still holds on to the lean muscles he gained from years spent as a cursed wolfdog, then a wolf shifter, before we figured out how to cure him. A pink dog collar with his name on the tag still circles his neck, despite his new witch status.

Haut scowls at him. “You’re not a wolf shifter anymore, so wear your clothes.”

“Are you offended by the view of my beautiful, flawless, witch skin?” He joins us at the table and waves one tanned arm under Ros’s nose. “Looks nummy, don’t you think?”

Ros’s nose twitches, but he keeps his eyes fixed on the grimoire in front of him, the nerd. “Still not happening.”

“What’s a guy gotta do to get a little horny bite around here? So many vampires, and not a taker among you.” Tris snatches the pie from next to



Haut and brings it to me. “Sweet for my sweet?”

Haut throws his cards down. “She hasn’t earned that.”

“I’m pretty sure I just won this game of Monopoly,” I counter and accept my reward. “Thank you, sparky.”

“Thank *me*,” Haut demands. “It’s *my* pie.”

Tris smirks. “I think, technically, it’s Ros’s pie.”

Ros turns the page. “Don’t drag me into your dominance play.”

Tris eagerly leans over him, putting his throat on full display. “You know what would be a great dominance play? If you fed from me, and then we both —”

“We have a guest in the house!” Owen announces in a voice that can probably be heard down on Main Street. “Mel’s upstairs, but she should be down soon.”

More thumping echoes through the house.

“Well, maybe not *soon*,” Owen revises. “Join us in the kitchen. I can get you a beverage while you meet the others.”

Owen returns to the kitchen, leading a tall, blond man in his late twenties, with classical features and intense, blue eyes.

His chiseled lips curve in a smile. “Greetings, I’m Aspen Redfern. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

The fork drops from my fingers as I stare at the man. “Damn, that’s no dud.”

Tris fans himself. “More like stud.”

I take in the way Aspen’s clothes mold to his fit body. “Full meal deal.”

Tris nods. “All the fixings.”

“The whole horse and wagon,” I breathe.

Tris gives me a disgusted look. “Rewind. Not sexy.”

“The cherry on top of a triple-chocolate sundae,” I breathe.

He holds up his hand. “Nice.”

We high five.

“Well, that was certainly...objectifying.” Aspen casts a hopeful glance at Ros. “Are you Tris?” Then his focus shifts to Haut. “And...Rowe?”

Both men point silently at me and Tris.

Dismay fills Aspen’s gaze. “Oh, my.”

I stare up at him with wide, innocent eyes. “There’s no shame in running.”

Mel’s light footsteps sound on the stairs. “No one is running, so stop

trying to scare him, you two.”

She floats into the kitchen a moment later in a peasant blouse and a swirl of floral skirts, her hands already on her hips as she glares at us. “You promised to behave.”

Tris takes in her transformation into the good witch and shakes his head. “That deal ended at dinner time, *Glinda*.”

“My apologies for arriving so late,” Aspen says stiffly. “An accident closed down the highway. I would have checked into a hotel, but the only accommodations were...unsavory.”

I look up at Tris. “He’s dissing our love shack.”

He shakes his head. “No, our love shack was between the flea-ridden motel where you hid under the bed and the hotel where I got thrown off the balcony of the top floor honeymoon suite.”

“Oh, right. That place is super unsavory. So many dust bunnies under the bed.” I pick up my fork, only to find the place where my pie had been empty.

My head whips toward Haut just as he polishes off the last of the crust.

He grins around his fork. “Fight me.”

“No.” Mel stabs a finger at him, then swings it toward me. “No flirting.”

“Flirting?” Aspen’s gaze bounces between us. “And what was that about a balcony...?”

Tris and I eagerly start to talk at once before Mel raises an imperious hand to stop us. “Don’t even try it. You invited me here for training, and you *will* be trained.”

“I was doing fine with the training.” Haut scrapes his fork against the empty plate just to taunt me. “Not sure why we need outsiders.”

“Ehhhh.” Tris tilts his hand from side to side.

Haut leans back in his chair and crosses his arms over his chest. “We got the barrier back up, didn’t we?”

“Life is about more than the barrier.” Tris turns toward him and crosses his own arms. “And *we* didn’t get her through it. *I* did, with the help of the brigade, while you were off playing in the woods.”

Ros turns the page on his book, maintaining his focus through the chaos. Must be that special op training he endured while growing up.

“Would you like coffee, Aspen?” Owen interrupts, heading into the kitchen.

“No, thank you. Some tea...” He trails off when I shake my head. “Water?”

“We also have lemonade. Haut knows grandma’s recipe, so it’s good.” I twist in my chair toward Owen. “Can *I* have coffee?”

“No.”

The denial comes from multiple sources.

I flop back in my chair. “Why does everyone else get coffee except me?”

Tris grips the back of my chair. “Because you’re the only one who acts like a squirrel on speed when you’re hopped up on the bean juice.”

“Please don’t call it bean juice.” Owen returns with a glass of ice water and passes it to Aspen. “Let me make introductions. I’m Owen Hartford, the Mayor of Hartford Cove.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” Aspen switches the ice water to his left hand and holds out his right. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I couldn’t see much of the town when I passed through, but it looks lovely.”

Owen straightens with pride and shakes his hand. “Thank you. We take great pride in the home we built here.”

Turning back toward us, he gestures to Haut. “This is Sheriff Haut Greyson.”

Aspen’s brow puckers. “Forgive me if I’m mistaken, but you’re not a witch, are you?”

Haut shakes his head. “Born a wolf shifter and proud of it.”

Aspen’s gaze jumps to me and Tris. “But you were teaching them magic?”

“No, I was teaching *Rowe* magic. Tris wasn’t a witch at the time.” Haut’s lip curls at my BFF. “He was a *mutt*.”

“Ah.” Aspen’s gaze sweeps over Tris again. “Is that why you’re wearing the collar? Is it a counter curse?”

“Oh, no, the curse is completely gone.” He flicks the dog tag. “But I belong to Rowe, so I like to keep wearing it.”

Aspen flushes. “I apologize for being so forward. I was out of place to ask about something so personal.”

My head cocks to the side. “It’s not a sex thing.”

“It *could* be a sex thing,” Tris whispers.

“Anyway.” Owen raises his voice. “Next, we have Ambros Shultz, leader of the Huntsmen.”

Ambros’s beautiful blue-green eyes finally rise from his book. “It’s more of a title than anything. I’m working to disband the organization with the help of Mel’s mothers.”

“That’s still quite impressive, especially for your age.” Aspen dips his chin. “It is a pleasure to meet you.

“And then we have Tris and Rowe Branning—”

“Wendall,” Haut corrects.

At the same time Mel says, “Rothaven.”

Aspen’s gaze jumps back to me and Tris in confusion. “You’re related?”

Owen takes a step back from him. “What?”

Tris leans down to wrap his arms around me. “Nothin’ says lovin’ like a cousin in the oven.”

I reach up to hook a finger in his collar. “Why roam when you can get it at home?”

“Our family tree is a straight line to Hell.”

“You guys, stop!” Mel pinches the bridge of her nose. “No, they’re not related. Tris doesn’t have a last name. I’m so sorry. I swear they’re not usually like this.”

“Disagree,” Haut grunts.

Ros’s attention returns to his book. “If anyone’s related, it’s Owen and Rowe.”

“I promise you, we’re not.” Owen stares at Ros with horror-filled eyes. “We keep meticulous records, and the Wendall and Hartford lines have never been mated until now.”

“Small town makes for a small DNA pool,” Tris teases.

“Don’t forget the orgies.” I turn to Ros. “By the way, Rosebud, do vampires have orgies? Because apparently witches do, and there’s a freaking *orgy festival* for wolf shifters.”

“My, is it that late already?” Ros closes his book and stands. “It was a pleasure meeting you, Aspen, but I think I will retire for the night.”

“You can’t run forever, my sharp-toothed lover!” I yell after him as he heads for the stairs. “I know where you sleep!”

Aspen turns to our witchy mentor. “Melody, might I have a word with you?”

With a glare cast toward us, she nods and leads him to the formal sitting room.

Tris and I immediately scoot closer to Haut. “What are they whispering about?”

He rolls his eyes. “You two. What else?”

“But *what* about us?” I insist.

He cocks his head toward the living room. “He’s questioning if either of you are equipped to actually learn magic or if it would be better to bind your magic for the safety of all.”

“Can that be done without killing a person?” Worried now, Tris straightens and raises his voice. “Mel, does that always kill the witch?”

We had all seen what happened to Tris’s evil ex-girlfriend when Mel’s mom’s bound her magic. I’m pretty sure her ashes are still clogging up our vacuum.

Mel’s exasperated sigh proceeds their return. “You could at least *pretend* not to eavesdrop.”

“This is an entire town of wolf shifters,” Haut reminds her. “Get better at whispering.”

“Are you planning to bind our magic like you did to June?” Tris demands again, like a dog with a bone.

A threatening growl comes from Haut. “I will bury you both if you touch even one magical hair on Rowe’s head.”

“Hey, where’s your concern for me?” Tris demands. “You only care about keeping Rowe magical so you can hold her up as a figurehead for the town.”

“That’s it.” Haut stands and steps toward Tris. “Time for you to run.”

Tris gulps and backs away. “You’re not the Alpha of me anymore.”

Haut strips off his shirt. “Keep telling yourself that. One... Two...”

As Haut’s body begins to shimmer, Tris takes off for the stairs at top speed. A moment later, a giant gray wolf bounds after him, letting out a loud howl.

Off toward town, answering howls drift through the open window.

Aspen stare after them. “Is he going to be okay?”

“Haut will just bat him around a little.” Owen brushes back the strands of black hair that fall over his forehead. “Haut knows that if he hurts Tris, he’ll draw Rowe’s wrath.”

“The wrath of the doghouse, just as soon as we build one.” I drag over Haut’s empty plate and gather a sad crumb onto my fingertip. “So, you want to strip our powers because we’re too much for you to handle after only five minutes?”

“It wouldn’t kill you,” Aspen says primly. “That is, unless you’ve been practicing the dark arts.”

That sounds like he considers it as a possibility.

This will never work.

“No one is stripping your powers, Rowe, which is what I was about to explain to Aspen.” Mel glares at the man. “You’ve gotten soft in your lofty Second Circle if you’re ready to throw in the towel after a little ribbing.”

Her arms cross under her breasts, making the ruffle around her neck flounce. “And if this is all it takes for you to pass judgment on a witch’s worth, then you can just get back in your fancy car and return to your old coven, because you’re obviously a bad fit for the needs of this group.”

I lean over to peer out the window and see that Aspen does, in fact, drive a fancy sports car.

I straighten and focus on Aspen. “Let’s make something clear right now. You are not doing us a favor by coming here. You do not have this job in the bag just because the Paranormal Council sent you. Whether you get to stay is still in question.”

I gather the discarded cards in the middle of the table. “Our interview process is unconventional, but we thought it best to throw you into the deep end right away. We are not your conventional witches. This is not your conventional town.”

Owen gives me an approving nod, showing I have his support.

“Many of the witches here were rejected by your fancy covens,” I tell Aspen bluntly. “They are self-taught, they are traumatized, and they have already been put through a trial by fire in the recent battle we faced against the huntsmen. If you can’t think faster and in a dozen directions at once while also showing patience and compassion, then you won’t make it as our teacher.”

“Rowe is very protective of the other witches here. We *all* are.” Fire simmers to life in Owen’s pupils as his protective werewolf rises to the surface. “Mel’s mothers may think you’re the one best suited for co-teaching our coven, but we’re not so sure.”

“Ulterior motives played heavily into their choice.” I shuffle the cards in my hands. “You being Mel’s unwanted fiancé is *not* counting in your favor, either, for you being here. If you make her feel uncomfortable, you *will* be sent packing.”

“Or we’ll simply bury you.” Haut claps Aspen on the shoulder, making him jump in fright. “We like Mel, and her choice of partners is completely up to her.”

“Oh, you guys.” Mel blushes. “You’re going to make me cry.”

“He just threatened to kill me, Melody,” Aspen says stiffly.

“I have an entire graveyard of witches down at the sheriff’s office. You’ll fit right in.” Haut strides into the kitchen fully nude and glorious, making me drool.

The first time I saw him, I knew he was trouble for my hormones, and that hasn’t abated even a little since we formed our mate bond. When I accepted Haut’s wolf, it was supposed to ease the constant burn to mash our bodies together, but it turns out I’m just hot for this man’s bod, even without mystical forces drawing us together.

And who wouldn’t be?

Haut is tall, with that sexy mix of dark, rugged, and groomed that turns heads, and a muscular body that tests the seams of his clothes when he bothers to wear them.

When I first came to Hartford Cove, he’d been Alpha. While Owen now holds the title, Haut still carries himself with the confidence of a man in charge of his domain.

He stops in front of me, his eyes filled with predatory hunger. “Want to come to my room tonight, bad puppy?”

Goodness. No one in their right mind would say no to that invitation, and I’ve never been accused of being in my right mind.

“Is Tris still breathing?” At his nod, I glance over at Mel. “Are we done for the night?”

Aspen avoids looking at Haut and fixes his gaze on me. “No, we still have business to discuss—”

“Go have fun,” Mel interrupts. “I have some things to go over with Aspen. We can meet again in the morning.”

“Are you going to come back tonight?” I ask.

Mel shakes her head. “My house is basically ready, so I’ll sleep there and walk Aspen over to the diner for breakfast.”

“Got it.” I climb up on my chair and leap onto Haut like a spider monkey. “Let’s go, bad wolf.”

Haut palms my ass with one large hand and turns toward the hall that leads to his first-floor bedroom. “Coming, Mayor?”

“No, you two enjoy yourselves. I need to show Aspen where he’ll be staying.” Shadows bubble from his skin. “*If* he’ll be staying.”

Aspen takes several steps away from Owen. “You’re a werewolf.”

“Welcome to Hartford Cove, Aspen. Or not,” I call over Haut’s shoulder.

“This is where the monsters live, so if that scares you, you’d best leave before dawn.”

And we can just keep searching for another leader who can outclass me in magic, since I appear to be stuck with it.



## BREAKFAST AT NESSE'S

The next morning, we all head down to Nesse's Diner in the center of town for breakfast.

It will either be a celebration to officially welcome Aspen to town, or a commiseration party for Mel having to deal with us alone for a bit longer.

As we pass the shattered remains of Nesse's statue, a shiver goes down my spine. Its ruined remains stand as a testament to how close we came to losing the battle against the huntsmen, and I can't wait to have it replaced.

The little bell over the door jingles a welcome, and my friend Abony waves us toward the room reserved for large parties at the back.

Barron and Jesse are already waiting when we enter.

Jesse rises from his chair to scoop me up in a bear hug, my feet dangling off the ground and his beard tickling my face. "There's my favorite little witch."

"Drop the little part," I squeak as he squeezes the air from my body.

Jesse and I became friends during my summer visits to my grandma's house while growing up. But back then, he was the smallest one in our group, and skinny as a bag of bones. In the fifteen years of my absence, he grew into a mountain of a man.

Behind me, Haut rumbles in warning, and Jesse sets me down, only for his mate, Barron, to step forward and pull me into a hug.

Unlike his burly counterpart, Barron didn't change much. He still wears his black hair down to his shoulders, and his olive-hued skin still holds the kiss of summer sun, despite being a complete nerd who runs a bookstore.

I return his hug and inhale the familiar scent of ink and paper that clings

to him. “How are you feeling?”

Barron had nearly died in the battle with the hunstmen. He had been riddled with silver that was poisoning his blood. Tris removed all the bullets, but the poison had already infected Barron’s system. I had donated my blood in a desperate attempt to suppress his wolf shifter side long enough to give his body time to heal at a human rate.

It was a near miss, though, and if Barron had died, we would have lost Jesse as well, either through grief or madness brought on by the death of his mate.

Barron steps back and rubs his shoulder. “I’m nearly back to normal, thanks to you.” He looks past me. “And to you, Tris.”

Tris joins us and slings an arm over my shoulders. “We’re just happy to see you recovering. I’m sure Dr. Lopez wishes Mrs. Smith would improve at the same speed.”

“Hush your mouth,” Jesse says. “The longer she keeps that cranky old sourpuss confined to a bed, the more time I have to enact my coup of the city council.”

I frown in confusion. “Can you take over the city council if you’re not even on it?”

Jesse was kicked off the city council at Mrs. Smith’s urging when he backed our plan to open Hartford Cove to the new witches and vampires who joined us.

Secretly, though, I think it was to eliminate her competition in the pie contest. She and Jesse have been battling for years over who makes the best apple pie. She’d even accused him of pinching her recipe.

Jesse winks at me. “That’s why it’s a coup, lass. And our mayor will back me, won’t you, Mayor?”

Owen slides out a chair and takes a seat at the long table. “It’s time for a change, so if you want to head the council, I’m behind you. I’d like to nominate Ambros for a seat, too, as well as Harper.”

“Now we’re talking.” Jesse leads Barron back to their seats and hovers over his mate as he settles into his chair. “We’re going to shake this town up.”

Ros heads for the chair farthest from the window. “Do I have a say in this?”

Owen arches a brow. “Not if you want a representative for the vampires on the council, making decisions about what happens to your people.”

“Sorry, Rosebud.” I pat his shoulder in sympathy as I take the chair beside him. “Sucks to be the man in charge.”

“You’re on the council, too, Rowe,” Owen reminds me.

“What? No!” I wave my hands in denial. “Mrs. Smith kicked me out! And besides, I don’t have enough time! There’s too much training to do!”

“Oh, *now* you want to train.” Haut sits next to Owen and stretches out his legs under the table to hook his feet around mine. “Council members get a voting seat in the pie-tasting contest.”

Tris grabs my hand and raises it into the air. “She’ll do it.”

“Traitor.” I yank my hand free and smack him. “You know we don’t share a stomach, right?”

“We’re witches,” he says sagely. “We’ll find a way.”

Ros raises his fork. “I vote to hide the grimoires from Rowe and Tris.”

Everyone else grabs their forks and pounds them on the table. “Hear, hear.”

Abony breezes into the room, carrying a tray laden with coffee, hot chocolate, milk shakes, and water. “What did I just miss voting on?”

“Whether to hide the magic books from these two unhinged witches.” Haut stands to take the tray from her and passes out drinks.

I eagerly accept my chocolate shake.

“Not sure what triggered that, but I’m sure it has solid backing.” Abony grabs a fork and pounds it against the table. “Hear, hear.”

Tris leans over to whisper in my ear, “We can just practice when they’re not looking.”

“No, you can’t,” Haut and Owen say at the same time.

Tris flops back in his chair. “I miss super hearing.”

“We’re here,” Mel calls from the hall. “Did we miss putting in our orders?”

“No, you’re just in time,” Abony calls back.

“Darn, it sounds like he stayed,” I grumble.

Owen’s blue eyes shift to meet mine. “We still have to vote on that. If we don’t like him, he’s out.”

Yeah, but if he ran, it would have made things easier. That way, we could have told the Paranormal Council he left voluntarily.

Hartford Cove has been in hiding for so long that the town was completely cut off from the rest of the paranormal world. But they know we’re here now, and they’re still trying to decide what to do with us.

They expect us to simply accept that there's a governing body we now have to answer to. But Hartford Cove has its own form of government, and there are enough of us to make them nervous, especially after what happened with the huntsmen.

As of now, they haven't proven they deserve to be listened to, as far as I'm concerned. They've dropped the ball a *lot* since making themselves known, first with bringing Tris's evil ex into our home. Then they arrived only *after* we had handled the huntsmen's attack ourselves.

Only Mel makes me want to give them a chance, and it's a slim one.

My chosen mentor steps into the room and pauses at the end of the table, with Aspen at her side.

This morning, Aspen wears a cream-colored, short-sleeve button-up tucked into a pair of suede trousers, and his pale blond hair sweeps back in artful waves from his face. Next to him, Mel wears another floaty skirt and blouse, without a speck of her usual eyeliner in sight.

I don't like it. Not one bit. She shouldn't feel self-conscious about the clothes she prefers to wear and be forced into this fake uniform of a witch.

Mel smiles around the room. "Let me make introductions for the new people in the room."

She turns to Abony first. "This is Abony. She works here at the diner and is a close friend to Rowe." She motions down the table. "The burly mountain man is Jesse, and the man next to him is Barron, who owns and operates *Books & Blots*. They are also close friends to Rowe."

She motions to the silent figure at her side. "And this is Aspen Redfern, second-ring practitioner and former head of the White Thorn coven."

Jesse slips a protective arm around Barron. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Aspen's cool gaze sweeps over the gathered crowd. "More wolf shifters?"

Abony stiffens at his words. "Got a problem with that, itchy man?"

He turns to her. "Not at all. It's just unusual to find a witch surrounded by so many wolf shifters. Your kind rarely feel comfortable around us. As you said, we make you itchy."

"The Wendall family were the only witches in Hartford Cove until this last month." Haut's gaze shifts to Ros. "The only non-wolves, in fact."

"What Haut means to say is that we've acclimated to magic over the centuries," Owen cuts in smoothly. "The barrier around our town is a constant source of magic, so those who find it intolerable don't stay long."

"Fascinating." Aspen pulls out a chair and waits for Mel to sit before

taking the one beside her. “And do many of the wolf shifters here take part in the teaching of magic?”

“Before you get caught up in that line of questioning,” Mel breaks in, “how about we place our orders for breakfast?”

“Pie and French fries,” Tris and I call out at the same time, then clink our milkshake glasses together.

“Waffles with extra bacon,” Ros says.

The others quickly give their orders, leaving little time for Aspen to acquaint himself with the menu. Even Mel has her standard order by now.

“I’ll take the three-egg breakfast.” Aspen skims the menu. “Wheat toast, no butter, scrambled egg whites, and fruit instead of hash browns. Oh, and no salt, please.”

“Good lord,” Tris whispers in horror.

Abony shakes her head as she takes the order. “Bacon or sausage?”

Aspen passes her the menu. “Do you have a meat alternative?”

“Yogurt?” she offers, clearly at a loss.

He smiles. “That would be lovely.”

I wave for her attention. “Can Ros have his bacon?”

Ros nudges me with his elbow. “I already got extra for you to pilfer.”

Jesse leans over. “I’ll help her with the pilfering.”

Ros sighs. “Can I get a double order of bacon?”

“Plus Aspen’s rejects,” I insist. “No bacon will be left behind.”

Aspen gives the milkshakes in front of me and Tris a censorious frown. “Do you always begin your day with so much sugar?”

Wow. I really don’t like this guy.

I grin at him. “How do you think I stay so sweet?”

“Don’t worry, it’s only on days we come to Nesse’s,” Tris assures him.

“How often do you come to the diner?” Aspen asks.

“At least once a day.” I take a long pull on my milkshake. “It saves the others the burden of coming up to the house.”

“This way, Owen, Haut, and Ros get a break from cooking for so many people first thing in the morning,” Tris adds. “It’s also close to the clinic where I now work. And *Books & Blots* is right down the street. The sheriff’s office and the historical society are right across the street.”

It’s also an easier walk for the other witches, who have taken up residence in town, though I asked them to stay home today until we suss out our feelings regarding Aspen. No reason to expose them to his judgment right

away. Some of them are still fragile.

Aspen's blond brows shoot up in shock as he stares at Tris. "You're a doctor?"

"Vet tech, though we also treat people," he corrects. "The two go hand in hand here."

"Right." His gaze bounces around to all the wolf shifters in the room before settling on me. "And what do you do, Rowe?"

"Cause mayhem, mostly." When Ros elbows me this time, I elbow him right back. "I'm a gofer."

Owen glares at me. "Rowe is a project manager. She's helping me to oversee the repairs of our town and to make sure our new residents are settled."

"I deliver blood," I say.

"That is only one of your many tasks." Owen gives an exasperated sigh. "Why are you downplaying the importance of what you do?"

"Why are you trying to slap a fancy title on it? You say *go there*, so I go there." I walk my fingers around the table. "Go for this, go for that. Check, check, check. I'm a gofer, and I like it."

Helping around town has let me meet a lot of the residents, and I like to think the Wendall name is starting to lose its shine. Many of them now talk to me like I'm a normal person, not some mystical savior for the town. If I give myself big titles, it will build a wall between us.

But Owen and I don't see eye to eye on this. He wants me to be respected for simply being me. I want to earn respect and trust, which is an uphill battle after I arrived and turned this place on its head.

Owen opens his mouth to argue, but before he can, Abony returns with a tray of dishes.

Haut rises and takes it from her to pass out food while she goes to get the rest of our orders.

I eagerly peek under the crust on my pie to find a red mix of berries before glancing over at the mountain of meringue piled atop lemon curd on Tris's plate.

They both look delicious.

"Halvsies?" we say at the same time and grin at each other.

Abony returns with the rest of the orders, passes them out, then takes the last plate and settles into one of the open chairs. "So, what's on the agenda today?"

I cut my pie down the center and slide half onto Tris's plate. "The order of steel will arrive today, so we can start repairing the cages under the sheriff's office."

"Marleen is coming in for her twenty-eight-week checkup," Tris says around the fry in his mouth. "She asked that you be there, Rowe."

"Can't Delilah do it?" I scoop half his pie onto my plate. "She actually knows about babies."

"She wants you to rub her tummy and tell her it will be okay." He pinches my cheek. "Humor the pregnant lady."

"Are you performing magic on pregnant women?" Alarm fills Aspen's words. "Untrained?"

I swat Tris's hand away. "Nothing more than the power of suggestion, but it helps to keep her calm and resist the urge to shift. I think the barrier does all the heavy lifting. And the Alpha."

"The Wendall witches have always blessed pregnancies, and it allows our children to be born safe and healthy." Haut glares at me. "It is *not* the power of suggestion. No babies made it to term after Charlene died."

"Yeah, grandma died, and the barrier started to fail. Coincidence?" I shake my head at him. "I'm not really blessing anyone's bellies when I rub them."

And I've rubbed a *lot* of bellies in the past week. Women keep stopping me on the street to ask for the magic tum-tum pat. I guess the fight put everyone in a baby-making mood.

I look across the table at Owen. "We're going to need more houses in the next twenty years."

He catches on to my thoughts instantly. "That will be a blessing. We'll add it to the budget and start clearing land."

"Rodney's picking up a new meat delivery today," Abony says. "He wanted to know if he can send your order up to the house right away. His freezer can't store the extra amounts he's bringing in."

"I can be home to help receive the delivery," Ros volunteers. "Jesse and I are just continuing the translation job at the bookstore after this, so it won't be a problem to take a break."

"You work as a translator when you're not leading the huntsmen?" Aspen asks, latching on to the nerdy topic.

"Yes, we've been translating Rowe's grimoires." Ros leans forward eagerly. "There is a lot of duplication between each volume, which makes

much of them redundant. We're creating a searchable database that can be shared with other covens."

Aspen's face pales. "You're doing *what?*" He turns to Mel. "Did you know about this?"

She cringes away from him. "Well, yeah, it's a big problem in the witch community, so—"

"You're allowing them to deface ancient grimoires and simply *share* the knowledge they contain with just *anyone?*" Face red, he thrusts to his feet. "This breaks every tradition within our community! I expect this from *them*. They're *children*. But *you*, Melody, should *know better*."

Silence falls over the room.

"Okay, that's enough." I grab the plate of bacon from next to Ros and stand. "Aspen, let's take a walk. We need to talk. Everyone else, stay."

Bacon in hand, I sweep from the room.



## THE LAST INTERVIEW

**A**spen surprises me by following me out of Nesse's Diner. I half expected him to be stubborn and stay inside.

Maybe the man can be trained.

I hold out the plate of bacon to him. "Want a piece?"

His nose wrinkles with disgust. "I don't ingest that which was once alive."

"Well, that's a load of bullshit, Mr. Wheat Toast and Fruit Cup." I take a piece of bacon and shove it into my mouth, talking around it. "I'll give you a do-over."

His blond eyebrows pinch in confusion. "A do-over?"

"To rephrase that statement," I say slowly. "You know, so it's not a lie. Unless you really think plants aren't alive, at which point we're going to have a whole different conversation. I advise avoiding words such as alive, sentience, and ability to think."

He lets out a long-suffering sigh, which really isn't fair given the length of time we've known each other. "Your body is your temple, and what you put into it affects your connection to your magic. Eating clean builds a stable foundation for practicing witchcraft."

I pick up another piece of bacon. "Wow, that sounds so boring, but you do you, boo."

He gives me a stern frown. "Once you begin training, you'll need to do the same."

"Hard pass." I turn toward the vet/hospital and start walking.

When Aspen hesitates, I click my tongue at him. "Get along, little pony. This is your final interview, so don't dawdle."

The early morning holds a chill in the air with the promise of fall. I'm excited to see what Hartford Cove does for Halloween. Owen said there's a festival, and I'm crossing my fingers for candied apples.

Despite the early hour, several people walk the street, and a few call out to me or wave.

I return the greetings, using names when I know them and making note of those I don't, so I can quiz Owen or Haut later.

It's unfair that everyone knows me, but I don't know everyone.

As another man calls out a greeting, Aspen asks, "Did you grow up here?"

"No." I wave at the man. "I spent the summers here until I was nine. After my mom died, I stopped visiting. I only returned a couple months ago."

His brows pinch together. "But everyone knows who you are."

I pause and turn back to face the way we came and point at the large house on the hill that overlooks the town. "That's the Wendall witch's house. It protects the town, in a figurative way. The Wendall witch helped found Hartford Cove and is responsible for the barrier that protects the town from outsiders. I'm the last of the line."

"So you're a big deal here," he says. "I understand what you're saying."

"No, you don't. It's just a name, and the barrier isn't special. I can be replaced, as Mel's moms demonstrated when they fixed the barrier after the huntsmen attacked." I turn back around and head for the double, glass doors to our left. "Come on, I'll show you the vet clinic. Tris spends a lot of time here. This is his priority, not magic classes."

"That's not how this works." Aspen follows me into the waiting room of the clinic, and his nose twitches at the smell of dog that permeates the air. "Learning magic takes dedication and commitment. He'll need to quit."

"That's a very privileged viewpoint." I look up at him. "Is that how you ran your previous coven?"

"Of course." He lifts his chin. "If you want to learn magic, there can be no distractions."

"So you only mentored rich witches who didn't need to worry about paying bills." I lift my brows. "What happened to the witches who tried to join a coven and *couldn't* dedicate all their time to it?"

"If they're not willing to commit to learning, then they have no place in my coven. I only teach the best." A note of pride rings in his voice. "My students go on to pass the third-ring trials and create covens of their own."

I shake my head. "It's sad that you think that's something to brag about."

A young cub comes bounding into the waiting room, and I kneel, bracing myself for his clumsy excitement.

"Hey, Westen, still sticking with wolf, I see." I offer him a slice of bacon and scratch the top of his head, his brown fur soft beneath my fingertips. "Are you going to attend puppy time tonight?"

He barks and snaps the bacon from my fingers before turning and racing back behind the counter.

I stand and turn to Aspen. "His mom died during the battle. He hasn't turned back to human since then. He's been staying at the clinic while the town figures out what to do with him."

Sympathy fills Aspen's eyes. "What about his father?"

"He's not in the picture." I lead the way down the hall.

One of the exam room doors is closed, which must be Westen's grandpa speaking to Dr. Lopez about the kid's condition.

I stop at a room in the back and knock on the door before popping my head inside. "Hey, Mrs. Smith. How's my favorite sourpuss?"

The skinny old woman glares at me from her hospital bed. "I'd be better if you'd leave me in peace."

"Peaceful times ahead, I promise." I step into the room and slide the plate of bacon onto the table that stretches over her bed. "I'm just the delivery fairy, here to give you the good stuff while Dr. Lopez is distracted."

Her lips purse into a pruney frown. "What are you up to now?"

I tuck my hands behind my back. "Can't a girl just give an old hag some bacon for no reason?"

"Not in my experience." She takes a piece and nibbles on it. "What do you want?"

"For you to turn your frown upside down." I pick up the puzzle book on her table and flip through it, seeing that most of the puzzles are solved. "Want me to bring you some apple pie next time?"

She sniffs. "That garbage they serve at Nesse's? I'd rather eat sawdust."

"Delightful as always." I back out of the room. "Stay sour, Mrs. Smith."

She waves a frail hand at me to go away before eagerly picking up another slice of bacon.

I close her door and head back to the front, Aspen trailing behind.

Once we're out on the street and the doors are closed behind us, I say, "She stepped between me and a huntsman. She got stabbed multiple times

with a silver knife and would have died if Tris and I hadn't shared our blood with her."

Aspen's lip curls with disgust. "You injected her with your blood?"

"Not me personally, but yes." I lead him farther down the street, where signs of construction show in the form of boarded-up windows and tarps stapled to siding. "I don't know any healing spells, but the magic in my blood suppressed her wolf temporarily, so the silver didn't poison her before she could be stitched back together."

I point across the street to a large, rectangular building with half the side missing. "That was the community center. We're working to rebuild it, but until then, all town meetings happen at the Library."

Aspen studies the destruction. "I didn't realize the huntsmen used explosives."

"They didn't." I walk diagonally across the street. "We set booby traps for the invaders who weren't deterred by the misdirection spells we cast in the woods."

"Explosive spells?" He frowns, an expression that's becoming a permanent fixture on his face. "You and Tris?"

"We all set them up. We had very little time, so we split into teams." I point toward the woods visible at the end of the street. "Tris and I had this sector. After the barrier was put back up, we reattached the misdirection spells to the barrier so it can power them and warn us of future threats."

Aspen's gaze lifts to the sky, making me wonder if he can see the spell that surrounds the town. A question for the future if he sticks around. Curiosity can wait; today, I'm on a mission.

Turning, I gaze back toward the destroyed statue of Nesse at the town center. "This town bled and died to protect what they've built here. They protected me and the other witches at great cost to themselves. So, no, Aspen, your lessons do *not* come first. These people come first, and you can work around that, or you can leave."

His gaze sweeps over the town, taking in the damage, and he remains silent.

I turn back around, walk a little farther down the street, and stop in front of Books & Blots, pushing open the door. "This is Barron's bookstore and the current hub of our translation project."

"He just leaves the door unlocked?" Aspen asks as he steps inside. "What if someone robs him?"

I follow him inside and take a deep breath, loving the smell of ink and aging paper that curls around me in welcome.

“This is a small community. If someone robs this place, the entire town will know and shame them.” I walk to the puzzle books and grab one Mrs. Smith hasn’t done yet, tucking it under my arm. “They could even get kicked out. No one’s going to risk that for some stationery and romance novels.”

I gesture for Aspen to follow me through the rows of bookcases to the back, where one of the display tables was cleared for use as our project table.

The pile of grimoires my grandma collected sits in the center of the table, many with colored flags poking out of them.

I pick one up. “Most of them are written in German, which I don’t speak, but a lot of people here do. It’s taught in school as part of their heritage or something.”

I hold the grimoire out to Aspen. “As you can see, we’re not destroying the books. But these are from generations of Wendall women, learning old spells and creating new ones. They’re repetitive, and much of them are diary entries, too. A lot of history of women who never left this place because they were the Wendall witch.”

Aspen traces his fingers over the aged spine. “You have no idea how rare it is to have such a concentration of spell craft all from one family. So much has been lost.”

“And wouldn’t it be nice if that history was shared?” I grab one of the spiral notebooks from the table. “Only evil, small-minded people who want to spread ignorance hoard knowledge.”

Aspen’s blue eyes snap up to meet mine. “There’s a difference between making education free and handing grenades to children.”

“So be part of the change before there’s a revolution and someone cuts off your head for being a pompous, elitist ass.” I hold out the notebook to him and gesture for him to take a seat at the table. “Help us identify what’s too dangerous for novice witches. And share knowledge of spells that have changed and no longer require you to dance naked in the middle of town.”

He settles onto a chair. “And what are you going to do?”

I hold up the puzzle book. “I’m going to sneak this to Mrs. Smith without her knowing I dropped it off, then I’m going to eat my pie and drink my milkshake before I go on a blood delivery for our new vampire residents. After that, I’m going to rub a preggy woman’s belly, because it makes her feel better. When all that is done, I’ll see where else I’m needed for today.”

“You’re going to be a gofer,” he murmurs.

I salute. “That’s me, your friendly neighborhood task girl!”

“And when will we train?” he asks dubiously.

“That will be up to you and Mel to figure out.” I turn and head for the door, calling back, “And let me recommend you take the stick out of your ass before that conversation, because you are *not* winning any favors with her right now, and no one cares what a big honcho you are. She comes first, and her word means more than yours.”

His sputters fill the bookshop.

“Have a good day!” I pull open the door, sending the little bell jingling, and leave Aspen behind with his thoughts.

# PERMISSION SLIPS

## OTHERWISE KNOWN AS BETRAYAL

The sun shimmers on the sand dunes behind the house as it dips toward the horizon. The sand, glistening like thousands of tiny crystals, takes on a bewitching, almost otherworldly quality.

If I weren't still terrified of the ocean, I'd suggest we have a picnic down there. But after nearly drowning thanks to Ros's sister—we've worked past it—the closest I come to the beach is our back porch, where I currently sit admiring the view while Ros braids my long hair to tame it for the night.

A brisk breeze comes from the ocean, bringing the scent of salt and an autumn chill as it ruffles the long strands of my hair that escape Ros's deft fingers.

Ros catches the flyaway strands and pulls them back into place. "You know, it would be easier if we did this inside."

"But then you couldn't admire the sunset." I look up at Ros, only for him to use the braid he's weaving to straighten my head. "How many sunsets have you watched in your mole-person life?"

Ros had lived in an underground city with other vampires until I came along and rescued him by shoving him into my car truck. He really doesn't thank me enough for dragging him back to my grandma's house.

"I've seen plenty of sunsets. Sunrises, too," he says dryly. "I wasn't as much of a mole person as you like to believe. I had a job that required I be above ground at all hours of the day."

"So you were nomming on other witches' blood to walk around during the day?" Tris stretches out on the worn boards at my feet, where he lies in the spot of sunlight. "It doesn't seem fair that you'd drink their blood, but not mine."



Ros continues to work on my braid, his fingers grazing the back of my neck and sending shivers through me. “If I bite you, will you shut up about it?”

With easy grace, Tris rolls onto his knees, the worn boards groaning beneath his weight. He turns to face us, eagerly gripping my thighs. “You’ll really do it?”

“If it will get you to stop walking around half-naked.” Ros tugs gently on my hair as he ties off the braid. “I need to feed soon, anyway.”

I reach back to smack Ros’s leg, my hand connecting with his muscular calf through his black pants. “Warn him about the three-bite rule.”

“Yes.” Tris wiggles with excitement, the porch creaking in response. “Warn me about the three-bite rule, then bite me.”

“I don’t feel like you’ll take this seriously, but here goes.” Ros sets the comb he was using on the little table that holds our glasses of lemonade. “If I bite you three times, it will form an unbreakable bond between us that I can then use to find you anywhere in the world.”

“So you’d basically be chipping me.” Tris considers it for a moment, then shrugs. “I don’t see a downside, since you’ll always find me right next to Rowe, anyway.”

“Aww.” I reach out to cup his cheeks. “Who’s the bestest boy?”

Tris’s hips shake like he still has a tail, and he leans in to lick my chin.

Ros tries again. “It’s a bond usually reserved for family and mates.”

Tris squints at him. “Are you saying we’re not mates?”

That seems to take Ros aback. “Well, I mean, in the strictest sense of the term—”

“Hello!” Mel’s voice calls from the front of the house. “We’ve come for a visit.”

“Oh, thank god.” Ros murmurs and then raises his voice. “We’re on the back porch!”

“Come on, Mel, bad timing!” Tris yells. “I almost had his fangs in my neck!”

“You’d have to take off the collar for that,” Ros mutters under his breath.

“Better luck next time!” Mel calls out, her steps light on the worn boards as she walks around the side of the house. “We have some preliminary stuff to take care of before tomorrow.”

“Hey, Mel.” I push Tris away to make room, and he tumbles back to the floor. Standing, I turn to face her and nod toward Aspen, who stands stiffly at

Mel's side. "So, you're still here."

"Good evening, Rowe," Aspen says, his voice calm and composed. "And Ambros, right?"

"Correct." Ros shakes his hand.

Aspen's gaze drops to Tris, who once more lies sprawled out on the porch in the dwindling patch of sunlight. "Good evening, Tris."

Tris lifts a hand in acknowledgment. "We were just about to go to bed, so this is bad timing."

"It's not even eight o'clock," Mel protests.

"And we were *not* about to go to bed," Ros corrects. "We were still going over the potential risks."

Aspen frowns. "Of going to bed early?"

"Of Tris and Ros forming a bond if he gets bitten three times." I lean closer. "This one's about sex."

Mel's eyes glaze over. "Oh, yeah, the bite is *good*."

Aspen turns to stare at her. "You let a vampire drink your blood?"

"It was a donation." She rolls her eyes. "Get over it."

"Wait a second!" Tris leaps to his feet to glare at Ros. "Am *I* the only one you told the rest of the vampires not to bite?"

Ros's lips twitch with amusement, and he looks away.

Tris's mouth drops open before he snaps it shut. "Have you been teasing me this whole time? Are you some kind of sadist?"

Ros grabs his lemonade from the table. "I'll leave you to your witchy meeting."

"Don't go." I snatch up my comb and clutch it to my chest. Playing with his auburn curls is one of the highlights of my night. "I haven't braided your hair yet."

"You can braid it after your meeting." Leaning down, he kisses the top of my head, takes the comb, and heads toward the front of the house.

As soon as he's gone, Tris turns toward me. "Were you in on this scheme of his?"

Just as surprised as Tris, I shake my head. "You know I can't keep a secret from you."

"True." He purses his lips. "You're horrible at lying, even by omission."

Is that something I should work on? I'm not sure my brain is made for subterfuge where Tris is concerned.

I give up on the idea and turn back to Mel and Aspen. "So, what's the

preliminary?”

Aspen clasps his hands behind his back. “First, I would like to see your current magic tools to assess their quality.”

Mel winces.

When I glance at Tris, he shrugs.

I turn back to Aspen. “Tools?”

“Yes, your wands...” He trails off when we shake our heads. “No wands?”

“Just these hands.” I give him the old razzle-dazzle.

“And our winning personalities,” Tris adds. “Never discount that.”

“What about your personal grimoires?” Aspen asks hopefully, then adds, “Not the ones down at Books & Blots.”

I straighten with excitement. “Oh, sure. I have one of those. Give me a second.”

Turning, I run to the screened-in part of the porch, then into the house through the back hallway. Haut’s unique forest scent fills his room, and the comforter on his bed still lies on the floor where it fell last night. I pick my way over the mess to grab my grimoire from his nightstand.

With it in hand, I race back outside.

There, I stop next to Tris and hold the book up proudly. “My grimoire.”

Aspen studies the beaten-up cover, where one corner clearly shows teeth marks of the canine variety. “What happened to it?”

“I smacked a bitch in the face with it.” When his eyes widen in alarm, I rush to reassure him, “She deserved it. She and her hoochie friends were trying to kidnap Tris for mating rituals.”

“Against my will.” Tris shudders. “Girls wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

I admire his bare, sun-kissed chest. “I mean, you *are* hot breeding material.”

He nods solemnly. “Tis a curse.”

“Okay.” Aspen reaches out for my grimoire. “Let’s see what kind of structure you’ve developed for your lessons.”

“Oh, I haven’t used it yet.” I let him take the book. “But I got one, so that counts, right?”

Aspen sighs heavily. “Well, I suppose that means we don’t have to break any bad habits. We can come up with a table of contents and a bullet system...”

He trails off as he flips open the book. “Oh, I see you’ve made a title

page. It's very...creative."

I eagerly step forward and point to the stick figure at the bottom of the page with a balloon of red hair and a pointy witch hat. "I thought, if I drew myself as a witch, it would get me into the right frame of mind."

"And there's commentary from...your men, I presume?" Dismay fills his voice as he reads the notes the guys all added. "Truly a group effort."

"Look, even Mel got in on it." I point to where she added the Rothaven last name next to Branning and Haut's addition of Wendall.

Aspen's blue eyes shift to his partner.

She shrugs. "Everyone else was doing it."

Aspen snaps the book closed and hands it back. "And, Tris, where is your grimoire?"

Tris takes the grimoire from my hands and holds it up. "Right here."

Aspen pinches the bridge of his nose. "You can't share a grimoire."

I step closer to Tris. "But we share everything."

"There's no reason to write something down twice." Tris wraps an arm around me. "We're trying to reduce redundancy, not make it worse."

Aspen takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. "Okay, before we begin lessons tomorrow, everyone needs their own grimoires. *No sharing*," he says firmly when we open our mouths to protest. "Our first lesson will be to create your wands."

Mel smiles brightly. "Wand making is fun. You'll enjoy it."

Tris cocks his head to the side. "Have you made a new wand?"

I cringe with guilt. I accidentally destroyed Mel's last wand during the battle against the huntsmen, which is why Aspen is here. Apparently, when I shattered her wand, it proved I was stronger than Mel in magic, so she needed an assist.

Mel grimaces. "No, I'll be helping lead the lesson by demonstration."

My gaze shifts to Aspen. "Hey, where's your wand?"

He flicks his wrist, and a wand appears in his hand. Unlike Mel's simple wooden wand, his is adorned in colorful threads, feathers, and crystals that seem in stark contrast to his personality.

"Oh, neat trick." I reach for it. "Let me see."

Mel slaps my hand away. "Bad, Rowe. No trying to break Aspen's wand."

"But how else will we know if he's strong enough to teach us?" Tris demands.

Aspen's brow arches. "Would you even know what to do with it?"

"No." I drop my hand back to my side.

When I broke Mel's wand, I was funneling the entire weight of the magical barrier through myself and moved on complete instinct.

Aspen leans forward, his voice turning conspiratorial. "Don't worry. Once you learn a few basic spells, I'll let you try out my wand. I'm not afraid that you can break it."

I give him serious eyes. "You understand that I'm going to try really, really hard to bust it, right?"

He grins. "I look forward to your efforts."

"Not quite the motivational speech I was hoping for, but here we are." Mel rubs her hands together. "After sitting down with the others and speaking to Dr. Lopez, we've decided to make our lessons at three in the afternoon, so that you have the evening to record what you learn in your grimoires and practice in the evening."

Aspen gives us a firm stare. "Everyone has agreed to release you from work by two thirty, so there's no excuse for not attending."

Tris leans down to whisper in my ear, "They got our parents to sign off on our permission slips."

I squint at them with suspicion. "But did they get Daddy's permission?"

"Daddy!" Tris and I yell in unison.

The sound of the kitchen window opening fills the air, followed by Haut's rumble. "Yes, I gave permission. The sooner they sign off on you two, the sooner things get back to normal."

I clutch my chest. "The betrayal."

Tris sags against me. "It hurts."

Mel grabs Aspen's arm and backs away, wiggling her fingers in farewell. "See you tomorrow, kids!"

Looks like there's no more getting out of it. We're learning to be witches, whether we like it or not.

When Tris and I head inside the house, we pass Ros on his way out, this time wearing boots and with his keys in hand.

"Where are you going so late?" I ask. "Did Tris scare you off?"

"Hey!" Tris smacks my arm. "I'm the one who's been led around by the nose all this time!"

"Nothing like that. Besides, you both need to wait another three days before opening your veins." Ros cups the back of my head and leans down to

give me a quick kiss. “There’s a problem in the vampire community that I need to go deal with.”

Worry shoots through me. “Is something wrong? No one said anything when I did blood deliveries earlier.”

Ros grimaces. “No, they wouldn’t have said anything to you.”

Tris stiffens next to me, and his tone turns serious. “What’s going on?”

“The sunlight serums that we took from my father’s soldiers are running out, and they’re arguing over who should get the last of them.” His fingers stroke the sides of my neck. “But it’s nothing to worry about. I’ll get it sorted out.”

The sunlight serum is made from diluting blood from witches, and it allows vampires a limited time to move around during the daylight. Bryant, a rogue huntsman and my tormentor, had been running the Sunlight Project, which involved kidnapping witches not attached to covens and imprisoning them to use for their blood.

When he defected, he moved the witches to a bunker buried in the woods, and the huntsmen had lost their easy access to witches.

Ros’s father had hidden all of this from Ros, claiming that the serums came from the donations of witches within the huntsmen community. When Ros took over the huntsmen, he was dismayed to discover their reserves almost depleted.

Tris and I offered our blood, but we donated so much in the aftermath of the fight that Ros doesn’t want us opening our veins for large donations for a while. Owen and Haut backed that decision, and everyone agreed that the witches we rescued should be left alone.

Their blood has been stolen more than enough for a lifetime.

Ros strokes my pulse soothingly. “Don’t feel guilty about this. We’ll work it out.” He kisses me again. “I need to go. Don’t wait up for me.”

I nod glumly. Despite his reassurances, I *do* feel guilty.

The vampires are now part of Hartford Cove, and we need to put just as much effort into protecting them as we do our wolf shifters.

## NOT HUNGRY

When I head down the stairs the next morning, the scent of freshly brewed coffee and the sound of sizzling bacon greet me.

A headache pounds at my temples, and my eyes feel gritty from lack of sleep. I don't remember the nightmares that kept jolting me awake last night, my heart pounding and the need to flee coursing through me, but their after-effects linger into my waking hours.

The talk of the sunlight serum must have triggered bed dreams. Dr. Lopez has warned me that I could suffer from PTSD, both from when Bryant attempted to kill Tris before kidnapping and torturing me, as well as from what happened during the battle against the huntsmen.

Plus, the childhood trauma caused by witnessing my mother's brutal murder, my best friend's attack, and then growing up cloistered off from the rest of the world, thinking myself insane from the unused magic building in my body, certainly didn't help.

I've only had three counseling sessions so far, and I already want to shove it all into a box and forget about it. These are demons I would gladly never face again.

I rub my eyes as I pad on sock-covered feet into the kitchen. "What's going on? Aren't we going to Nesse's for breakfast?"

"You were awake half the night." Tris crosses the kitchen, already dressed in his vet uniform, and presses a mug into my hands. "I didn't think the diner would be good for you, so I told Haut you were dying for a home-cooked breakfast."

I blink toward the stove where Haut stands in his boxers and an apron, flipping bacon with the skill of a pro. His broad back looks warm and

inviting, so I shuffle over to lean against it.

“What had you up all night, bad puppy?” he rumbles, his deep voice soothing the tension from my body.

I mumble into his warm skin and rub my nose against his spine.

“Again with real words,” Owen encourages. “Not even super hearing could make sense of that.”

“Bad dreams,” I say louder. “Don’t remember.”

“Just come to my room when that happens,” Haut says. “I’ll wear you out so you can’t dream.”

“Hey, I was with her last night,” Tris protests.

“And clearly failing to do your job.” Careful of my full mug, Haut pulls me around to his side and places a plate of bacon into my free hand. “Your fuel for the day.”

I smack a sloppy kiss onto his bicep before shuffling back across the kitchen to slump into the chair Tris pulls out for me.

As Tris scoots me in, he leans down to breathe into my ear, “Drink your hot chocolate. It will help more than the bacon.”

I dutifully lift it to my lips, and my nose twitches when I catch a whiff of coffee rising from the rim.

Tris takes his usual seat at the table, catches my eye, and winks.

Owen frowns at us but doesn’t comment as I take a greedy sip, relishing the flavor of the forbidden treat hidden within my chocolate.

My gaze lands on Ros’s empty seat, and I frown. “Is Rosebud still sleeping?”

“He hasn’t come home yet,” Owen says. “He texted, though, to let us know he’s fine.”

I rub my throbbing temple and take another sip of choco-coffee. “Was he not able to resolve the issue with the serum?”

“He did.” Owen cuts his bloody steak into bite-sized pieces. “He stayed up to help better fortify some of the houses, so those without the serum don’t have to fear waking up on fire.”

“We need to do that spell.” I take a piece of bacon and dunk it into my mug. “What’s the point of finding it if we’re not using it?”

“Ask your mentors about it,” Owen encourages.

I nod in agreement and nibble on my choco-coffee-bacon, my heart not really in it. The nightmares from last night left my stomach queasy and talk of the serum makes that uneasy feeling return. Like I’m not safe in my own



home, surrounded by my mates.

The war between the huntsmen and wolf shifters had begun over my ancestor, who escaped the slaughter of her home to build Hartford Cove. She took her teacher's grimoires with her, which included the only known spell that gives vampires the freedom to move around during the daytime without needing to ingest the blood of a witch.

My family had been sitting on the spell for generations, while vampires were forced to live underground. I gave it to Ros as a peace offering to stop the war, but his evil asshole of a father didn't care about that. He just wanted to exterminate all wolf shifters from the world.

We stopped him, and I accidentally stole his super bat power, so he's currently rotting in supernatural prison. Ros is now dismantling the organization that carried on the old feud, which means there's nothing to worry about.

But the restlessness won't go away.

Concern fills Tris's light-brown eyes, and he leans over to cup my cheek. "Maybe you should go back to bed and try to get some rest. You're not looking your usual perky self."

The idea of lying upstairs alone in grandma's big bed makes me shudder.

I shake my head, then wince as pain shoots through my temples. "Too much to do today."

Haut brings another plate of bacon and a plate of eggs to the table. "What's on your agenda for today?"

When I look at Owen, he shakes his head. "Nothing that can't be put off a day."

Haut's hand settles on my thigh. "If you don't want to go back to bed, we can just snuggle on the couch."

I widen my eyes at him. "Can I have Greyson?"

He huffs out a breath. "I *am* Greyson, but if you want to snuggle my wolf, then you can." He takes my mug from me and scoots it over to Tris. "But no more caffeine. It will make you anxious, which isn't good for relaxing."

"Busted." Tris lifts the mug and sips, then hums with appreciation.

"I need to raid Books & Blots before the lesson this afternoon," I tell Haut. "Grimoires for everyone. Aspen commanded it."

"Then we'll go down there later." He nudges the plate in front of me. "Eat more bacon."

I force myself to eat another slice while the others scarf down their

breakfasts and talk around me about their plans for the day.

Despite my efforts to pay attention, the fog of exhaustion won't let any of the words stick. It reminds me of when Bryant switched out my meds and they were messing with my head even more than my original prescription, which just makes me anxious.

Maybe everyone's right, and I really should stay away from caffeine.

When Owen and Tris stand to leave, the motion startles me, and I jump.

Haut's hand cups the back of my neck. "Did you fall asleep there for a second?"

"Maybe." I lean into his touch. "Couch now?"

He frowns at the barely touched bacon, but nods. "Sure. We can save this for lunch."

Without clearing the table, Haut stands and picks me up, carrying me into the family room. There, he swaddles me in a blanket until only my eyes and nose poke out before depositing me on the couch.

Turning on the TV, he picks a movie at random. His apron goes sailing over the couch, and he shucks off his boxers. A moment later, a large gray wolf stands in his place.

Greyson jumps up onto the couch and licks my face, then nudges me onto my side and climbs on top, his weight pressing me into the cushions. His large head settles on top of mine, and he lets out a long sigh as he relaxes.

Smashed and warm within my cozy cocoon, I quickly fall asleep.



When I wake up, my head feels better and a warm, naked man presses against my back.

Haut had shifted to his human form during my nap and slipped under the blanket with me. Now, his hard cock presses against my lower back.

A movie still plays on the TV, though I don't think it's the one we started with. Haut's arm rests under my head as a pillow, and his steady breaths tell me he fell asleep, too.

I wiggle back against him, loving the way his big body wraps around mine.

The heavy arm draped over my waist tightens, snugging me up against his body, and his breathing changes, the muscles in his body tensing then

releasing in a micro stretch. With a contented rumble, his hips flex, his cock rubbing against me.

The hand at my waist slips under my shirt to spread over my bare skin. “How do you feel? Better?”

“Yeah.” Sleep thickens my voice, and a hollow ache fills my stomach. “Hungry.”

With a hungry rumble of his own, his hand slides below my waistband to cup between my legs.

My pulse quickens. “Not *that* kind of hungry.”

His thumb pushes between my folds to find the sensitive nub hidden within. “Are you sure?”

My breath catches, and warmth spreads through my body.

He scoots lower behind me, his lips finding the curve of my shoulder, and his cock nestles against my ass. My breath catches as he licks and sucks at my skin while his thumb makes slow circles around my clit, coaxing the embers of desire to grow.

A soft moan escapes me, my hips rocking into his touch, and the fingers between my legs curve inward, seeking my entrance.

I spread my legs wider, hooking one over the top of Haut’s, and he growls as he sinks his fingers inside me. I gasp at the sensation of being filled, and my hips rock faster, chasing the pleasure.

Just as my muscles begin to tighten around his thick fingers, they withdraw from my body.

A whine of protest escapes me, and I try to shove his hand back into place. “Why did you stop?”

He nibbles on my ear. “Didn’t you say you were hungry?”

“Sausage first, then bacon,” I command.

“Such a way with words.” He pushes my pants down to my thighs, and his cock slides between my legs, his length rubbing over my slick entrance. “Is this the sausage you’re asking for?”

I rock my hips against his length, needing the friction. “Yes. Gimme.”

He chuckles. “Such a bad puppy.”

His hips thrust against me, his cock sliding back and forth through my folds without entering. My desire slicks his hard length, making the glide easier, and every time he pulls back before thrusting forward again, the head of his cock catches on my entrance before sliding past.

Pleasure and frustration build within me, and I tilt my hips backward,

arching my back. His next thrust forward catches harder, and he shifts behind me, grabbing my leg that drapes over his as finally he pushes into my body.

The thick stretch of his cock sends me over the edge, and I clench around him as I come.

He holds still through the flex of my muscles around him, waiting until my body begins to relax.

Then he starts thrusting, the position making it shallow, but the angle perfect for hitting that bundle of nerves inside that curls my toes with pleasure. His fingers find my sensitive clit again and rub it in time to each powerful surge of his body within mine, building the pleasure once more.

The arm under my head curves, twisting my body around so his lips can find mine, claiming me in a sloppy kiss of teeth and tongues.

I moan into his mouth and cover the hand between my legs, urging him to move faster.

A growl rises from him, and he pulls back. "Touch your breasts."

A shiver goes through me, and I slide my free hand under my camisole, pinching my nipples into hard peaks. Gasps of pleasure escape me, and my inner muscles clench around Haut's cock as my body tenses for another release.

His mouth finds my ear, his voice a hungry purr, "That's it. Let go for me."

With a cry, I fall over the edge again, my inner muscles squeezing and releasing around him.

Haut growls in my ear as he stills, and his knot swells against my entrance before hot cum fills my channel.

My muscles turn liquid, and I sag onto the couch, my leg sliding off Haut's as I struggle to catch my breath.

Haut nuzzles my throat. "Do you need me to carry you to the bathroom?"

"Can't we just stay like this for a bit?" I pant.

"No can do." He slaps my hip lightly. "You have magic class in an hour."

I groan at the reminder. "Fine, carry me to the shower. And bring the bacon. I'm still hungry."

## INTRODUCTIONS

The late afternoon sun casts a warm glow over grandma's herb garden, and the fragrant scent of earth and herbs fills the air. The crash of waves sound in the distance, and the rustle of branches come from the forest just past the yard.

It's a serene backdrop for the upcoming lesson in witchcraft, but I can't stuff down my sense of anxiety. I can't even remember the last time I was in school. It would have been grade three or four.

I don't remember learning anything. Just recess. Will Aspen give us recess?

I fidget nervously with the leather-bound journals, rearranging them on the table. With Haut's help, I picked them up from Books & Blots twenty minutes prior. Barron hadn't stocked enough in the same color, so I chose a variety, more than we have witches who need them, in the hope everyone will find something they like.

A handful of pencils and pens stick out of a cut crystal glass from the kitchen, while a pitcher of lemonade and glasses rest on the far end of the table, away from the books.

"This is the last of them," Tris says as he brings in folded chairs that he stole from the community center.

"I don't know why we couldn't just do this in the basement," Haut grumbles. "That's what it's there for."

I rearrange the grimoires once more. "Because the basement is creepy."

My grandma's magic space looks more like the lab of a mad scientist, complete with creepy plastic curtains that would look at home in a meat processing facility.

Mel thinks I should gut the space and make it my own, but I've never felt comfortable underground, and I doubt some throw pillows will help with that. I've been wanting to talk to the others about converting the area into more living space, since there are so many of us in the house.

While I know it's held three generations of Wendalls in the past, it feels too small with all the testosterone walking around.

But before we can do anything like that, we need to deal with the ancient elevator. My vote is to rip it out and put in a spiral staircase. When the suggestion made Owen start mumbling about technical stuff, though, my eyes glazed over and my mind checked out.

So the creepy lab basement remains unused for now.

As Tris unfolds the chairs and sets them up at the tables, I gaze around the garden. I remember spending a lot of time out here with grandma while she babied the plants and told me about their uses.

I'm ashamed to admit I don't remember any of her lessons. But I didn't care about plants then, and I don't care about them now. I enjoyed the cadence of her voice, though, when she spoke of things she loved.

A brisk breeze comes from the forest, bringing with it an unpleasant scent, like meat left out too long, and I shiver as I glance toward the trees.

After I initially rejected my bond with Haut, he'd been stuck in his wolf form and brought me many bloody gifts from those woods. What I smell now is uncomfortably familiar. I hope there's not a dead deer nearby that will draw predators.

Of course, if there is, I have predators of my own to protect me.

A hand settles on my shoulder, making me jump.

Haut's concerned gaze catches mine. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, I'm just nervous." I glance toward the woods again. "Do other wolves hunt up here?"

He shrugs. "I've never restricted them from this part of the forest. Why?"

I shake my head. "It's nothing."

He squeezes my shoulder. "You'll do well today."

"How can you say that with a serious face?" I roll my eyes at him. "You've tried to teach me."

He grips my cheeks with one large hand and smacks a kiss onto my forehead. "I believe in your ability to focus when you need to, just like you did when you led us to those poor witches trapped in the well."

"You make me sound like Lassie," I grumble.

He pets the top of my head. “Such a good girl.”

“Leave now!” I point toward the house. “This is officially a witches-only garden!”

Ruffling my hair, he strides to the porch railing and vaults over in an impressive display of muscular prowess.

“I could totally do that,” Tris says with envy in his tone.

My eyes stay fixed on Haut’s broad back. “No, you couldn’t.”

Tris’s shoulders slump. “No, I couldn’t.”

The sound of soft voices come from the driveway, and I hurry to the edge of the garden to wave the new arrivals over.

Harper walks at the head of the small group, her blond hair pulled back in a smooth ponytail and her sharp, blue gaze sweeping over the setup.

The path through the garden is wide enough to fit the rectangle tables we borrowed from the community center. They’re just long enough to fit three chairs on one side, leaving the other side open so no one has to turn in their seats to see the front.

The four tables stretch to the gate at the back that leads down to the dunes, making enough room for all eleven members of our coven, while a fifth table sits at the front, slightly larger than the others to denote the teacher’s station.

As the women step into the garden, I smile and gesture toward the table. “Please take a workbook, a glass of lemonade, and choose a seat.”

They gather around the table, murmuring softly as they pick up different colored journals and select pens from the cup before gathering their beverages and dispersing among the tables.

Harper chooses a seat at the front alone, while the others fill the tables behind her.

The crunch of tires on the driveway draw my attention, and I go out to help Ambros with Delilah.

She had been discharged from the hospital a couple days ago, but she’s still fragile.

I meet them in the driveway, where Ambros slowly walks with his arm around his sister. While she’s fifteen years older than Ambros, there’s no mistaking the family resemblance. She has the same curly auburn hair that he does, though silver streaks hers at the temples, and the same blue-green hazel eyes.

Those eyes light up when she spots me, and she takes a few steps forward

on her own to pull me into an embrace. “It’s good to see you again, sister.”

I give Ros panic-eyes over her shoulder, and he mimes hugging her back, so I do. Awkwardly and with much back patting.

While Delilah had spent some time in my mind and feels a bond with me through her connection to Ambros, I’m still getting comfortable around her.

She pulls back and links her arm through mine, leaning her weight on me. Even though she’s several inches taller, she feels frail enough to blow away in a stiff breeze. Her imprisonment over the years has taken a steep toll on her health.

“Ambros was telling me about everything you’ve been doing for his people.” She hugs my arm. “You are truly amazing, Rowe.”

When I cast more panicked eyes over my shoulder at Ros, he gives me two thumbs up before heading into the house.

I turn back to Delilah. “It’s more of a team effort. Did he tell you he stayed up all night boarding up windows?”

“I heard, though not from him. I worry he pushes himself too hard, trying to fix what our father has done.” She squeezes my arm. “Make sure he gets rest tonight.”

“I’ll handcuff him to the bed if I have to,” I promise.

She chuckles. “I said make sure he rests, not wear him out.”

My face catches on fire. “Handcuff to sleep, nothing else.”

We enter the garden, and her gaze moves around the space with appreciation. “I had a garden, once. It was my joy.”

“If you like, you can come here whenever you want.” I gaze around the space, wishing I had the same level of enthusiasm. “I have a bit of a black thumb, and Haut doesn’t like the work, but does it in memory of my grandma. The plants would probably appreciate someone who cares.”

She sighs. “I would enjoy that very much.”

I mentally add daily pick-ups to my to-do list as I lead her to the table at the front. “Choose whichever color you like.”

Her hand trembles as she touches a green, leather-bound journal, and tears shimmer in her eyes. “I haven’t had a grimoire in so long.”

I jolt at the reminder that, unlike the rest of us, Delilah grew up among witches and already has training. But her father stole that part of her life when he killed her wolf shifter mate and locked her up until she learned her lesson.

A lesson that stole over a decade of her life.



Delilah clutches the green journal to her chest as I lead her to the table where Harper sits. Once she settles on one of the chairs, I return to the table to fill a glass of lemonade and bring her the cup of pens and pencils to choose from.

She selects a pencil with a cloud eraser on the top, murmuring her appreciation.

With our coven now assembled, I stand at the front to address the group. “Alright, everyone, Mel will be here soon with Aspen. And just a bit of a warning, he can be an entitled snob, but try not to hold it against him. He had a privileged upbringing and needs a little time to settle into life in Hartford Cove.”

Ambyrlynn, a petite woman with curly brown hair, raises her hand. “Will we have to pass a test to remain a part of this coven?”

Worried nods come from several of the women. Many of them had tried to join covens before and been rejected. Bryant had lured them into the Sunlight Project by promising they could meet other witches like themselves.

“Absolutely not.” My hands move to my hips. “He’s here to teach, but he doesn’t have the authority to kick any of you out. So long as you want to be here, you have a place in this coven.”

Ginny, her almond-shaped black eyes shimmering with tears, lifts a hand. “What if we can’t learn what he teaches?”

“Then we’ll get someone who’s better at teaching.” I gaze around at their nervous faces. “Mel’s here to stay, and you all know she’s committed to our coven. Just think of Aspen as opinionated arm candy.”

“What a lovely introduction,” a cool voice says from behind me.

I glance over my shoulder at Mel and Aspen as they enter the garden before turning back to those in front of me. “Attractive, opinionated arm candy.”

“At least you’re consistent.” Aspen steps up to the table and studies the leftover grimoires before nodding to me. “Please, have a seat with the rest of the class.”

With a salute, I head toward the back, where Tris saved a seat for me.

“Nu uh. You sit in the front, Rowe,” Mel commands.

“But...” I look at the single chair left at Delilah and Harper’s table. “There’s only one seat.”

“You and Tris aren’t allowed to sit together during lessons,” she says firmly. “You’ll only distract each other.”

“Boo,” Tris hisses from the back.

“I already hate this.” I settle into my seat at the front, and Tris passes my grimoire to the table in front of him, who passes it to me.

Aspen clasps his hands together. “First, I will introduce myself. My name is Aspen Redfern, a witch of the Second Circle. I have led—”

“Oh, shoot, I forgot a pencil!” I pop up out of my seat and hurry to the table.

“Ms. Rothaven,” Aspen hisses. “Do not undermine—”

“They don’t know what a Second Circle is,” I hiss back as I pick through the pencils. “And lording your credentials over them won’t make them feel at ease. Pull the freaking wand out of your ass.”

Mel lifts a hand to her mouth and coughs, “Told you so.”

Aspen’s cheeks pinken, but he dips his chin in acknowledgment.

Selecting a purple sparkly pen, I return to my seat.

Aspen clears his throat. “Before I introduce myself, I’d like to first get to know all of you.” He gestures toward the table I sit at. “Let’s start at the front.”

Harper rises and smooths down the front of her skirt. “My name is Harper Young, age thirty-two. I was kidnapped and put into the Sunlight Project when I was twenty-six.”

She sits back down.

Aspen stares at her in stunned silence. While it’s clear he was asking for their magical resumes, these women have had to tell their story so many times by now that they assume he wants to know their trauma, too.

Delilah rises unsteadily to her feet. “My name is Delilah Shultz, age forty-three. My father sent me to be a part of the Sunlight project when I was twenty-three.”

Delilah sits back down.

Aspen shakes his head, his lips parting.

I stand before he can speak. “My name is Rowe Branning, age twenty-four. My father was killed eight months ago, and I was nearly kidnapped into the Sunlight Project, which was a facility that drained witches of their blood to produce the sunlight serum. Another attempt was made two months ago, which I barely escaped from.”

With a hard stare at Aspen, I resume my seat.

A chair behind me scrapes back, and Ambyrlynn’s voice trembles when she speaks. “My name is Ambyrlynn Adams, age twenty-three. I was

kidnapped into the Sunlight Project five years ago.”

The recounting continues until at last Tris stands. “My name is Tris, age twenty-six. I was magically sucked dry by an evil witch until she cursed me into the form of a wolfdog. I have been a human again for three months.”

Mel’s blue eyes shimmer with unshed tears, and she gives everyone a gentle smile. “Thank you all for sharing. We understand that what you have been through was terrifying and inhumane. Many of you are still recovering physically and have an even longer journey to attain mental well-being.”

She places her hands on the grimoires that remain on the table, her voice strengthening. “Your heritage as witches was used against you, and your time to train and embrace your powers was stolen. But we are here to give that back to you, starting today with the creation of your first wand, which will be a symbol of your strength as powerful women and men.”

Murmurs of excitement rise from those behind me.

Aspen clears his throat. “Right. First, let us explain the basics of wand creation, and then Mel will let you watch as she makes one. Your homework for the night will be to gather your own materials, and tomorrow, we will start the work on yours.”

He clasps his hands behind his back. “Please, open to the first page of your grimoires.”

The anxiety returns, and I flip open my grimoire. Time for this little toaster to get a magical upgrade.

## BUCKETS...? SHHH!

**A**fter the tedious explanation on wand making—during which I zone out for large portions—Mel and Aspen release us to go out into the wilds of Hartford Cove and gather our materials.

Dismayed, I stare down at my grimoire, which has a picture of a stick with question marks around it and the words *Things that call out to me* scribbled off to the side.

“Anyone else heading down to the beach?” Ginny calls out to the group, her dark eyes sparkling with anticipation.

A couple others stand to join her, including Tris, and they head down the hill at the back of the house to the sand dunes that lead onto the beach. Beneath the sun’s rays, the white sand glitter magically, and the gentle waves sparkle.

I shudder at the idea of digging around that close to the evil ocean. I don’t care what Haut says. Flesh-eating fish live in that tranquil blue death pond.

Harper, Ambyrlynn, and a few others head toward the tree line at the outer edge of the lawn, and another shudder goes through me. It’s a good source of sticks, but you won’t catch me traipsing around inside. There be monsters in those woods.

I turn to Delilah, who remains seated at our table. She had manipulated water to lead us to where she and the other witches were being held captive. Something near the ocean might speak to her.

“Do you want to go down to the beach with the others?” I glance toward the house. “I’m sure Ambros would come out to carry you down there.”

She shakes her head with a soft smile. “I’d rather spend time in the garden.”

I lean back in my chair, taking a deep breath of the evening air. It carries the sweet scent of lavender and earthy sage, along with dozens of other herbs I can't name. Clumps of yellow, orange, and purple flowers bloom beside greens in every shade.

It's pretty, and there are some thicker branches that could be used for a wand, but again, it doesn't call to me.

I glance back at Delilah, who seems in no rush to start her hunt. The sun makes her auburn hair glow, catching in the silver strands at her temples, and the blue-green of her eyes looks exactly like Ambros's.

She's Ros's sister, and therefore my family, which is an odd feeling. I've never had a sister before, and I'm not sure what to do with her.

Her pale face breaks into a soft smile. "Why are you staring?"

"I've never had a sister before," I say, speaking my thoughts. My brow scrunches. "How do I support you?"

She lets out a tinkling laugh that fills the garden. "You know I'm nearly twenty years older than you, right?"

I cock my head to the side, studying the fine lines on her face from her hard life. "But you were at the same point as me when your life was stolen from you."

Her smile slips away, and her head bows. "Yes."

I glance toward the house, then out over the garden. "The world must be so different from how you remember it."

"It is. Technology and ideologies have advanced so much." She raises her chin, and her smile returns, chasing all the ghosts from her eyes. "But I'm not the only one whose world has changed drastically."

My gaze jumps toward the beach, then to the woods, where the other witches laugh together as they gather their materials. "You're right. I need to talk to the others more about what they need."

A soft hand covers mine. "I'm talking about *you*, Rowe."

Surprised, I turn back to her. "What about me?"

She squeezes my fingers. "My brother tells me you didn't grow up here."

My shoulders tense. "No, we only visited in the summers until my mom...died. After that, my dad stopped bringing me. I came here with Tris because we had nowhere else to go. At the time, I thought my grandma would still be around, but she had died."

"Which means you didn't know about your heritage until a few months ago." Sympathy shimmers in her eyes. "You didn't know about wolf shifters,

witches, or vampires.”

“Well, I kind of knew about witches.” My attention drifts back to Tris, where he struggles to break off a piece of driftwood. “At least, I knew about curses, so I had an inkling about witches.”

My focus shifts back to Delilah, and I drop my voice. “Though, I kind of imagined them all as evil. Like the witch from Hanzel and Gretel.”

Delilah throws back her head and laughs.

“Only someone truly evil would try to neuter Tris,” I say defensively.

Amusement twinkles in her eyes. “You two are very close.”

“We’ve been through a lot together.” I smile toward my best friend. “He’s the best. I wouldn’t be here without him.”

The statement isn’t just lip service, either.

Without Tris, I wouldn’t have made it through my dad dying so suddenly, leaving me alone in a world I’d been cloistered from. Tris is the reason my dad started letting me out on small excursions, where I discovered how little I understood. Hidden away with nothing but books and TV for company had definitely warped my sense of reality.

And Tris is the reason I was brave enough to escape Bryant when he tried to take over my life. Without him, I would have been locked up, just like Delilah and the others.

Realizing how my words may have come across, I hurry to add, “Not that Ros isn’t also the best. He’s just the best in a different way. He taught me how to shoot a gun and didn’t get angry when I shoved him in my car trunk to bring him home with me.”

She stares at me. “You did what?”

I wave my hands in the air. “It’s nothing. Just a little kidnapping between mates, but he’s not a prisoner. I just wanted you to know I love your brother and don’t consider him less than Tris.”

“You don’t have to defend your feelings. I can’t even imagine having four mates.” Sadness flickers across her face. “I remember how wonderful it was to find my spark.”

Bryant’s voice fills my mind, whispering about how Delilah had fallen for a wolf shifter, and that her father ordered his death before locking her up.

“Do you...want to talk about it?” I ask tentatively, feeling like it’s unfair to her that I know more about her history than she’s told me herself.

She shakes her head and offers me another smile, though this one can’t vanish her ghosts. “I’d rather hear about my brother. How are things going

with him? Is he happy here in Hartford Cove?”

I hesitate over how to answer that question.

Ambros and I haven't been together long, and he spent much of that time away, trying to stop his father from destroying Hartford Cove. While we share an undeniable connection, I wonder sometimes if he misses the fast-paced life of hunting rogue supernaturals.

“We're still getting to know each other.” I play with a curl of my long, dark-red hair. “But I hope he's happy. He seems content. I think having other vampires here helps, as well as finding you. I think a large part of his life was about finding you, and now that we have, it's allowed him to think more about what he wants in life.”

Delilah nods, her gaze fixed on the herb garden as if drawing strength from the earthy scents and vibrant colors. “He always had a way with people, even when he was younger, but he used to resist joining our father's organization.”

I turn to her in surprise. “He did?”

A distant look enters her eyes. “Oh, yes. He was quite the rebel when he was young. He talked about becoming a chef, of all things. Our father was not pleased.”

I can't help but chuckle at the image of Ambros with his long hair tied up and wearing a chef's hat. “I can see that. He makes delicious waffles. I heard I have *you* to thank for that.”

“He used to annoy me so much, constantly being underfoot in the kitchen, wanting to help.” Delilah shakes her head. “But I suppose he embraced our father's world after I disappeared. He felt the responsibility, the need, to protect. Locking me up solved two problems for our father.”

Anger rises through me at how the two Shultz siblings had been mistreated. “Well, now he's getting a taste of his own medicine in jail.”

“So he is.” Delilah clears her throat. “We should probably look for wand ingredients before the sun sets.”

I may be bad at picking up on social cues, but I hear that one loud and clear and bounce to my feet. “Should I get you a basket? If I'd known they were going to send us on a scavenger hunt, I would have bought more buckets. How many of these smelly weeds are calling out to you?”

“Something to store them in would be nice.” She rises slowly from her seat, her limbs shaking. “And perhaps a pair of gardening shears.”

“Aye aye, captain!” I salute her. “Be right back!”

I turn and sprint out of the garden, follow the path around to the front of the house, and pound up the porch stairs. “Rosebud!”

“No need to shout, my love.” Ros’s voice drifts from the formal sitting room tucked next to the kitchen. “I’m right here.”

I veer toward him and swing into the archway to find him sitting in my grandma’s old chair, a book propped on his folded knee.

The sunlight coming through the bay window catches in his curly, shoulder-length auburn hair and paints his classical features in golden light. The sight makes me want to stand there admiring him for hours, while at the same time, my fingers twitch with the urge to touch those soft curls.

Crinkles form at the corners of his blue-green eyes. “Were you just doing a roll call? Or did you need something?”

I snap myself out of the trance my mate’s beauty cast over me. “I need my bucket!”

One brow arches. “Which one?”

I widen my eyes. “There’s only one bucket.”

His other brow arches. “So that’s not a hoard of buckets growing in the attic?”

My hands move to my hips. “What have you been doing in my attic?”

“Don’t change the subject.” He slides a bookmark into his book, closes it, and sets it aside to stand. “Which *specific* bucket are you looking for?”

My head tips back as he walks over to stand in front of me. “The special bucket. The bucket for finding lost things.”

He grazes a knuckle over my cheek, making my breath catch. “And why do you need this special bucket?”

I lick my lips. “Because Delilah’s picking herbs in the garden, and it’s my luckiest—and *only*—bucket.”

“Ah.” His touch drifts down to my quickening pulse, and hunger fills his eyes. “I believe it’s in the hall closet.”

I raise a hand to settle over his heart. “If you keep looking at me like that, I’m going to forget I had a different reason for coming in here, and then you’ll have to write me an excuse for not having any wand ingredients tomorrow.”

His face dips toward mine, his hungry gaze jumping from my lips to my throat. “We can’t have that.”

“Don’t make me get out the tiny erasers.” The threat comes out on a shaky breath. “I *will* cap your fangs.”



“Before or after they’re inside you?” he purrs.

“You are such a bad vampire.” I sway toward him. “But if you’re hungry, who am I to deny you a meal?”

“So self-sacrificing.” His hand curls around the back of my neck. “Maybe just a little sip?”

Eyes closing, I tip my head back. “Just the teeniest, tiniest.”

The screen door bangs, followed by footsteps pounding through the house, and Tris shouts, “Hey! Put your fangs away! You said no biting for another two days!”

Ros and I groan as Tris tugs me away from biting temptation.

“Besides, we’re supposed to be doing a class assignment.” Tris drapes an arm around me and glares at Ros. “Stop distracting Rowe.”

“It was only going to be a teeny tiny distraction.” I look up at Tris. “What did you come in here for, anyway?”

“Ginny asked if we have a sieve.” His focus shifts to Ros. “What’s a sieve?”

“It’s what we use to drain the noodles.” Suspicion fills his voice. “What’s she planning to use it for?”

“Not for noodles.” Tris glances around. “I also need an ax.”

Alarm pulls Ros up straight. “What do you need an ax for?”

Tris rolls his eyes. “To cut things, obviously.”

“Oh, I need scissors.” I bounce on my toes. “Preferably garden shears, but really big scissors would suffice.”

Ros’s wide eyes shift to me. “Why do you need scissors?”

“To cut things, obviously.” Now, it’s my turn to roll my eyes. “I promise not to run while holding them. In fact, maybe we should get a whole bucket of scissors.”

“Oh, good call.” Tris’s arm drops from my shoulders, and he turns toward the stairs. “I’ll go get your buckets.”

“What? No! Shh!” I glance at Ros and laugh. “What buckets? There are no buckets in the attic.”

“Uh, huh.” With a shake of his head, Ros walks to the hall closet and reaches up to the top shelf to grab my special bucket. “Here you go. The garden shears are probably in the back shed with the other gardening tools.”

I shudder with revulsion. “Where the spiders live?”

Ros sighs. “I’ll go get the shears for you.”

I hug him tight. “You’re the best.”

A clatter of plastic tubs sounds from the stairs. “Hey, I thought *I* was the best!”

“You’re the bestest!” I call.

Tris clatters past with his arms full of buckets, heading toward the kitchen.

A moment later, he trots back toward the door, now with a colander on his head, and the screen door bangs shut.

I give Ros another squeeze. “You’re also the bestest, oh master of spider slaying.”

“Now you’re just trying to butter me up,” he grumbles.

“I can butter you up and still mean it.” Releasing him, I hoist up my bucket. “I hope Delilah likes this.”

“She’ll appreciate that you’re letting her use it.” He taps the puffy glitter paint on the side, where I labeled it *Special Bucket*, along with stars and wavy lines to represent water. “How could she not when it’s so special?”

I had added the decorations before allowing Haut to hide it, so it wouldn’t get mixed up with my other not-so-secret buckets. If I ever need to speak to another witch through water, or need to track someone down, I want to use something tried and true.

My head lifts with excitement. “Hey, do you think this could be considered a magical tool? Aspen seemed pretty disappointed we didn’t have any, but we used this bucket to find Delilah and the others, so it’s pretty magical, right?”

Warmth fills Ros’s face, and he cups my cheek. “Yeah, it’s pretty magical, all right.” Then his eyes narrow. “Do you have Aspen’s cell number?”

I frown up at Ros. “Why?”

He strokes my cheeks. “Just something I’d like to discuss with him.”

I shrug. “It’s in my phone if you can find it. Can’t remember where I left the darn thing, but I added Aspen under Stick Up His Ass.”

Ros dips his fingers into my pocket and pulls out my phone. “Got it.”

“Huh.” I glance down at my leggings. “That should have been obvious.”

“You have a lot on your mind.” He turns me around and gives me a little shove toward the door. “No more avoiding your homework.”

“I wasn’t avoiding.” I peer back over my shoulder at him. “This was an important pause. And if you’re really hungry, I can drop the bucket off with Delilah, then come back inside for a little nibble.”

He swats me on the ass, leaving a delicious sting behind. “You won’t be using me to escape your homework.”

“Fine,” I pout and let him push me out onto the porch.

While he heads around back to the spider-infested shed, I return to the garden.

I find Delilah kneeling next to a bush of stinky purple lavender and present her with my special bucket. “Here we go, one herb-transportation device!”

A smile spreads over Delilah’s lips, and she takes it to admire my artwork on the sides. “Oh, my. Are you sure you want to loan this to me?”

“Of course. This is a magical bucket.” I poke the puffy paint that forms squiggles on the side. “This represents when you made the water lead us to you and the others. I’d say that makes this very important magical tool half yours.”

“Oh.” Her hands tremble on the bucket, and she blinks a few times. “Thank you, Rowe. This means a lot.”

I glance at the few clippings she holds in her lap. “Looks like you’re making good progress with finding things that speak to you.”

“Oh, no.” She touches the green leaves. “I just thought this rosemary and oregano would go well with tonight’s dinner.”

“Ah.” I nod like I know what she’s talking about. “Delicious weeds for the...soup?”

“Pot roast,” she supplies. “Rodney down at the butcher gave me a pot roast. He’s such a kind young man.”

“Rodney’s good with meat.” I waggle my eyebrows. “And single.”

She frowns at me. “And half my age.”

“Don’t men peak earlier than women?” Ros arrives with the promised shears, which look capable of taking down small trees, and I straighten to face him. “Hey, have you peaked yet?”

Delilah chokes on a laugh, her face turning pink.

“Peeked?” He glances back toward the house. “Is there another stash of buckets I’m not supposed to know about somewhere inside?”

“Rowe, look!” Tris jogs up, a proud grin on his face.

He carries a sloshing bucket, and sand covers the rolled-up cuffs of his pants and his bare feet.

He comes over to us and sets the heavy bucket on the stone path. “Look what Ambyrlynn found!”

I peer into the bucket to see dozens of small white clams. “Uh, Tris, I don’t think Mel is going to let you use live clams to make a wand.”

“It’s not for wand making, it’s for our bellies!” He dances from foot to foot with excitement. “Ambros, you know what to do with these, right? I’ve never been to a clambake, and I really, really want to know what that is.”

Catching his excitement, I bounce on my toes. “I’ve never been to a clambake, either! How do we do that? Do we just shove them into the oven?”

“I don’t actually know, either.” Ros looks pained at the admission. “We didn’t live near the beach growing up. But I’m sure Owen or Haut will know what to do with these.”

Tris turns back toward the beach. “We’ll dig up more!”

“Shouldn’t you be doing your homework—”

A terrified scream splits the air, cutting off his words.

Blood running cold, I spin toward the woods where the sound came from. The place where three of the witches I’m supposed to protect ventured into without being warned about the monster that lives inside.

## INTO THE WOODS, BRAVE TOASTER

I take off running, Ros's and Tris's voices chasing after me.

Outside the garden, I grab the wooden sign that says *Garden* from next to the short fence without pausing, my heart pounding in my throat.

I should have told them not to go into the woods. Nothing good has ever happened in there.

Off toward town, howls ring through the air, responding to the call of distress.

My gaze sweeps the tree line for any sign of Harper and the others. The woods are silent now, and I can't tell which direction the scream came from.

Before I can dive into the shadows, strong arms come around me from behind, lifting me from my feet. "Whoa there, tiny Helsing! What do you think you're going to do with that stake?"

I struggle against Tris's hold. "Let me go! We have to save them!"

"Rowe, it's okay. They're coming out of the woods." Ros catches up and points into the trees. "See? There they are."

I follow the line of his arm and spot Harper and the others rushing out of the bushes near the driveway, their faces ashen.

Ros gently peels my hands off the wooden sign I clutch. "I'll go see what happened, okay? But the witches are *fine*."

I sag within Tris's arms. "Okay, go play Rambo. I'll just...stay here."

As Ros moves to intercept the women, my head falls back on Tris's shoulder, and I close my eyes as the adrenaline drains out of me.

"Are you okay?" Tris nuzzles my cheek. "You took off like a rabbit with a coyote on your tail."

I let out a shaky sigh. "If we need wood to build new houses, can we tear

down this forest? I hate it so much.”

“Even if we don’t need it to build houses, we can tear it down.” Tris sets me back on my feet, though his arms stay around me. “We can use it for the bonfire at the wolf shifter’s orgy next year.”

That draws a laugh from me. “That’s a good idea.”

“You know, Ros isn’t the only Rambo around here.” He cuddles me closer. “As soon as you heard that scream, you launched into attack mode.”

“Yeah, let’s deactivate that mode.” I shake my head at myself.

What did I seriously think I could do with a picket sign against a monster?

I glance toward Ros and the women. “What do you think made them scream?”

Tris smirks. “They probably saw a naked wolf shifter.”

I try to return his smile, but fail. That hadn’t been the startled scream of impropriety. That was a scream of terror.

Ros glances toward the woods, his expression grim, before he nods at the women and motions them toward the house.

No, they definitely didn’t scream because they saw a naked wolf shifter.

Harper walks with the other women to the foot of the porch steps, where she pauses to watch them go inside before heading toward the garden. There, she stops to speak to Delilah, who pales and gathers her things to shuffle toward the house.

Once she’s on her way, Harper heads down into the sand dunes to gather the others.

My focus shifts back to Ros just in time to catch sight of him vanishing into the woods.

Oh, hell no. He doesn’t even have his gun with him. Ros had stopped carrying it while in Clearhelm, and it now sits in a safe down at the sheriff’s office.

I wiggle out of Tris’s arms and hurry after Ros. He’s not going in there alone.

“Hey, sparky, where do you think you’re scampering off to now?” Tris hurries to keep pace with me, which isn’t hard with his long legs. “Don’t you think Ros would prefer we go inside with the others?”

I double-time my pace. “He’s unarmed.”

“No, he has your very solid picket sign.” Tris catches my hand. “We should go inside where it’s safe.”

“I can’t run and hide.” My hands curl into fists. “Not again.”

Despite my words, I freeze at the tree line, unable to convince my feet to move forward. My deepest nightmares began in these woods. My mother died here, and I thought Owen had died with her. Every trauma I struggle with now began *here*.

A tremor runs through me, fear rattling my bones. The feel of nightmarish red eyes watching me raises goose bumps all over my body. No matter how much I tell myself that Owen’s and Haut’s fathers killed the rogue werewolf that murdered my mom, I can’t force myself to move forward.

Tris grips my shoulders. “It’s okay to not always be a brave little toaster.”

I take a gulping breath, and the scent of rotted meat fills my lungs, making me want to gag. “They probably just found a dead deer or something, right?”

Tris gives me a comforting squeeze. “I’m sure that’s all it is.”

Tires speed up the driveway just as a gray wolf shoots past me, streaking into the woods. A car door slams, and feet race across the gravel driveway.

Owen stops next to us, out of breath. “What happened? Who screamed?”

“We don’t know. Harper and a couple others were in the woods, looking for wand material, when one of them screamed.” Tris nods toward the woods, where Greyson had disappeared. “Ros went in to investigate.”

Owen nods and cups my cheeks, pulling my gaze to his. “Go inside the house, Rowe. We’ll figure out what happened, okay?”

I reach up to clutch his hands. “Don’t go in there.”

His expression softens. “I’ve been back in those woods hundreds of times since then. Nothing’s going to harm me.”

Logic tells me he’s right, but logic holds no sway over the panicked race of my heart.

I clutch his hands tighter, as if my strength is enough to stop him from going after the others. “I can’t bear for you to get hurt again.”

More vehicles come up the driveway, Dr. Lopez’s sedan following Deputy Arden’s SUV.

They barely glance at us as they rush out of their vehicles and into the woods, led by signals my human senses can’t pick up on.

I swallow past the lump in my throat. “It’s not a deer, is it?”

Owen’s nostrils flare, and his expression hardens. “Go inside the house, Rowe.”

My nails dig into his hands. “Is the monster back?”

He shakes his head. “No.”

The firm tone of his voice leaves no room for question, so why do so many bounce around in my mind?

What if they just *thought* they killed the rogue werewolf? What if it’s been hiding out here all this time, just waiting for a chance to start murdering people again? How did they kill it? Did they use silver? What if they didn’t, and it crawled out of its grave?

I must have said that out loud, because Owen shakes his head. “The rogue was torn apart and burned. There’s no coming back from that.”

With a deep breath, I nod and pull Owen’s hands from my face, though I keep hold of one. “Take me in there.”

“Rowe...” he protests.

“I need to see what’s happened.” My hand shakes in his. “I have to know what’s threatening our home.”

He exchanges a look with Tris over the top of my head, and I tense, prepared to fight Tris off if he tries to forcefully take me into the house. If Owen says there’s no monster in these woods, then I need to face that fear and find out what scared my friends into hiding.

After a moment, Owen nods. “Fine, but I need you to stay between me and Tris. And if anything happens, promise me you’ll run.”

My lips part on a protest.

He holds up his free hand. “Your promise, Rowe, or I’ll have Tris lock you inside the house right this second.”

“He would never!” I turn to Tris, who stares back with a grim expression that says he most certainly would. “Traitor.”

Owen tugs on my hand to draw my attention back to him. “Promise?”

“I promise.” I squeeze his fingers. “But you’re running with me this time.” I look at Tris. “Both of you.”

“You won’t catch me arguing,” Tris says.

When Owen stays silent, I tug on his hand. “Promise, or I’ll have Tris lock you in the house this second.”

Owen’s lips quirk at the returned threat, but he doesn’t point out that, now that Tris is a witch, Owen can easily out-muscle him.

Instead, he dips down to kiss me, his breath feather light on my cheek. “I promise.”

With a firm nod, I clutch Owen’s hand and squeeze my eyes shut. “Lead the way.”



I stumble as Owen leads me forward. Despite having my eyes closed, I know the exact moment we leave the lawn and step into the woods. The top of my head cools when the overhead tree branches block the sun, and the soft spring of grass gives way to the crunch of pine needles and dirt.

*I am a brave little toaster, I tell myself. The woods can't hurt me.*

Cracking my eyes open, I stare through the veil of my lashes at the trees we pass. When we were kids, we played here with the brigade, never worrying about danger.

The rhymes we learned were just fairy tales, and dusk is hours away. Even if there *is* a monster, we still have plenty of time to hide beneath our blankets.

Voices come from up ahead, and I spot movement between the trees.

I peer over my shoulder, past Tris's lean form. We haven't come that far into the woods. We're only a dozen feet or so from the edge, which means that whatever happened took place close to my home.

Nausea rises, spurred on by the stench in the air as we draw closer to the group ahead. It smells sweet and fetid at the same time, like meat spoiled by the sun.

My hand rises to cover my nose, trying to block out the scent, but it slips past my fingers, invading my senses until I taste copper on my tongue.

I force my hand down. If I can handle dead deer left on my porch, then I can handle whatever this is.

We step through the trees to find Deputy Arden, Dr. Lopez, and Haut crouched in a semicircle.

Haut, sensing my approach, rises and turns to face me, his expression stern. "Go back to the house. This isn't something you should see."

After coming this far, I can't turn away. I step closer, peering past Haut's imposing figure. Bile roils in my stomach when I spot the body of a partially shifted wolfman lying motionless among the trees.

A large chunk is missing from his furry shoulder, as if some great monster bit down on him, and images of the same thing happening to my mom flood my memory.

But Owen said the monster was dead, so this has to be something else.

"What... what happened to him?" I stammer, my voice barely audible.

Haut tries to block my view, his gaze filled with a mixture of concern and protectiveness. "Rowe, please. Go back to the house. We'll handle this."

I can't tear my eyes away from the gruesome sight. "Was it a bear? Can a

bear kill a wolf shifter?”

Silence fills the forest.

No, of course not. I’ve seen wolf shifters bounce back from being stabbed and shot. It would take more than a bear to kill this man.

Despite Owen’s reassurances, danger still lurks in Hartford Cove, and the monsters I feared as a child may not be as distant as I’d hoped.

My circuits must break, because I don’t remember bolting, nor the scratch of branches against my face or the pound of my feet on the porch.

The bang of the door slamming shut on the screened-in porch sends me scurrying under the table, where I pull the chairs in so that no one can find me.

It’s a foolish, childish action, and one I can’t stop myself from doing.

Once I’m secured, I huddle in a ball at the center, my legs drawn up under my chin and the sound of my racing heart louder than the distant crash of waves.

God, I wasn’t even brave enough to stay there for Owen and Tris. I just left them in the woods.

The floorboards vibrate beneath me, and I crack my eyes open to see delicate, slipper-covered feet walking toward my hiding place.

“Rowe?” Worry fills Delilah’s voice. “I saw you from the window. Is everything okay?”

My fingers twist in my lap. “I... I can’t.” My voice comes out barely above a whisper. “I’m afraid.”

Delilah crouches to peer at me through the table legs. “Harper told us about the...body. Did you know him?”

I shake my head, though I’m not sure if I did or not. Greyson is the only one who I recognize in wolf form.

She settles a hand on the chair. “Do you mind if I join you?”

In answer, I reach out and push back the chair next to her.

She drops onto her hands and knees to crawl under the table, pulling the chair back into place behind her. “It’s scary to see dead bodies. And it was so near the edge of the forest. It’s okay to be afraid, but you have the best men in town guarding you.”

“I’m afraid of what’s in the woods,” I confess, my voice shaking. “The monster.”

She stiffens. “There’s a monster in the woods?”

I turn my head to stare at her. “There was. And now there is again.”

Delilah's eyes widen, and she leans in closer, her auburn hair falling like a curtain around her face. "What do you mean?"

My body trembles, and I hug my knees tighter. "Earlier, when I said my mom died, that wasn't completely true. She was murdered in those woods."

Delilah's hand touches my back. "What happened?"

I take a deep breath, fighting down the guilt that always comes with this retelling. "When I was nine years old, Owen and I went into those woods to search for treasure. We thought it would be an adventure. But we got turned around, and night fell. We were attacked by a rogue werewolf, though I didn't know that's what it was at the time. All I saw was the curse. A black monster made of smoke with red coals for eyes."

Delilah gasps, her hand flying to her mouth in shock. "Oh, Rowe, I had no idea."

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes as memories flood back, vivid and painful. "My mother saved me, but she... she didn't survive. The monster killed her and then attacked Owen. That's how he was cursed to become a werewolf."

Sympathy fills Delilah's eyes, and she reaches out to touch my shoulder in a comforting gesture. "I'm so sorry, Rowe."

"After that," I continue, my voice quivering, "My dad didn't trust that the people of Hartford Cove could keep me safe, and I didn't ask to come back. I blamed myself for what happened, even though I was just a child."

I sniffle and rub my nose against my leggings. "When my dad died, though, this was the only place I had to go. I've only been back three months, and there's another monster in the woods. Maybe I'm a curse for this place."

She pales, her hand dropping from my shoulder as she sits back, shock etched across her face. "You returned here four months ago?"

I frown. "Yeah, but you knew I only came back here recently."

Delilah pushes a shaky hand through her hair. "I did, I just didn't realize... That's when Bryant moved us from the house to the bunker."

"Oh." Realization dawns, and my shoulders hunch. "That was probably my fault, then."

She shakes her head. "How could it possibly be your fault? You didn't even know about everything that was going on when you came to Hartford Cove."

"Bryant and my dad were...friends." Ashamed to admit it, I drop my cheek onto my knees. "My dad was originally sent out to chase a lead about

the Wendall witch, but when he found her, they fell in love and ran away together. After going rogue, the huntsmen ordered his death, and Bryant was the one who finally tracked him down and killed him.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. “We met at the morgue, which is when Bryant realized that there was another Wendall witch, and he decided to keep me for himself out of some psycho desire to take care of me in my dad’s honor.”

The memory of that time is still hazy with grief. “He lived in my home for five months before I realized he was planning to have me declared insane and make himself my legal guardian. Tris and I ran, which is when Bryant defected from the huntsmen.”

“And since he ran the Sunlight Project, he decided to keep the rest of us for himself, too,” Delilah says in a dull tone.

I lift my head. “I’m so sorry for what happened to you all. If not for me, he never would have buried you all in that bunker—”

Her hand on my arm stops me. “We were already prisoners. It was just a new cell.”

I shake my head. “But some of you died.”

“They weren’t the first to die in the Sunlight Project.” Delilah’s expression darkens. “I’m so glad you killed that monster. Knowing he’s gone is the only thing that lets me sleep at night.”

Her words cut through me, and I look away, unable to face her and uphold the lie.

The last time I saw Bryant, he’d been a half-formed man hooked up to blood bags and even crazier than before. While I sincerely hope he died before he could finish healing the gunshot wound to his head, I won’t believe it until I see his dead body.

Part of why Ros keeps leaving isn’t all about shutting down the huntsmen. He, too, wants to make sure Bryant stays dead, for the sake of everyone he tormented.

I force a smile, not wanting to shatter the illusion of peace and safety that Delilah holds dear. “I’m glad you can sleep better.”

She squeezes my arm. “Do you know what this means?”

“I don’t,” I tell her honestly.

“It means monsters can be overcome, Rowe. You have grown so much since you were last in Hartford Cove. You’ve fought a war. And you’re not alone.” She wraps an arm around me. “Whatever happened to that poor man in the woods, we’ll figure it out, and we’ll defeat it together.”

As she hugs me, I try to relax within her arms, but I can't find the same glimmer of hope that shines within her. While I may have fought a war, my monsters are still out there, and now something new is disrupting our small town.

Something I can't help but believe is here because of me.

## BABYSITTER

A soft scratching jolts me from sleep, and my heart pounds as I stare up at the ceiling over my bed where the sound comes from.

Do we have rats? It sounds bigger than a rodent. Did a raccoon get into the attic?

The scratching stops, and I strain my ears for the sound of scurrying rodent feet. When nothing comes, my racing heart settles.

Sweat beads on my skin, the humid heat of the end of summer and the warmth of the man half on top of me combining into a stifling weight.

Wiggling an arm out from under the blanket, I poke Tris in the cheek.

With a soft snuffle, he rolls away from me to lie on his stomach, smashing his face into the pillow. If I hadn't seen him do that a hundred times before, I'd worry he might suffocate in his sleep.

I turn my head to squint at the clock on the nightstand, the glowing red letters bright in the darkness of the room. Four in the morning. *Way* too early to be awake.

But now that I am, my bladder kicks up a fuss that won't allow me to go back to sleep.

I ease back the comforter on my other side and scoot across the mattress to swing my legs out of bed. My feet land on the cool, hardwood floor, making my toes curl in reflex. Before fall fully sets in, I need to buy some slippers, or winter will be miserable.

A soft chuff comes from the end of the bed, and I glance over to where the moonlight coming through the window illuminates Greyson's shadowed form.

His head points toward me, his ears flicking in question.

“Bathroom,” I whisper, then when he makes a move to stand, I add, “Stay.”

He huffs doggy breath at me and drops his head back to the comforter.

I reach out to scratch his fuzzy ear before sliding out of bed and padding out into the hall.

The door across from mine leads to my old bedroom, which Tris claimed as his when I moved to my grandma’s old bedroom. Owen sleeps in the one next to it, connected by a Jack-and-Jill bathroom, with Ros in the guest room next to mine.

I slip into my old room and tiptoe into the bathroom, relying on the nightlight plugged in above the sink to see so that I don’t disturb Owen’s sleep. It had been a long day for everyone, and we’d gone to bed late.

After finding the body, Dr. Lopez took it back to her clinic to run tests and try to figure out if this was an animal attack or something worse.

I can’t wrap my mind around what kind of animal could kill a wolf shifter in wolfman form. Unless we have grizzly bears? That idea terrifies me almost as much as the alternative.

Tris loved wildlife shows when we lived with my dad, and I’ve seen way too many episodes of *When Bears Attack* to ever want to live in grizzly country. Those monsters can break into houses if they want to, and I’m far too bite-sized for comfort.

Owen had escorted the witches home while Deputy Arden and Haut stayed in the woods to search for evidence. They were in there until after sunset, reappearing long after dinner had cooled on the stove.

If they found anything, they didn’t share their discoveries beyond Haut’s gruff instruction not to go outside alone.

My counter suggestion that I carry my gun was firmly denied.

It’s really not fair. Ros would have let me arm myself in his underground city filled with vampires. Maybe I should dig a tunnel under the house, name it Rowetopia, and make my own laws.

First one will be: *No one bosses Rowe around.*

Second one will be: *All visitors must bring pie.*

After quietly washing my hands, I step back out into the shadowed hall.

As I head toward my room, the scratching noise starts up again. It really does sound too big to be a rodent. What if a poor bird got stuck up there?

Biting my lip, I tiptoe to the hall closet and find a flashlight before creeping into my room.

Instead of crawling back into bed, I walk to the closet and slip inside before flicking on my flashlight. A small stack of boxes gives me enough height to reach the hatch in the ceiling, and I pull it down, lowering the fold-up ladder as quietly as possible.

I'll just pop open the roof hatch to allow whatever's up here to escape, then go back to bed.

The wooden steps scrape against my bare feet as I climb, and I wave the flashlight around to scare off any woodland attackers before I step up into the attic.

The large, open space runs from one end of the house to the other, with sheet-draped furniture making ghostly shapes alongside boxes. I should find some time to spend up here, going through everything and getting rid of what we can't use.

Not everyone who recently moved to Hartford Cove arrived with possessions or the means to purchase necessities. The furniture that's collecting dust up here could go to a needy home, and who knows what treasures hide in those boxes?

There's absolutely no reason to hoard what others could use.

I sweep my flashlight around in search of the mystery scratcher. "Little birdy, who is definitely not a rat?"

"What are you doing?"

I shriek and spin toward the ladder, brandishing my flashlight.

Haut squints against the blinding light and holds up a hand. "What are you doing up here at this time of night?"

"I heard noises." I point the light at the floor. "We either have rats or there's something trapped up here."

He frowns and climbs farther up the ladder. "When did you hear noises?"

"Just now." I quiet and listen for the scratching, but silence fills the attic. "Well, I heard it a minute ago. That's what woke me up."

Haut shakes his head. "I didn't hear anything."

My mouth opens to argue, then closes. Haut, with his super hearing, would know better than anyone if there's something scurrying around in the attic.

He walks over to wrap an arm around me. "You were probably dreaming about it, and that's what woke you."

But I heard it out in the hall, too, when I was most definitely awake.

Afraid he'll tell me I was the only one moving around in the house, I keep



those words to myself. It wasn't that long ago that I hallucinated things, some of them real and most of them not.

Dr. Lopez has taken blood samples to make sure the meds Bryant tricked me into taking are out of my system, but she warned me that it could take six months before their effects completely fade.

I've worked so hard to be independent, to be more than my psychosis. Admitting I'm hearing things feels like a huge step backward.

I lean my weight against Haut's warm body. "If there *were* rats, your naked ass scared them away."

He gazes down at me for a heartbeat. "My tail is definitely bigger than theirs."

I shine my flashlight on his *tail*, which really is intimidating, no matter how many times it's been inside me. "Truly terrifying."

His arm curls around me, and he guides me toward the ladder. "Back to bed with you, little mouse detective. And if you hear any more noises, wake one of us up before sneaking around in the attic at night."

Dust sifts beneath my feet as we walk back to the opening, and I shine my flashlight across the floor. But the only footprints are ours, and whatever noise woke me is gone.



I fold my arm under my breasts and glare. "So, you're my babysitter, huh?"

Barron leans in the open doorframe. "Don't say you didn't expect it after what happened yesterday."

My foot starts tapping. "They could give me my gun back so I can protect myself."

He pales and straightens away from the door. "We've had enough people shot with silver."

I wince at the reminder of how recently he was shot. "Sorry, I'm grumpy about missing breakfast at Nesse's again. You should go to your bookstore. I'm okay on my own."

"Nu-uh, we're on the buddy system until further notice." He reaches out to grab my arm and tug me out of the house. "Now, come on, *buddy*. What's on our task list today?"

I squint against the early morning sun. "First, we go to the butcher to pick

up blood and do a delivery. Then we reward ourselves with French fries.”

He walks down the stairs, using the handrail for support. “Bit fast for a reward, don’t you think?”

I bounce down to the driveway after him. “Are you questioning how I self-motivate?”

His hands come up. “Nope. Not me.”

“That’s what I thought.” I stop next to his van and pop open the driver’s door, climbing inside.

He catches the door before I can close it. “What are you doing?”

“Chauffeuring you around on my errands.” I buckle my seat belt. “Hop in on the other side.”

“You know this is *my* van, right?” When I nod, his brows arch. “So, why are *you* driving?”

“Because you’re still healing.” I reach for the door handle. “I will be your driver today. Now get in.”

He releases the door, and I close it, then turn on the van using the keys dangling from the ignition.

Barron climbs into the passenger’s side and buckles up. “I’m not an invalid, you know.”

“And when you can turn back into your wolf, you can drive me around again.” I tap my foot around the peddles until I find the brake and release it, then roll down the driveway. “Any progress with that?”

He leans back in his seat and closes his eyes. “I can sense my wolf moving around inside, like he’s waking up, but I can’t shift yet. My wounds are nearly gone, too, and are healing faster every day. I’m not sure why I’m stuck in human form.”

My shoulders relax at the news. When the wolves who received Tris’s and my blood couldn’t immediately shift the next day, I’d worried that we permanently damaged their other half.

But it makes sense that their wolves will be slow to wake up after being suppressed. The return of super healing gives me hope that everyone will be back to normal in the next week or so.

The drive down the hill into town only takes a minute, which is why we usually walk. But Barron’s not healed enough for the hike up the driveway, yet.

When I park in front of the butcher a few moments later, it feels weird to be the only vehicle on the street. Most of Hartford Cove’s citizens walk

everywhere, but with the expansion of witches and vampires in our town, we may see more vehicles soon.

I hop out and resist the urge to go around to help Barron. He may still need handrails to go up and down stairs, but as he said, he's not an invalid.

But this non-invalid still deserves to have doors opened for him.

I hurry ahead of him to the butcher shop and open the heavy glass door, making the little bell attached to the interior handle jingle.

Barron gives me an exasperated look as he steps inside ahead of me, and I follow.

The cool air within the butcher holds a weird combination of metallic blood, cleaning supplies, and spices. A glass display case fills the front of the shop, with cuts of meat—mostly beef—in the front and smoked options in the shorter case that juts off on the left.

Under the large window that faces the street, a low shelf holds marinades and spices, while a fridge offers a small selection of beers and wine.

"I'll be right out!" a voice calls from the back.

"It's just me here for a blood pickup!" I head for the small open space next to the fridge and step behind the counter.

The large door to the refrigerator stands open, with a thirty-pound barbell on the floor to make sure it doesn't close by accident.

Rodney pops his head out of the opening, a brown beanie pulled low over his ears. Red flushes the tip of his nose and his cheeks, while his hazel eyes twinkle. "Give me a second, and I'll grab you a couple of bags."

He vanishes back into the refrigerator, and I hug my elbows against the chill as I wait.

Rodney is only a couple of years older than me, but well established at the butcher. He helps at the store when he's not driving the truck that leaves town to pick up orders from the suppliers. He's here more than the owner, and I wonder how long it will be before he takes over the shop.

"Woo!" Rodney steps out of the fridge, four blood bags in hand, and shoves the barbell to the side with one foot. "It's *cold* in there!"

As the door swings shut, he goes to the counter and grabs two plastic sacks, sliding two blood bags into each one.

Turning back to us, he holds them out. "Here we go!"

As I take the sacks from him, I notice a large bandage on his forearm that makes me frown. Wolf shifters don't usually need bandages unless they're hurt badly. "Are you okay?"

Rodney glances down at his arm and grimaces. “Got a bad bug bite. It’s mostly healed, but you can never be too safe while handling raw meat.”

“Bug bite?” My mind races trying to figure out what kind of bug could hurt a wolf shifter, and I peer back at Barron. “We don’t have poisonous insects here, do we?”

Barron reaches out to take the bags from me. “Here, let me carry that.”

“Why are you avoiding answering the question?” I hurry after Barron as he slips around the counter and heads for the door before realizing I forgot Rodney. I spin back toward him. “Get that looked at by Dr. Lopez. Especially if you received blood from me or Tris. You don’t want to mess with infections!”

“Will do.” He waves at us. “Have a good day!”

The bell tinkles, and I whip back around to chase after my friend. “Barron, I want an answer!”

He laughs as he holds the door open for me. “There are only a couple, and they usually stick to the woods.”

I shudder. “You won’t catch me in there.”

Especially not after the events of yesterday. When I tried to get more details from Haut and Owen over breakfast, they were annoyingly tight lipped.

They’re not the only sources of information in town, though. I can go straight to the source, just as soon as I ditch my babysitter.

## THE YOU KNOW WHAT

**M**y pace slows as we approach the house ahead.

The last time I came here, it looked like any other house on the street. But now, boards cover the windows, and tarps hang from the eaves of the porch. A slit at the top of the stairs allows access to the house.

This must be the home of vampires who won't receive any more sunlight serum until we can either make more or perform the spell that will allow them to walk freely in the sunlight.

I pull my shoulders back, march up the stairs, and slip through the slit in the tarp. A welcoming glow spills from the porch light next to the door, and no boards cover the windows protected by the tarp. Wicker chairs and a small table sit off to the side, though I can't imagine anyone sipping lemonade out here with this as their view.

Barron opens the screen door, and I plaster a smile onto my face before knocking.

The sound of movement comes from inside the house, and a moment later, the door cracks open.

Brown eyes dart to me, then the closed tarp behind us before the door opens wider, revealing a tall, lean man in his mid-thirties with closely-cropped dark-brown hair.

He smiles, showing a hint of fang. "Rowe, it's good to see you again."

"We come bearing blood." I take the bag from Barron's hand and pass them to the other man. "Drake, have you met Barron? He's shadowing me today."

Drake takes the bag before his gaze shifts to Barron, and he dips his head. "You're the owner of Books & Blots, right? I've been wanting to stop in and

see what you carry, but now I can only go out when you're already closed."

"I don't lock the doors at night. You're welcome to come in and browse. If you see anything you like, just leave me a note that you took it, and I can email you an invoice." Barron glances around the porch. "I'm sorry your accommodations right now are less than ideal. But I know Rowe is working on fixing that."

Drake shrugs. "It's not so different from how we lived before."

That's a bald-faced lie. While Drake and the other vampires may be used to no windows in their underground houses, they had an entire city where they could move around freely.

"The Pizza Parlor and Nesse's Diner are working on twenty-four-hour service, so you'll be able to go out to eat at night," I say, desperate to find a silver lining for their situation.

He lets out an appreciative sigh. "That will be nice. Zane and I are both horrible at cooking."

"You should come to the house for lessons. Ambros and Haut are great cooks." When his eyes widen in surprise at the invitation, I shift from one foot to the other. "Or, if you're hungry, you can place an order at one of the restaurants, and I'll pick it up and bring it to you."

Drake's expression softens as he looks down at me. "You're too kind, Rowe. You already do so much for us. It's a big change from our last leader's mate. She wouldn't have been caught dead making house calls."

An embarrassed flush rises to my cheeks. "Well, I get bored easily, so if I'm not busy, I create chaos."

"I know what you mean." Drake glances back into the house. "Zane and I were just discussing how restless we are with nothing to do. We're used to having a direction and format to our day."

"Did I hear my name?" A second man appears in the doorway, this one with red hair the color of tangerines and more freckles than pale skin. "Are you bothering Rowe with your grumbling?"

Zane frowns at his housemate. "I'm just saying we could be more useful."

"We run patrols in the woods at night." Zane rolls his eyes at his housemate. "You just need to find a hobby."

Drake's body stiffens with offense. "I have hobbies."

Zane shakes his head. "Translating old fairy tales that already have English versions isn't a hobby."

Barron perks up. "Which fairy tales?"

“The Grimm Brothers.” Drake’s expression brightens with enthusiasm. “They’re so much more gruesome than modern renditions.”

Spotting a fellow nerd, Barron nudges me aside. “You speak German?”

Drake steps back and gestures to the house. “Would you care to see my work?”

Barron nods and steps forward, only to come up short when he remembers his babysitter assignment.

I wave a hand for him to go on. “My next stop is the clinic, and you can’t come with me for that.”

He frowns and steps back toward me. “Why can’t I come with you?”

I squint up at him. “Because I’ll be talking to Dr. Lopez about my brain, which is a mystery only she gets to unravel.”

“Ah.” He glances back at Drake. “I should take you there...”

“Go on.” I flap my hands at him. “No one will get me inside your van. I’ll be back to pick you up in an hour.”

He hesitates a second longer before nodding and following Drake and Zane into the house.

I wait until the door closes before slipping through the tarp and heading to the van that waits down the street where we had parked for our first delivery.

With my babysitter successfully ditched for an hour, I drive to the clinic and march inside.

I luck out and find Dr. Lopez in her office before Tris spots me and close the door behind me.

Dr. Lopez looks up from her desk in surprise. “Rowe, we didn’t have a session scheduled for today, but I’m glad you came in.”

“I’m not here for a session.” I pull a chair up close to her desk and sit down. “What have you learned about *You Know What?*?”

With wolf shifter patients in the rooms able to listen in, I’m not sure how much I can say. Are we keeping the body a secret? Does everyone in town already know? Wolf howls had answered the scream yesterday, but only Owen, Haut, and Deputy Arden came to investigate.

Dr. Lopez folds her hands on her desk. “I’m still looking into it, but my findings will go to Haut first, and he will decide what to disclose to others.”

I lean forward to grip the edge of her desk. “But, was it a...” I mouth, “*Werewolf?*”

She sighs. “I can’t tell you that.”

My knuckles turn white as I tighten my grip. “But it was in *my* woods.

Steps away from *my* house.”

“I realize that.” She stands and walks around to pull up the other chair in the room and positions it to face me. “That must have been very hard for you after what happened with your mother. How did you sleep last night?”

The question makes me twitch. Not well, even after Haut smothered me with cuddles, but I’m not here to be shrinked.

I’m here for answers. “We’re not talking about my sleep. We’re talking about the *You Know What*.”

Dr. Lopez gives a knowing nod. “So, you’re not sleeping well then. Are you having nightmares?”

“No.” When she stays silent, her kind brown eyes fixed on me, I fidget. “I thought I heard noises in the attic, but Haut says we don’t have rats.”

She crosses her legs. “What else?”

I shake my head. “That’s it.”

Dr. Lopez folds her hands in her lap. “Trauma like what happened yesterday, so much like what you experienced in your youth, could have triggered a return of your hallucinations. As we discussed before, you could experience relapses in episodes from the medicine you were taking.”

I nod, though I’m still not sure I was hallucinating.

“How has your sleep been otherwise?” she prods. “Any nightmares?”

“A few,” I admit reluctantly. “But I don’t remember them when I wake up.”

“How do you *feel* when you wake up?” she asks.

“Uneasy.” I pick at my nails. “Like I’m not safe in my house.”

Sympathy fills her face. “Why do you think you’re having dreams that leave you feeling that way?”

It’s a leading question, but all of her questions are like that. The answer lies inside me, if I want to dig it out. But does giving something voice really make it easier to move past?

And how did this turn into a counseling session when I came here to talk about the body in her back room?

She tries a different angle. “After what happened before, why did you choose to come back to Hartford Cove?”

“Because we had nowhere else to go,” I say, more comfortable with this line of questioning. “With his curse, Tris couldn’t work, and I’d never had a job. Bryant controlled my dad’s bank account, so we had no money. Grandma’s house was the only place I could think of that might give us



shelter until we figured something out.”

She uncrosses and recrosses her legs. “You never planned to stay, though, did you?”

I pluck at a string on the hem of my oversized sweater. “No, coming here was supposed to be temporary.”

“Because you don’t feel safe here?”

The question hangs in the air between us, and silence fills the room, pressuring me to fill it.

My shoulders hunch. “I have Tris, Haut, Owen, and Ambros. How could I not be safe?”

“But Owen couldn’t stop your mother from dying.”

My head snaps up. “He was just a kid.”

“And Haut’s jealousy scared you into fleeing.”

“That wasn’t his fault,” I protest. “Our mate bond hadn’t settled.”

“And Tris couldn’t protect you from Bryant taking you,” she continues gently.

My hands curl into fists on my thighs. “He tried.”

“And Ambros couldn’t stop his father from coming here to destroy our sanctuary.” Her gaze remains steady on me. “All of your mates have proven they’re not enough to protect you.”

I shake my head. “That’s not what my dreams are about.”

“You need to forgive them for letting you down,” she says. “And you need to forgive yourself. None of what’s happened was within your control, but how you move forward can be.”

I stiffen. “I don’t blame them for what’s happened.”

“Not consciously, but something is causing these feelings. And you won’t be able to move forward until you face them.” She stands. “The battle and what happened yesterday are dredging up feelings you’ve repressed. I’d like to talk with you again in two days.”

Of course, she would. She likes digging into my brain.

She walks to a locked cabinet against one wall. “In the meantime, I’d like to put you on some medication.”

I stiffen with alarm at the suggestion. “What kind?”

“One to help you sleep. Exhaustion is a trigger for hallucinations and anxiety.” She opens the door and pulls out two bottles. “I’ve heard you struggle with learning magic, so the other is to help you focus.”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

She turns back to me with two pill bottles in her hand. “Has anyone ever discussed ADHD with you?”

I shake my head.

“Symptoms include forgetfulness, short attention span, fidgeting...” She smiles when I instantly stop picking at my sweater. “You have many of the markers. So does Tris, and we’ve been discussing options on how to manage it.”

I tuck my hands behind my back. “I don’t need those.”

“Your distrust is understandable, but not all medication is harmful, and the right ones can change your life.” She holds out the bottles. “Think of it like when you have a headache. You take a pain reliever, and it takes away your headache. This is the same thing, only it’s to help your mind focus.”

Reluctantly, I take the bottles and shove them into my pockets. “I’ll think about it.”

“That’s all I ask.” She gestures for me to follow her to the door. “Try the sleep medicine for tonight. A good night’s rest should help with your feelings of paranoia and anxiety. And come back to see me in two days for another session.”

“I’ll see what my schedule looks like.” I step out into the hall, and my pockets rattle uncomfortably with the pills. “Let Haut know as soon as you find anything conclusive.”

And I’ll torment Haut until he shares the information.

The look she gives me says she knows what I’m thinking, but she only nods. “Have a good day, Rowe.”

Instead of leaving, I wait until her back is turned before I walk down the hall to Mrs. Smith’s room, where Tris’s cajoling voice drifts out.

I tiptoe past and continue down the hall to the heavy metal door at the back marked *Coroner’s Office*. In a town this size, Dr. Lopez is a jack of all trades, seeing to the sick and the dead all in one place.

Yesterday, I ran before I got a good look at the wound on the body, and the person being in their wolfman form made it doubly difficult to make out the damage.

But the way the werewolf ripped into my mom will forever be burned into my memory. If I can get a closer look at the wolfman, I won’t need to wait for Dr. Lopez’s confirmation of whether this was a werewolf attack.

There are only three werewolves in Hartford Cove, and only one who can shift outside of the full moon. While I know Owen would never attack

someone without provocation, the rest of the town still has mixed feelings toward my mate.

Feelings about him have improved since my return, but not everyone is happy that he's now the Alpha. If this *is* a werewolf attack, we need to figure out how it happened before news of the death reaches the rest of the town.

Will the town people come for Owen once they hear the news? Will they give my gentle lover a chance to defend himself?

We can't leave such things to chance.

But when I grasp the handle, the knob refuses to turn. Of course, the door would be locked. Dr. Lopez wouldn't want just anyone snooping around behind this door.

And I'm not a skilled enough spy to get inside without the key.

Which just means I need to be clever, and a little devious, to sneak inside.

## EENY MEENY MINY...

**A**fter I pick Barron back up and we complete my errands, we return to my house, and I stash my drugs in the bathroom upstairs.

Then Barron helps me move the tables from the garden into the basement. After what happened yesterday, the sterile space is safer than being close to the woods, and it has access to the beach if we need it.

I set out a carafe of coffee in deference to the much cooler temperature down here, and a kettle with hot water for those who prefer hot chocolate. We even stopped at the store to pick up tea for Aspen, and I place the box next to the hot cocoa packets.

Tris arrives with Delilah leaning against his side, and he exchanges a nod with Barron, who gives me a farewell hug before heading to the elevator up to the first floor.

When I walk over to help Delilah into a chair, Tris leans over and kisses my cheek. “I heard you were in the clinic earlier. Want to talk about it?”

I squint at him. “Do you have something *you* want to talk about?”

He shrugs. “I was diagnosed with ADHD in elementary school, but medication wasn’t an option back then.”

Delilah shifts in her seat. “Why wasn’t medication an option?”

Tris hesitates for a moment, his usual smile dimming. “The people who ran the group home where I grew up didn’t believe problematic children could be fixed with medication. They had other methods of beating out the evil.”

Even though I’ve heard this before, my heart aches that Tris grew up in a home determined to extinguish his light. But he made it through and grew into an amazing man, after a few hiccups in the road, such as being a horn

dog then being cursed to be an actual dog.

All of that led to us finding each other, though, and Tris has told me several times that he'd do it all again to be with me now.

Sadness shimmers in Delilah's eyes. "I'm so sorry you grew up in that kind of environment. Is that why you don't have a last name?"

"Legally, I have one on paper, but I don't use it." His gaze meets mine, warmth chasing away the tension. "I'm hoping for a new last name in my future."

Happiness spreads through me, and I touch the ring on my finger that we picked out when we fled Hartford Cove a couple months ago. "There are three to pick from. You can have any of them."

He grins. "Haut and Owen can have Wendall. I'll stick with the original Branning."

I glance down at Delilah. "Should I add Shultz to my list?"

She laughs at the suggestion. "I'd be happy to have you as a sister in name as well as marriage. Will you be having a ceremony soon? Have you discussed children?"

"Whoa!" I wave my hands to stop her. "Slow down! We're just talking last names right now! Where did kids come from?"

Tris waggles his eyebrows at me. "I do like all the stuff that leads to kids."

"No!" I cross my arms over my stomach, then cross my legs for good measure. "Poop a watermelon out of your ass before asking me to shoot one out!"

"Calm down. They're not the size of watermelons." Tris cups his hands into a ball. "More like a grapefruit."

"That's not better!" My voice echoes around the large space. "Stop talking about it!"

The elevator rattles open, spilling out Harper and several others. The hushed murmurs interrupt any more discussion of babies.

I give Tris a final glare before I move to intercept them. "Sorry for the change in location, but you're all familiar with this space, so hopefully it's not too big of a transition. Please get your beverage of choice while I take the elevator back up for the next group."

Striding to the box of questionable safety, I close the gate and push the button to go to the first floor.

The death trap rattles upward, and the light from the basement vanishes,

leaving only the lantern on the floor for light.

*Spiral staircase, spiral staircase*, I chant to myself until the elevator rattles to a stop.

Ambyrlynn and Ginny peer through the gate, with the rest of our little coven behind them.

I pull the door open and step to the side. “Your transportation awaits.”

They shuffle inside, making the small lift bounce, and I resist the urge to leap off to the safety of the hall.

What is the weight limit on this thing, anyway? And when were the cables last replaced? Or is this thing so old that it runs on ropes? Did elevators ever use ropes? I’m pretty sure I remember something like that in a book I read.

I close the gate and press the button to go back down and think light thoughts until we reach the bottom.

My passengers disembark, and I take a deep breath before riding to the top one more time. At the first floor, I don’t find Mel and Aspen waiting, so I open the gate, grateful for a small reprieve from the horror box.

As I step off, the lantern on the floor flickers off before turning back on.

When did we last replace the batteries in that? Do we *have* replacement batteries? The remote for the TV needed new batteries, and Tris said he used the last ones in the drawer, but the lantern probably takes different batteries.

I make a mental note to ask Haut about it when he gets home later, realize I won’t remember, and pull out my phone to text him before I forget.

As I hit send, Mel and Aspen arrive, looking like a match made in beige. While I expect it from Aspen, I scowl at seeing yet another flowing skirt and peasant blouse on Mel. If I thought the floaty outfits made her happy, I wouldn’t care, but I’ve seen her true self, and this mask is stifling.

Why does she care so much about what Aspen thinks of her? It’s not like her moms don’t know she rocks ripped T-shirts and checker-board pants. Would he not take her seriously as a teacher if she jingled with chains?

“Aww, turn that frown upside down,” Mel teases as they stop in front of me, and she adjusts the heavy bag over her arm. “We can handle a few classes in the dungeon.”

That’s not why I’m frowning, but it doesn’t improve my mood.

“Dungeon?” Aspen glances between us, adjusting the box he carries. “Am I missing something? Melody said we would be holding class in your family’s inner sanctum. I’m quite interested to see how the Rathaven coven

found harmony with their magic. It's rare to be invited into the heart of a witch's practitioner space."

I stare at him for a second as I imagine how disappointed he's going to be. Based on everyone else's reactions to seeing the *inner sanctum*, what I have downstairs isn't normal for witches.

I shake my head and motion toward the elevator. "After you."

Aspen eyes the narrow elevator and the lantern on the floor as he steps inside. "Is this up to code?"

"Where's your sense of adventure?" Mel hops on, making the thing bounce.

Aspen's face pales as he looks around and realizes there's nothing to hang on to.

"Don't worry, if the cable breaks, it's only a one floor drop." I hold my breath as I step into the lift and close the gate before hitting the button.

The elevator shakes, then jerks as it begins its descent, and just as the top of the door drops below the floor, the lantern flickers before going out.

This time it doesn't come back on.

I squeeze my eyes shut. "Just think of this as a lead-up to the great reveal."

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I pull it out. Light from the screen floods the elevator, and Haut's response fills the screen.

Haut: They're in the second drawer of the kitchen island.

"Too little, too late, bad wolf." I hit the power button on the side, casting us back into darkness.

Light creeps in from the floor, growing brighter as we reach the basement, and I don't even wait for the lift to stop before I pull open the gate and slide out the bottom.

"Way to make us feel safe, Rowe!" Mel yells after me.

"I never promised a safe arrival!" Shuddering, I do a full body wiggle to cast off the evil.

The elevator completes its descent, and Aspen gives me an odd look. "What are you doing?"

I sweep my hands over myself from head to toe. "Casting off the bad mojo that stepped onto the lift with you."

His shoulders pull back. "I did *not* bring bad mojo with me."

"No?" When he shakes his head, my hands move to my hips. "Then explain how the lantern made it through everyone's trip down except yours."

Behind him, Mel covers her mouth to stifle her giggle.

Aspen starts to glance over his shoulder toward her, and I flap my arms for his attention. “Let’s start the tour of the very secret inner workshop of the Great and Powerful Wendall Witch.”

His blue eyes glint with interest, and he forgets about Mel as he steps forward.

I walk backward. “To the left, under the super-secret tarp, we have a giant cage in which we’ve locked Owen up in the past.” I drop my voice and lean forward. “*Not* for sex reasons.”

Aspen’s eyes widen as he glances toward the large box-shape in the corner.

I pump my arms in front of my chest like a traffic director. “Moving forward, we have the sterile worktables.”

Aspen’s gaze jumps to the tables, and his lips part on a quick intake of breath.

I point up at the ceiling. “Hooks convenient for hanging things.” I angle my arms to the right. “Electric cauldrons are on the shelves, and in the suspiciously shadowed space between the shelves, you will find an escape route that leads to the dunes.”

I pause and tap a foot over the drain in the concrete floor. “Drain for washing away unwanted things.”

Dismay fills Aspen’s face as he glances around. “Is this...really your workshop?”

I cross my arms in front of my chest. “Negative, sir! This place is creepy as fuck.”

“Hey, now,” Tris protests from behind me. “Don’t make fucks creepy.”

“This place is creepy as a ghost truck on an abandoned highway,” I correct.

“Better,” Tris approves. “And more horror movie accurate.”

Aspen’s focus shifts past me. “Is that a plastic curtain?”

“Right you are, sir.” I peer over my shoulder at it and catch a few smiles on the lips of my coven members, who spent quite a lot of time down here when they first arrived. “It’s where we hide the bodies, sir.”

“It’s just the study area,” Mel tells him. “The curtain keeps it separated from the workshop.”

“It’s no more inviting than this side, but you can take a peek if you want.” I turn away from them to head for the refreshment table, my eyes on a hot



chocolate packet. “The single desk and chair are chock-full of mystical wonder, I’m sure. But it’s otherwise empty.”

Aspen looks around, his gaze lingering on the Bunsen burners on the shelves and the corresponding propane tanks on the floor. “Have all the generations of your family practiced in this space?”

I dump my cocoa into a unicorn mug and fill it with hot water. “Unless you have a spell to speak to the dead, the world will never know.”

“My moms think Rowe’s grandmother was more of an alchemist.” Mel walks to the teacher’s table at the front and sets her heavy bag on it. “We’re not sure what type of witch Rowe’s mother was, since Rowe doesn’t remember her practicing magic. She left Hartford Cove to attend college and didn’t move back.”

As I take my seat next to Delilah at the front of the room, Aspen glances around at the other witches. “Does anyone here know what your affinity is?”

I have no idea and turn to look over my shoulder at the others.

Tris raises his hand. “Is being fabulous an affinity?”

Mel smiles. “No, but nice try.”

He slumps back into his chair. “Then, no.”

Most everyone shakes their heads, though I notice Delilah remains still, with her hands in her lap.

“Then it’s good we’re changing our lesson plan for today.” Aspen joins Mel at the table and sets down his box. “Since the hunt for materials was interrupted yesterday, we thought we’d test everyone’s affinities today.”

He opens the box and pulls out a stack of metal bowls. “Most witches have an element they resonate with, but if you don’t, no fear. As with Rowe’s grandmother, you may be a different type of witch, and we’ll focus on discovering your specialties.”

A stir of excitement goes through the room.

“Some of you may already suspect which element you have an affinity for.” Mel takes a bottle of water from her bag and pours it into the bowl Aspen sets in front of her. “Maybe going to the beach always fills you with a sense of peace, or you find yourself calmed by being out in nature.”

She next empties a bag of dirt into a new bowl, before pulling out a jar of clear liquid and pouring it into the next bowl.

“Or perhaps you find comfort in building a fire at night, or your pulse races near a bonfire.” Aspen slips a pack of matches from his pocket and strikes one before dropping it into the bowl.

Fire whooshes out before the flames settle to just above the bowl's rim.

Into the last bowl, Mel places a handful of tiny white feathers before setting the bag on the floor. "Or maybe meditation is your thing, and you find solace in silence."

Eww. That sounds like a nap to me.

Aspen traces his finger around the rim of each bowl, murmuring too softly for us to hear, then nods at Mel.

"You may resonate with more than one element, too. For example, I have an affinity for fire." She holds her hand over the bowl of fire, and the flames rise to caress her palm. "I also have an affinity for earth."

She picks up the bowl and walks among the tables with her hand held over the top. As she passes us, I see the top of the earth shifting into different patterns.

More murmurs of excitement fill the room while my stomach clenches with anxiety.

If there was an affinity for pie, I'd have this test in the bag. But those other things they mentioned? So not me.

As Mel walks back to the teacher's table, Aspen gives us all a winning smile. "I have an affinity for all elements, so no matter what you are, we can teach you."

"Braggart," Tris coughs from the back.

Aspen's icy gaze fixed on him. "How about we start at the back today? Tris, you can go first."

His groan echoes through the room, and his chair scrapes back.

When he passes, he tweaks my braid and smiles down at me with a confidence I lack.

He stops in front of the bowls and rubs his hands together. "How does this work?"

"Hold your hand over each bowl and concentrate on the element it holds," Aspen instructs. "Feel for a connection, a resonance within that speaks to your magic."

"Take your time," Mel adds. "There's no rush."

Tris lets out a long breath before he holds his hand over the first bowl with the water.

After several seconds, he shakes his head and moves to the bowl of earth next. He barely pauses before moving to the fire, tentatively extending his hand over the flames.

As they flicker and dance, I lean forward, my elbows on the table. They're not touching his palm like they did for Mel, but they're definitely higher than they started.

It's like a magical game of eeny, meeny, miny, moe.

Tris lets out a huff of surprise and moves to the bowl of feathers. Before he even extends his hand, the feathers swirl out of the bowl in a little whirlwind.

"What the—" Tris leaps back from the soft flurry, and they drift back into the bowl.

Mel grins at him. "Congratulations, Tris. You are an air witch with minor fire affinity. It's a common combination, as air feeds fire."

Tris runs a shaky hand through his sandy-blond hair. "Cool, so I can... blow up balloons?"

Mel winks at him. "Circus clown, here you come."

"Ginny, please come forward," Aspen calls out.

I raise my hand as Tris walks toward me, and he gives me a high-five as he passes.

One by one, each witch comes forward to hold their hand over the bowls, and each witch steps away with at least one affinity. Many receive a secondary one, like Tris, and Ambyrlynn gets earth, with a minor in both fire and air.

When Aspen calls Delilah forward, I make a move to stand, but her hand on my arm keeps me seated. Bracing herself against the table, she rises and shuffles to the table, where she pauses.

Without touching the bowls, the water sloshes, the earth roils, the fire rises, and the feathers swirl.

Shock widens my eyes. Based on what I've already experienced of her magic, I knew Delilah must be powerful, but she's so quiet and unassuming that I never expected her to resonate with fire.

A smile spreads over Aspen's lips. "Wonderful, Delilah. Harper, you're next."

Delilah's steps wobble as she returns to our table, and I stand to offer her my arm for balance as she sits.

"Thank you," she murmurs.

"That was amazing." I lean closer. "I figured you for air, since you can speak in my head, and water for obvious reasons, but wow!"

She shakes her head. "The ability to speak mind to mind is only a minor

part of my witch power. It was my vampiric bond with Ambros that allowed me to reach you over such a great distance.”

I frown in confusion. “You mean the three-bite thing?”

She nods. “Yes. Bryant was able to block the bond in the beginning, but after he moved us, I started to sense Ambros again, though he showed no sign of hearing me. When I pushed harder, I broke past our bond and found your mate bond, which my brother did not become aware of until you met in person.”

A dozen questions fill my mind, but before I can ask one, Harper returns to our table, and Aspen calls out, “Rowe, it’s your turn.”

Dread fills me as I stand and walk toward the bowls.

Expectation fills Aspen’s eyes, and even Mel looks eager. I’m the great Wendall witch and the heir to the missing Rothaven coven. If Delilah could trigger all four elements, then what amazing magic will I be capable of?

But when I stop in front of the bowls, the water remains still, the dirt looks like dirt, the fire shrinks back, and the feathers remain still.

“It’s okay, it doesn’t hurt,” Mel whispers in encouragement.

She holds out her hand to demonstrate, and I reluctantly lift mine to hover over each bowl. But none of the elements call out to me.

Frowning, I focus on the water. I’ve used it to talk to Delilah. Surely, we’re at least minorly compatible.

But not a ripple crosses its surface.

I’m an elemental dud.

## KITCHEN HELPERS

**T**ris stands behind me and rubs my shoulders. “It’s okay. Not having an element just makes you special.”

I turn my head on the kitchen table, where I’ve been sitting with my forehead against the wooden surface and wallowing since the rest of the coven left an hour ago.

Resting my cheek against the cool surface, I look up at Tris from the corner of my eye. “I don’t *want* to be special. Why can’t I just be the same as everyone else?”

Haut passes us with his arms loaded down with groceries. “Because you’re the Wendall witch.”

“A little sympathy here,” Tris hisses. “Can’t you see she’s sad?”

“No time for sadness.” Haut dumps the bags on the counter. “The sun is setting, so guests will be here soon.”

Confused, I straighten and turn in my chair to stare at him. “Guests? Who’s coming over?”

He gives me an exasperated huff. “Who did you invite to come over and learn to cook?”

My lips part, but when the answer doesn’t magically appear, I shut my mouth and shake my head.

Haut plants his hands on the kitchen island and stares at me. “Are you serious?”

Tris rubs my shoulders again. “It’s okay. It’s been a long day.”

“It is *not* okay.” Haut turns away to bang around in the cabinets. “I was planning to order pizza and watch a movie on the couch tonight.”

I perk up with excitement. Pizza and a movie sound like just what I need

after the magic disaster earlier. “That sounds nice.”

“I thought so, too, but now neither of us can have a relaxing evening.” He crouches in front of the island to dig through the cabinet under it. “Text Owen that we need more to-go containers.”

I frown at the firm line of Haut’s back. “Why do we need to-go containers?”

He straightens and turns toward me, annoyance in every line of his face. “Because you invited people over so that I can teach them to cook, and I’d rather not have whatever disaster they come up with spoiling in the back of our fridge!”

“Oh.” My tired mind finally catches up with what’s going on. “Zane and Drake are coming over?”

Haut throws his hands up in frustration. “Yes! Along with Barron and Jesse, which is why I’m home late. I had to stop at the grocery store to pick up ingredients and figure out a meal plan that will be easy for beginners.”

I clasp my hands in front of my face. “Wow, that’s so nice of you.”

Growling, Haut steps toward me, and I gulp, worried that I pushed him too far.

Before he can strangle me, though, a knock sounds at the door, and I jump to my feet. “I’ll get that!”

The more witnesses, the less likely Haut will be to kill me. I take the long way around the table to leave the kitchen and hurry to the front door.

Barron and Jesse stand on the porch, a bag hanging from Jesse’s arm, with Drake and Zane behind them. The two vampires look nervous, their eyes sweeping the wrap-around porch and what they can see of the house.

“Welcome.” I swing the door wider. “Please, come inside.”

Jesse ruffles my hair as he steps into the foyer. “Evening, lass.”

I swat his hand away. “You know where the kitchen is.”

Jesse rubs his stomach. “I sure do.”

Barron gives me a brief hug before his mate wraps an arm around his waist and half-carries him toward the kitchen.

Zane steps forward and holds out a bottle of wine. “Thank you for having us over. We appreciate the chance at a home-cooked meal.”

“You’ll appreciate it more when you cook it yourself,” Haut calls out. “Come on back and help prep the ingredients.”

When Drake’s wide eyes shift toward Haut’s voice, I whisper, “Don’t worry, he’s a giant, growly marshmallow.”

“You can help, too, bad puppy!” Haut yells.

Tris groans. “Please, no, I want to be able to eat dinner tonight.”

Both Zane and Drake laugh, the sound breaking the tension of being strangers in our home.

“It’s good to know we’re not the only ones who don’t know what to do with a kitchen.” Drake takes off his coat, revealing broad shoulders and the hint of tattoos peeking out from under his shirt. “Though, anything is better than the food at the mess hall back at the compound.”

I take his coat to hang it in the closet. “The food there wasn’t *that* bad.”

Curiosity lights Zane’s eyes. “You’ve been to the mess hall?”

I nod. “Ros dared me to try the gravy there.”

Zane shudders. “Oh, you brave soul. I can’t believe Ambros let you eat that.”

Footsteps on the stairs precede Ros joining us in the foyer, the scent of soap from his shower clinging to his skin. “What did I do now?”

Zane snaps to attention. “Hello, sir.”

Ros clasps him on the shoulder. “None of that in my home. Just relax.” His amused gaze shifts between us. “So, what were you guys talking about before I arrived?”

Drake gives him a disapproving look. “You took your mate to eat at the mess hall.”

Ros’s eyes drop to me. “I seem to remember you demanding we eat out, and the mess hall was the only option. I tried to warn you what you should stay away from, but you wanted to play food roulette.”

Ros looks back at the other men. “She tried everything on the menu and ate it all.”

Drake lets out a low whistle. “Damn, you must have a cast iron belly.”

I pat my flat stomach. “Nothing escapes this puppy.”

Ros leans down to nuzzle my throat. “Your food baby was adorable.”

“It was out to here.” I hold my hand a few inches from my stomach. “Ros could have rolled me out of there.”

“Reminisce while putting your hands to work, or no one is eating tonight!” Haut barks, making Zane and Drake jump.

“Come on, I’ll show you the way.” Ros plucks the bottle of wine from the crook of my arms. “And we can crack this open.”

As I move to close the front door, I catch sight of Owen stepping out of his car.

Quickly, I grab my phone and type out a text.

He pauses to pull his phone out of his pocket, and the light from his screen illuminates his face. After a second, his head lifts, and he stares at where I hover in the doorway before he slips back into his car to fetch Haut's to-go containers.

Waving, I close the door and stop at the closet to hang up Drake's jacket before joining the others in the kitchen.

Haut and Ambros stand on one side of the island, while Zane and Drake stand across from them, wearing aprons, with cutting boards in front of them. Jesse stands at the counter near the fridge, pulling a pie from the bag he brought, while Tris and Barron sit at the table, sipping wine.

Tris's eyes brighten. "Oh, is that the famous apple pie?"

Barron sips from the glass of wine he holds. "Yes, it is. Should still be warm, too."

Zane looks up from the carrot he's peeling. "What makes it famous?"

"The fact that it beat Mrs. Smith's in the pie contest." I walk over to the island and reach for a large knife.

"No." Haut slaps my knuckles with his spatula.

I snatch my hand back. "You said I needed to help."

He sets a cutting board and a head of romaine lettuce in front of me. "Peel leaves."

I purse my lips. "I'd rather cut things."

Haut moves the knife farther away. "I'd rather not have blood in our spaghetti."

"Might be nice," Zane says, then his head jerks up, and his wide eyes jump to Ros. "Not that I want to—"

"It's fine," Ros cuts in. "I know you meant nothing by it."

Tris pushes up his sleeve. "If you're hungry—"

"No." Ros's narrow eyes shift to him. "Put your sleeve back down."

Tris tugs his cuff back into place. "So possessive of veins you're not using."

Ambros smirks. "It's called anticipation."

Tris grabs his glass of wine. "It's called blue balls, you sadist."

Barron chuckles. "Something wrong with your hand, Tris?"

"Everyone's against me," he mumbles into his wine glass.

"I still love you," I tell him, shredding lettuce like no one's business.

Tris instantly brightens. "And that's all that matters, sparky."



“So, you *don't* want Ambros to bite you?” Barron asks.

Tris whips toward him. “Whose side are you on?”

He smiles. “Jesse’s and Rowe’s side.”

“Well, I can’t argue with that.” Tris stands and walks over to us, stopping behind me. “My, what a nicely pulverized mound of lettuce you have there.”

Haut looks up from dicing onions and garlic, takes in the squashed pile of greens in front of me, and sighs. “Go sit at the table before you ruin the rest of our salad.”

I shake a finger at him. “It’s not my fault you suck at instructions.”

“Keep waving that in my face, and I’ll bite it,” Haut growls.

“It just doesn’t have the same thrill when the offer comes from you.” Tris draws me away from the rumbling Haut.

We sit with the others at the table, and I sneak sips of wine while Haut and Ambros teach Zane and Drake how to make salad, garlic bread, and spaghetti.

Soon, the delicious smell of Italian herbs and buttery garlic fill the kitchen, and my stomach rumbles with anticipation.

Owen returns home for the second time and sets his shopping bag on the counter before greeting our guests and diving in to help with the meal. It makes for a cozy evening, and the sips of wine warm my stomach.

When the spaghetti meets Haut’s approval, he serves up generous portions for everyone.

While we eat, Zane and Drake share stories of what it was like growing up in the barracks underground and regale us with stories of mess hall mishaps. Ros commiserates with them over early morning training, and the evening passes with pleasant company.

Despite the impromptu plan, it turns into a fun evening, and more bottles of wine get pulled out, refilling glasses.

Over dessert, Drake and Barron talk about German translations, which draws Ros in, and the three men nerd out.

The wine makes me tired, and I find myself stifling yawns.

Haut’s hand covers my knee as he leans closer. “Why don’t you go to bed? You haven’t been sleeping well.”

I nod and stand. “Thank you for coming, guys. Sorry I’m heading to bed before you leave.”

Zane and Drake stand.

“Thank you for having us over,” Zane says. “The food and company have

been wonderful.”

I wave for them to sit back down. “Stay and enjoy yourselves. Don’t let me end the night early.”

Owen catches my hand. “Do you want me to come with you?”

I lean down and kiss his cheek. “No, stay and have fun.”

Leaving them, I head upstairs, going to the bathroom to brush my teeth.

As I run my toothbrush under the water, a light scratching fills the room.

Pulse leaping, I turn off the faucet and strain my ears, but the sound doesn’t come again.

Laughter drifts from downstairs, along with the indistinguishable rumble of conversation.

Maybe that’s what I heard?

I turn the water back on, and the scratching noise resumes in the walls behind the mirror.

Heart pounding, I shut off the water and drop my toothbrush into the holder.

*It’s not real. It’s just a byproduct of the pills Bryant gave me,* I tell myself, but I can’t stop my heart from racing as I rush out of the bathroom and into my bedroom.

There, I dive under the covers and pull them over my head, blocking out the monster.

## A LITTLE DEVIOUS

The cold concrete of the basement floor numbs my ass, despite the cushion I sit cross-legged on.

I struggle to block out the sounds from the other side of the plastic curtain, where the rest of the coven has been split into groups based on their elements to work with Mel and Aspen on accessing their powers.

Despite the chill, my head nods forward, my dark-red hair falling around my face. I jolt upright and rub the grit from my eyes, my lids heavy with exhaustion. The past few nights have been sleepless, plagued by strange noises in the house that no one else seems to hear.

I fidget with the hem of my bunny sweatshirt. When I dressed this morning, I needed the comfort of my soft armor to face the day. More and more, my anxiety grows, to the point that I dread going to bed at night.

Every time I close my eyes, nightmares plague me, and when I wake, I get flashes of a dark figure standing over my bed. The guys are all worried, but when my questions about odd noises in the house drew concerned looks, I stopped bringing it up.

Dr. Lopez already digs too deep into my psyche. I don't need to be analyzed at home, too. The hallucinations will go away once the drugs finish working their way through my system.

With a deep breath, I allow my heavy lids to close and try once more to focus inward while not falling asleep. The fog in my brain feels like I'm pushing through molasses, making it harder to concentrate.

I've been at this for days, struggling to discover my magical affinity, but nothing clicks. It's as if I'm trying to unlock a door without the key. If not for the magic I've performed in the past, I'd think I wasn't a witch at all. It's

frustrating that I can only access my power with someone else leading or on instinct.

The swish of the plastic curtain jerks me upright once more, and I glance over to see Aspen striding toward me.

His icy-blue eyes hold a mingling of hope and impending disappointment. “Were you just sleeping?”

“No.” I shift uncomfortably on the cushion. “But I’m pretty sure I wasn’t meditating, either. Slow breathing is just boring.”

“You *need* to focus.” Impatience tinges his voice. “The magic is inside you, but you’ll never find it if you keep resisting.”

My fingers dig into my thighs, my frustration threatening to erupt. “I’m not resisting. I’ve been trying every day, but nothing happens. Maybe my magic only works with other witches involved.”

Aspen pinches the bridge of his nose, like I’m giving him a headache. “Magic isn’t reliant on other people. Yes, covens combine power to perform larger spells, but that only works because each witch brings magic of their own to the circle. You just need to learn to focus.”

My teeth clench. “I *am* focusing.”

“No, you’re napping,” he snaps. “Do you even want to be a witch? Because your lack of dedication makes me question why I’m even here.”

“I’ve been questioning that since the day you arrived.” I push to my feet and stumble when my numb legs take a second to get with the vertical program. “You were sent here to help teach me, but all you’re doing is telling me to sit and breathe!”

Pink tints his cheeks, and he takes a step closer. “If you actually *wanted* to learn, I’d have something to teach you! But you discount my lessons at every turn! Meditation is a time-honored practice for every young witch to learn. Balance within brings balance without. But you can’t even manage that much!”

“Whoa, there.” Tris bursts through the plastic curtain, his eyes shifting between us. “Aspen, give her a break. Not all of us are naturals like you.”

Irritation twists Aspen’s features. “I’m trying to teach her the basics. If she can’t grasp this, then she’ll never learn to channel her magic effectively.”

My frustration bubbles up. “I’ve been trying! I’ve followed every step, taken notes, and nothing happens. My cauldron is broken.”

“Your cauldron is not broken.” Aspen takes a step closer, looming over me. “You’ve just slapped a lid on it that you refuse to open. What’s holding

you back? Is it fear? Doubt? You need to confront whatever's preventing you from embracing your magic, or you'll be bound for your own safety."

I glare up at him, my body shaking with exhaustion and anger. "Yeah, I remember the consequences. You were fast to use that threat when you first arrived, if you remember. But bullying me won't make my magic suddenly start working."

He leans down, his nostrils flaring. "You have so much potential to be great, and you're going to waste it because you're too afraid to *be* something."

I rear back, the words slapping harder than any physical blow could.

Tris pushes between us, forcing Aspen away from me, and his voice takes on a protective edge. "Back off, Aspen. Rowe needs some space. Pressuring her won't help."

Aspen rakes a frustrated hand through his perfectly groomed hair. "I can't teach someone who doesn't want to learn. Talk some sense into her, because everything I say goes in one ear and out the other."

Spinning on his heel, he marches through the curtain.

Anger trembles through me. "I *do* want to learn, you rigid, incompetent, self-satisfied—"

Tris's hand covers my mouth, stopping the angry flow. "Okay, sparky, a little less spit in your rage."

I glare up at him and try to bite his palm without success.

He strokes my tangled hair. "Oh, honey, you need a nap so bad that it makes me tired just looking at you. Are you sure you won't take the sleeping meds Dr. Lopez gave you?"

I mumble against his palm.

"I know you don't like drugs, but you need to rest." When I shake my head, he sighs and drops his hand. "Then let me help you meditate."

Reluctantly, I allow him to draw me back to the cushion on the floor. He sits, folds his legs, and pats his lap in invitation.

I settle into the hollow created by his bent legs and lean against his solid warmth. "Is partner assisted mediation even allowed?"

"Who's going to stop us?" He wraps his arms around me. "Now, close your eyes and focus while I list all the bones in a wolf's body."

I release a deep breath and close my eyes, melting into the warmth of his embrace. My next breath brings in the comforting scent of his body, a familiar combination of the mint shampoo he prefers and a subtle musk

specific to him.

His cheek rubs against the side of my head, and his quiet voice fills my ear. “Nuchal crest. Zygomatic arch. Orbitals. Incisors...”

The slow cadence of his voice turns into a path that cuts through the molasses in my mind, and sparks of blue magic flicker across the back of my eyelids.

With a contented sigh, I sink deeper, following the path of my mate bond back to Tris, surrounding myself in the warmth of his magic.



That night, I lie in bed, staring up at the ceiling of my grandmother’s bedroom. The antique furniture, the floral wallpaper, and the musty scent of the room are wearing on me. Every creak and rustle in the old house jolts me awake, and my exhausted mind has reached its breaking point.

Tris snuffles next to me, peacefully sleeping through the tiny scrape of claws in the walls, his soft snores like a grating lullaby on my nerves.

I can’t take it any longer. I need to get out of this room.

Throwing back the covers, I slide out of bed. Tris mumbles in his sleep, and I freeze until his soft snores return before slipping out of the room alone.

At dinner tonight, I had asked for an update on the murder, but Haut was tight-lipped with the details. He knows something, but he’s keeping it a secret from me, which set off my short temper, and we ended the night yelling at each other.

When Ros left for his evening patrol, Haut had gone with him, leaving just Owen and Tris with me in the house.

I walk across the hall, my feet cold on the hardwood before the carpet runner at the center offers a temporary reprieve that vanishes as soon as I step toward my old bedroom.

When I open the door, moonlight spills through the curtain. While Tris took over the space, he only uses it to store his clothes. Mel had finished moving out earlier in the week, but Tris is in no hurry to regain his private space. The twin-sized bed that had been mine during the summers when I visited here is perfect for my height but leaves Tris’s feet dangling off the end.

That doesn’t mean signs of his use aren’t present in the spill of

belongings across the handmade quilt on the bed or the piles of clothes that dot the floor.

I shove the stuff to the foot of the bed and crawl between the sheets, curling into a ball. The scent of lavender clings to the pillow, reminding me of my grandma in the garden. The bunny wall runner dredges up the memory of hot summers filled with lemonade on the porch and the soft crush of grass under my bare feet.

But even in the comfort of my childhood bed, sleep eludes me. Memories of childhood inevitably lead to my last moments in Hartford Cove, which ended in blood and death. And those thoughts circle me back to the dead wolfman in the woods outside my house. Which brings up questions and worries that can't be resolved without knowing more about the murder.

Tossing and turning in frustration, I sit up and press my palms against my closed eyes until the images vanish and all I see is red.

Maybe Tris is right, and I need to take the sleeping pills. One night won't make me reliant on them, and uninterrupted sleep will take away this constant exhaustion.

I slip back out of bed and pad into the bathroom, making sure the connecting door is shut so I don't disturb Owen before I flip on the light. Tris's scrubs still lie on the floor from his shower earlier, and I shake my head at what a slob he is. It's not like he's the only one who uses this bathroom.

Stepping over them, I open the medicine cabinet.

Razors and toothbrushes sit next to the two bottles of untouched pills Dr. Lopez sent home with me. My hand shakes as I reach for the one to help me sleep, and my fingers curl against my palm before I touch the bottle, my body rejecting the very thought of holding them.

As much as I need sleep, I just can't bring myself to take the pills.

I close the medicine cabinet, and my exhausted face stares back at me from the mirror. My blue eyes look fever bright against the red that surrounds my irises, and dark shadows give my face a sunken appearance.

Tris isn't wrong. Looking at me makes me even more tired.

When I turn away from the mirror, my foot bumps against his scrubs, and I bend to pick them up. As I lift them, keys fall out of his pocket, and my pulse quickens.

I've been trying to sneak Tris's keys to the clinic all week, but the guys are always around me. Now, here I am alone, and there the keys are, just

begging to be used.

It looks like I needed to be even less devious than I thought.

I pick the keys up and hurry back into the bedroom, where I dig out a pair of my pink sweats that Tris likes to wear from a basket that smells clean. Changing out of my pajama pants, I pull on one of Tris's T-shirts. In the small closet, I find my unicorn sneakers, no longer white and with the lights broken, and slip them on.

Then, I head for the window that overlooks the beach. If I go downstairs and out the front door, all the creaks of the old house will wake Owen up with his super hearing. By taking the less direct route, no one will be the wiser.

The window slides up silently, and I step out onto the porch roof, then tiptoe along the side of the house toward the front. There, I scoot to the edge of the roof backward on my hands and knees and dangle off the edge before dropping into the bushes next to the railing.

As quietly as possible, I escape their leafy embrace and walk along the grass next to the gravel driveway, making my way toward town.

The cool night air slips through my thin T-shirt, raising goose bumps on my skin and making me regret not grabbing a sweatshirt, too. The first day of fall has arrived, and it's like nature hit a switch in Hartford Cove, bringing chilly nights.

Hartford Cove at night creeps me out, with all the dark windows facing the empty street. I hurry down Main Street, clutching the keys in my pocket.

As I approach the clinic, I spot a patrolman up ahead, his flashlight sweeping across the path.

My heart races, and I duck into a narrow alcove, hiding in the shadows.

The footsteps draw closer, echoing in the silence, and I hold my breath, praying he won't spot me. While I won't be thrown in jail for being out this late, they'll definitely tell my mates, and that will ruin my reputation as a master thief.

After an eternity, the patrolman moves on, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I wait a few moments to make sure he's far enough away before continuing to the clinic.

The biggest key on the ring opens the front door, and I slip inside.

Shadows fill the entrance, and I resist the urge to turn on any lights, not wanting to alert anyone to my presence. Instead, I navigate the dimly lit hallway with the help of the night lights plugged in along the way.



The doors to the patient rooms line both sides of the hallway, and I tiptoe past them, the soft sounds of sleep and the occasional murmur from those in restless dreams drifting out.

I reach the end of the hallway, where the coroner's office is located. My heart pounds as I pull out the keys, my hands trembling with anticipation.

The first key I try doesn't work, nor does the next, nor the next.

Breath held, I shove the final key into the lock, but the door refuses to budge.

Frustrated, I wiggle the key, trying to force it to open the door. I can't have made it this far, only to fail now. But desperation won't force the door to unlock, and I sag against it in defeat.

I'll just have to try a different way to get what I need.

Just as I'm about to turn away, a voice sounds behind me. "Freeze! Put your hands where I can see them!"

My pulse spikes, and my hands reflexively shoot into the air.

Crap. For the second time in Hartford Cove, the fuzz has found me.

## BAD ROWE

“Stay where you are,” the voice behind me commands. “Don’t move.”  
Through the pounding of my heart, I realize that the voice of the patrolman sounds familiar.

“Keep your hands up.”

The firm order sends a shiver down my spine, and I begin to turn, wanting to see the face behind the voice.

“Stay still,” the man commands, and there’s no mistaking it now. The timbre, the authority in that voice—it’s Ambros.

I freeze, my heart still racing, as he approaches from behind.

Reaching past me, he pulls the keys from the doorknob, his body brushing against mine. He slips them into his pocket without moving away again.

“We received a report of an intruder,” Ambros says, his voice low and laced with amusement. “What should I do with this little thief I’ve found?”

I raise my hands higher, placing them on the door, and spread my legs to shoulder-width apart. “Oh, no, officer, you caught me. Is there anything I can do for you not to turn me in?”

“Are you trying to seduce me? The sheriff warned me you’re a slippery thief when cornered.” Ambros cups my waist, his large hands nearly wrapping all the way around me. His lips brush against my neck as his hands slowly slide over my hips. “Are you hiding anything I should know about?”

His touch sends shivers of desire through me, and a smile tugs at my lips. “I sure am.”

“Oh?” His hands slip beneath my baggy T-shirt and dip into my waistband. “Sounds like I need to do a thorough investigation.”

Before things can heat up, the door to one of the patient rooms creaks open, and we both freeze.

Mrs. Smith's voice cuts through the silence. "This is a clinic full of wolf shifters, and there's a pup present. If you two want to roleplay, go somewhere else so the rest of us can rest in peace."

"*You* should rest in peace," I mutter as Ambros's hands leave my pants.

"I heard that," Mrs. Smith snaps.

I straighten my T-shirt, and one side slips off my shoulder. "Go back to bed, or no more bacon for you."

Her huff drifts down the hall, followed by the sound of her door closing.

Ros and I exchange a look and stifle our laughter as we hurry down the hall and out of the clinic.

On the sidewalk, Ros locks the front door, then gestures for me to lead the way back toward home.

From the corner of my eye, I take in Ros's black tactical uniform, and the silver grip of the gun that rides on his hip. He had started carrying it again the day the body was found, and I really don't think it's fair that my gun remains in lockup.

I shiver against the chill of the night and hug my arms for warmth.

A moment later, a lightweight jacket slips around my shoulders, the warmth from Ros's body clinging to it.

I tug it closer. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He waves at a dark figure walking in the opposite direction across the street.

I rub my cheek against the jacket's collar, inhaling Ros's cologne. "Sorry for disrupting your patrol."

He glances down at me. "It was the end of my shift, anyway."

I nod, and silence falls between us until we reach the top of the driveway in front of our house.

"You shouldn't be out here alone, you know." The gentle admonishment breaks the silence. "There's still a killer on the loose."

My shoulders hunch. I had remembered that halfway to the clinic, but I was already committed to my breaking and entering at that point. "I know. It won't happen again."

His hum rings with disbelief. "Why were you trying to sneak into the coroner's office?"

My lips purse. "I wanted to see how it compares to the one at the vampire

clinic.”

I had gone with Ros to view the remains of a body he thought was his sister. It had turned out to be someone else, despite the similarity in age and childhood injuries. Bryant sure had killed and buried a lot of people.

Ros sighs, his breath fogging in the air in front of his face. “Please don’t lie to me.”

“I wanted to face my fears.” And hopefully lay new ones to rest.

Ros stops and turns to me, his gaze searching mine. “There are easier ways to face your fears. You don’t need to break into the clinic in the middle of the night.”

Not when no one will tell me what’s going on. But Haut refuses to listen when I tell him that not knowing makes things worse.

Before I can respond, a quiet creak comes from the porch. I startle with fear, but Ros just raises his hand to wave at Tris, who sits in one of the chairs near the front door. He wears the blue sweatpants that match mine and nothing else.

How long did he sit out here, waiting for me to come home? He must be freezing.

Guilt sweeps through me, and I half step behind Ros. “Hey, bestie, what are you doing out here at this time of night?”

He rises to walk to the steps and leans against the porch’s support beam. “I’ve been waiting for my little sneaky sneak to be escorted home.”

My eyes widen. “How did you know Ros would find me?”

Tris smirks, his sandy-blond hair catching the moonlight. “Who do you think ratted you out?”

My mouth drops open. “You traitor.”

“Says the thief who stole my keys.” He shakes his head. “What has the world come to, where you plan a heist without me?”

I walk up the steps to stop in front of him. “You were on the wrong side of the law this time.”

He *tsks*. “And now you’re the one who’s been caught. Not sure I can bail you out of this one, sparky.”

Ros steps up behind me, his hands settling on my waist. “Shall we continue our interrogation?”

A smile spreads over Tris’s lips. “Do you want to be the good cop or the bad cop?”

Ros releases my waist. “Oh, no, the suspect has slipped my grasp.”

Confused, I look back at him.

He winks. "That's your cue to run."

"Oh." I look back at Tris, who steps to the side, clearing the path into the house. "Oh."

Pulse leaping, I spring forward, the jacket falling from my shoulders as I dart into the house and up the stairs. Their feet pound behind me, keeping pace without using their long legs to overtake me.

I reach the top out of breath and dart into Tris's room, beelining for the open window.

A startled laugh comes from the doorway a moment before Tris's strong arms wrap around my waist. "Okay, that's a little *too* realistic, sparky."

Laughing, I wiggle out of his hold and dart back toward the door, only for Ros to catch me and toss me onto the bed.

Tris pounces, his fingers finding their way under my shirt to tickle my sides. "Now you will answer for your crimes!"

Laughter spills out of me, and I slap at his hands, trying to stop him. "I surrender! Stop! I give up!"

Tris looks over his shoulder at Ros. "I don't know. Do you believe her?"

Ros unzips his vest and shrugs it off. "Nope. She admitted earlier that she had a weapon."

Tris turns back to me with a grin. "Sounds like someone needs a strip search."

"Never!" I twist away and crawl toward the other side of the bed.

Hands catch in the loose material in the back of my pants, and my attempt at escape bares my ass to the room.

"Aww, look at that cute little rump." Tris slaps one bare cheek. "Bad Rowe. No more solo capers at night."

I gasp at the sting and twist around to glare at him. "You did not just spank me."

"You stole from me." His brows arch before he smacks my ass again. "Bad Rowe."

Now I really do try to escape, wiggling free from my pants.

Victorious, I turn to stick my tongue out at Tris. "Ha, take that!"

His gaze moves past me. "Don't start celebrating so fast."

I turn back around to find Ros in front of me, his black T-shirt now gone and the front of his pants open.

His fingers under my chin bring my head up. "Where do you think you're

going, little thief?”

Tris comes up behind me, kneeling on the bed, and slides his hands under the loose T-shirt to cup my small breasts. I gasp at the brush of his cold hands against my tender flesh, and my back arches with pleasure.

His skilled fingers pinch and twist my nipples into hard peaks, pulling gasps from me while Ros watches.

“Hmm, these might be dangerous,” Tris breathes into my ear, sending a shiver down my spine. “We’d better disarm them.”

Ros licks his lips, revealing a hint of fang, and plants one knee on the bed. “I can help with that.”

I raise my arms for Tris to pull the shirt over my head, then gasp when Ros’s warm mouth envelops my breast, his tongue flicking over one taut nipple. He sucks hard, drawing more of my delicate flesh into his mouth, and his fangs pierce my skin.

Pleasure rushes through me, and I moan as my body heats, my head falling back on Tris’s shoulder.

His hand on my jaw draws my head around, his lips sliding over mine in a messy kiss. His other hand strokes down my body to cup between my legs, where he finds me soaked with desire.

He groans and pulls back from our kiss. “Damn, that’s some bite if you’re already this wet.”

Ros releases my breast and licks his lips as he looks past me to Tris. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Fuck yes.” Tris fumbles off his collar, dropping it to the bed.

Ros reaches out to cup the back of his neck and draws him forward, sandwiching me between their bodies. “Last chance to say no.”

“Stop being a tease and just...” his words drift off into a moan as Ros strikes, his fangs piercing Tris’s vein.

Tris ruts against my back, the sweats he wears chafing against my sensitized skin.

Pulse racing, I reach back to push down Tris’s pants, freeing his straining cock. It slaps against my ass, leaving a trail of pre-cum on my heated skin. He ruts helplessly against my lower back, smearing cum as pleasure rushes through him.

I gasp, my desperate lips sucking and biting at Ros’s chest, my nose filled with his scent. Ros holds Tris so close that I can’t shift enough to bring Tris into position, and my inner muscles clench with desire, with the need to be

filled.

Finally, Ros releases Tris's vein, pulling back.

With a desperate groan, Tris grasps my hips, his fingers bruising my flesh, and his cock thrusts into me. My release slams through me, my inner muscles desperately pulsing around Tris's cock as he rocks in and out of my body at a frantic pace.

I clutch Ros's waist for support, and when he bends to kiss me, I greedily welcome him into my mouth, sucking the taste of my and Tris's blood from his tongue.

When he pulls back and directs my head lower, I eagerly drop to my hands and knees, opening my mouth to receive his cock. I moan as his velvety heat pushes past my lips, tasting salty and smelling of desire.

Ros's hand tangles in my hair, positioning my head until he slides into my throat, filling me as completely as Tris does. The two men find a rhythm, their bodies surging in and out of mine, pleasure spiraling between us until we come together, Tris's hot cum flooding my womb at the same time Ros's pumps into my mouth.

Afterward, we collapse together on the small mattress, with Ambros at the foot of the bed to make room for all three of us.

"How was it?" Ros's concerned gaze settles on Tris's throat, where two angry punctures stand out against his pale skin. "Any regrets?"

"Bite me anytime you want." Tris waves a limp hand in welcome. "Give me that bond. I'm down for it."

Ros chuckles. "I'll think about it."

Tris rears up onto one elbow to stare at him. "Are you teasing me again? You can't keep that to yourself after I've had it once."

I elbow him. "Stop begging for horny bites while I'm still sticky from this one."

He waggles his brows at me. "We could be *more* sticky."

I shove against his chest. "Just lie down."

Tris flops onto his side and dances fingers across my stomach. "So, why did you steal my keys? Were you planning to smother Mrs. Smith in her sleep?"

I grab the pillow above my head and smack him with it. "No, but if you keep tickling me, I might smother you."

Tris laughs and feigns panic. "Oh, no, not the pillow! Anything but the pillow!"

Amusement fills Ros's eyes, and he pulls my feet onto his lap to rub them. "I caught her trying to sneak into the coroner's office."

Tris snatches the pillow from me. "You were trying to look at the body?"

"No one will tell me anything, so I wanted to see for myself." I pull my abandoned T-shirt over my breasts. "I need to know the truth."

Sympathy fills Tris's expression, and he sets the pillow aside to wrap an arm around me. "Even if I had a key to the coroner's office, you wouldn't have found anything. Dr. Lopez sent the body for cremation yesterday."

I rear back in shock. "But then... Does that mean she discovered what killed the man? Why didn't Haut tell me?"

"Because he's protecting you." Tris withdraws his arm and climbs out of bed, tugging on my pink sweatpants before he walks to his dresser, where he pulls a file from his sock drawer.

"I knew Haut wouldn't tell you anything until he knew more. When I read the report, I almost didn't make a copy. I'm not sure it will help you sleep any better." He returns to the bed and hands the folder to me. "But I know you won't give up until you have answers."

When I glance at Ros, he nods with encouragement. I sit up to pull the T-shirt on, then smooth my finger over the name on the folder. Tom Arnold. I don't recognize it, but I haven't memorized everyone's names in town.

With a deep breath, I open the folder, flipping through its contents.

Inside are pictures from where the body was found and others from the coroner's office. My stomach tightens as I find the one with the blown-up picture of the gruesome wound that killed the wolfman. It looks exactly like the one I remember being inflicted on my mother.

I set the photos aside to skim through the written report, and my eyes catch on a word. "The victim was exsanguinated? What's the mean?"

The answer comes from Ambros. "Drained of blood."

The words jolt through me, and I flip back to the pictures, searching for any other wounds. If this were a werewolf kill, there would be more damage, parts of the body eaten... But the only wound is the large bite out of the man's shoulder.

I turn to Tris. "If someone bleeds out, there would still be blood in the body, right?"

He hesitates before he nods. "Once the heart stops pumping, the blood flow slows. A wound like that would lose a lot of blood, but not all of it."

I flip back to the pictures of the woods and study the ground. "Shouldn't



there be more blood around the body? Or did it soak into the earth?”

“It didn’t.” Ambros’s expression turns grim. “That’s why Dr. Lopez took so long to perform the autopsy. The bite is from a werewolf, but it’s not a werewolf kill.”

I take in the hard set of his jaw. “You think a vampire was involved?”

He scrapes his hair back from his face. “I’m not sure. It’s also possible that the person was killed somewhere else and then staged in front of our house.”

“But...” I shake my head. “Why would someone do that?”

“To cast suspicion on Owen? Or to cast suspicion on the new vampires in town?” His gaze meets mine. “Or to scare you into leaving Hartford Cove again?”

“I don’t understand.” I glance between him and Tris. “Why would someone want to scare me into leaving?”

Tris wraps his arms around me. “Where would we go if we couldn’t stay here?”

I frown. “Anywhere. I’m rich.”

“But not everyone knows that.” Ros takes the folder from me, slips the photos back inside, and sets it on the nightstand. “If you were still broke and needed to leave, who would offer you shelter?”

My eyes widen in shock. “The witches?”

“Any of these scenarios are possible.” Tris takes my hand. “Which is why, right now, *everyone* is under suspicion.”

## LESSONS IN WANDS

Unease fills me the next day when we sit down at the tables in the garden once more.

Mel and Aspen thought that wand making would be better out in nature, and Haut had grudgingly agreed as long as he and Ros stood guard nearby.

Haut hadn't been happy when he found out that Tris snuck a copy of the autopsy report, and even less pleased that he shared it with me. But Tris was right that I'm less anxious now that I know what we're dealing with. While we still don't know who the killer is, I'm at least not completely in the dark.

The late afternoon sun shines down on us, and while dark clouds hover on the horizon, the wind coming from the direction of town means the storm will stay away from us.

I fidget with the materials on the table in front of me. Tris and Delilah had shared some of the ingredients they gathered, so I'll have something to work with today. Nothing pulls me toward any of the items, but maybe I just don't know what a *pull* feels like. Mel and Aspen hadn't been very informative on that aspect of things.

I cast a nervous glance toward the woods and relax a little when I spot Ros pacing the tree line. His gun rides on his hip, loaded with silver bullets.

No murder monsters will get past him.

"Alright, everyone." Mel claps her hands for attention. "Today, we're going to create our first wands. These will be an extension of your power, so even if you gathered a bunch of materials, choose the ones you use carefully."

Aspen gives us all an encouraging smile. "On your desks, you'll find

tools to help shape your wands and bind the materials together. As you progress through your training, you'll find the tools you prefer to work with, and you'll remake your wand as you grow more confident in your craft."

"That means you shouldn't worry about getting it right the first time around," Mel says. "This might not even be the first wand you make this week. You may find that once you complete the project in class, you'll realize that you needed a different ingredient and you want to do it over. I, myself, have made over fifty wands."

A murmur goes through the coven, and excited tension fills the air.

I glance down at my pile once more. Tris had given me a raven feather and a piece of driftwood from the beach, and Delilah had added a tiny vial of moonlit water she had prepared. They're all extras from what they collected, so I'm not depriving them of something they need to make their wands.

Still, it feels a bit like cheating. I should have made more of an effort, but every time I stopped between running errands to stare at nature, I just felt dead inside. Or maybe that was just the exhaustion and frustration working against me.

"First, you will work on shaping the bone of your wand," Aspen instructs. "Most first wands are made of wood at their base, but as you progress, you may find you prefer glass, stone, or any number of other ingredients. The goal for this one is for the point to face straight forward when you hold it in your extended arm."

"As you work, Aspen and I will come around to inspect your ingredients," Mel says. "You may begin."

I peer past Delilah's bucket of herbs to Harper's ingredients. A nice selection of slender branches sits in front of her, along with a puff of moss and a few pretty stones and leaves.

Behind me, Ginny's hoard includes shells, driftwood, sea glass, and even a jar of glittering fish scales.

I don't even want to know how she collected those. *Eww.*

Next to her, Ambyrlynn's pile holds a jar of what looks like ash, quite a few leaves and sticks, dozens of feathers, and a pile of flowers.

I turn back to my minimal ingredients. There won't be any sorting for me. As it is, I barely have enough to make a wand.

Reluctantly, I pull a piece of sandpaper from the box on our table to smooth out my piece of wood.

As we work, Mel and Aspen stroll among us, inspecting what each witch

gathered.

Mel stops in front of Harper, curiosity in her eyes as she points to the fluffy ball of moss in Harper's pile. "Interesting choice. How do you plan to combine this with your wand?"

As she answers, Aspen's voice comes from the table behind ours, distracting me.

"You've gathered several excellent ingredients, Ambyrlynn," he approves. "Narrowing your choices will be hard with three elemental affinities, so I suggest focusing on your strongest for now, and working in the minor elements when you're more confident."

When they reach Ginny, Mel laughs. "Bold choice with the fish scales."

"The fish was already dead when I found it, so I hope it's okay to use them," Ginny whispers.

"If they call to you, then they call to you," Mel says. "I can't wait to see how you use them."

My nervousness intensifies as they circle back toward our table.

Aspen stops in front of us and peers down at the bucket filled with Delilah's flowers and herbs. In the bright sunlight, the purple and blue glitter puff paints sparkle.

Aspen's nose wrinkles. "That's a very...decorative bucket."

Delilah gives him a serene smile. "It's very special."

A sour expression pinches his face. "So it says."

"It's one of our magic tools," I say defensively.

Aspen's gaze flickers briefly toward Ros, who stares toward us, looking menacing.

A glint of fear flashes through Aspen's eyes before he recovers and musters a compliment. "It's a...creative choice."

Aspen moves past Delilah, and his cool blue eyes settle on my ingredients.

"Rowe, did you choose these ingredients because they truly called out to you?" Aspen inquires, his tone neutral but piercing.

My heart skips a beat. He didn't ask anyone else that question. Why is he picking on me?

I focus on smoothing out the rough ridges in my piece of driftwood. "They feel all right."

Aspen's lips twitch, his doubt clear. "The bond between a witch and her wand is a reflection of her power. Are you sure these components reflect your

true self?”

I swallow hard. They don't, but my true self is a mystery even to me, so how could I choose something that reflects it? I just need to sound confident.

I look up to meet his eyes, glad I practiced this in case I was quizzed. “Driftwood, because my life has been adrift, raven feather for knowledge, and moonlit water to access the subconscious.”

“Moonlit water is a powerful choice.” Aspen's gaze flicks back to Delilah's ingredients. “One that Delilah has also made.”

Delilah reaches over to rest her hand on mine. “We are sisters, both in magic and in blood. Rowe has made her garden open to me, and we spend much time together. We took advantage of the lesson to experiment.”

The muscle in Aspen's jaw ticks. “We haven't had a full moon since you started lessons.”

The coven falls into a hushed silence, and Aspen's gaze returns to mine. His scrutiny makes me squirm, and I feel like I'm failing an important test.

Delilah squeezes my hand, her comforting presence a reminder that I'm not alone.

When I stay silent, Aspen sighs. “Very well. Good luck, Rowe.”

As he walks away, I turn to Delilah and mouth, “*Thank you.*”

She smiles and pats my hand before she returns to snapping thorns off a piece of wood that I'm pretty sure came from the rosebush near the back porch.

As I work on sanding my driftwood smooth, it warms within my hand, and I try to find a connection with it. But wood is wood, and not especially exciting. Is it because I'm not an elemental witch? Is that why I'm having a hard time with this?

I hold the piece of wood out in front of me, my arm fully extended. At least it's straight, so I meet that requirement.

Mel's gentle voice breaks through my thoughts. “All right, everyone, open your grimoires and reference the notes you took during our demonstration last week. This will help you cast the spell more effectively.”

I open my grimoire, and my heart sinks as I flip past the title page to the first class. My notes are non-existent, aside from a stick and question marks. I thought they'd show us again when we actually started making the wands. I'm far better at hands-on learning than reading from books.

When I glance over at Delilah's grimoire, she angles it toward me without comment. Crisp handwriting fills the page, with diagrams I'm pretty sure

weren't covered in the demonstration. It sure is nice to have a seat buddy who's been through these lessons already.

I stand and dig through the box for a piece of chalk, then take one of the small chalkboards. Her notes say gold works better, but I take that as an advanced wand-making trick that we'll learn later.

Biting my bottom lip, I carefully copy the diagram onto my board, having to do it twice to get it right. Slowly, my shoulders relax. This feels like when I did magic with Haut, where he handed me the ingredients and told me what to do. I'm comfortable with this.

At least wand making doesn't require dancing. If it did, I'd be screwed.

I set the board with my diagram to the side and open the vial of moonlit water, wetting my fingers. A surprising sensation tingles up my arm, and I blink as silver threads curl up from my fingertips, reaching toward my wand, where they swirl in intricate fractal patterns.

I rub my fingers together, and more strands fall to the table, slipping across the wooden surface toward the chalkboard. My pulse quickens, and I hold my breath as wonder fills me.

The sound of glass breaking jars me out of my trance, and I flinch upright, the silver lines vanishing. I turn to look at the table behind me, where Ginny crouches next to her table, picking up the remains of a jar.

"Sorry, everyone." She dips her head, her black hair swinging forward to cover her face. "I'm just clumsy."

"That's okay, Ginny. Accidents happen." Mel joins her with a little handheld broom and dustpan. "I can clean this up. Keep working on your wand."

Rattled, I turn back to my work and lift the raven feather on my table but can't figure out how to attach it. I check Delilah's grimoire for guidance, but the notes swim before my tired eyes, and frustration bubbles up.

"Do you need a hand with that feather, Rowe?" Harper offers, standing from her seat.

Before I can answer, Aspen swoops in, his voice stern. "Rowe needs to make the wand by herself, Harper."

Harper frowns, her expression a mixture of concern and annoyance. "But if we help each other, won't we all get better at this?"

Aspen's gaze darts to me, then back to Harper. "Witches need to be able to craft their tools without assistance, or they fail at the most basic of lessons."

Harper's shoulders slump, and she reluctantly settles back into her chair, her lips pressed together with unhappiness.

She shouldn't get in trouble for being nice, but before I can voice my opinion, Aspen catches sight of the grimoire I'm using.

His eyes narrow with disappointment. "Let me see your grimoire, Rowe."

Shoulders hunching, I reluctantly hand it over.

He flips through the pages and then looks at me with a mixture of annoyance and anger. "These notes are severely lacking. How do you expect to make your first magic tool if you didn't even pay attention during the demonstration?"

My throat tightens, and I fight back tears. I've been trying so hard, doing everything he wants me to do, yet I keep falling short.

He flips back to my title page, filled with my drawings and notes from my guys, and scowls. "How am I to teach you when you treat magic like a joke?" He gestures at the puffy-paint-adorned bucket sitting on our table. "You call this a magical tool?"

Delilah's voice trembles as she speaks up, her blue-green eyes filled with emotion. "That's a special bucket, Aspen. It's important."

His lip curls. "It has no place in witchcraft."

My fists clench. "It's important and powerful."

"It's a childish joke." His gaze sweeps over me. "Everything about you is a childish joke. Just look at what you're wearing."

I reach up to touch the hood on my sweatshirt with the bunny ears. Haut had washed it so I could wear it again this week. It's the same sweatshirt that Mel spelled to be bulletproof, and I wore it today because I needed the extra armor. "This is also a powerful magic tool."

"And your shoes?" he sneers. "Are those magical, too?"

The sun dims as the dark clouds that had been hovering on the horizon sweep over the garden.

Angry tears sting my eyes, and I tuck my unicorn sneakers under my chair. They were a gift from Ros, and I wore them today because I was wearing them when we found Delilah and the others, which makes them lucky. I need all the help I can get, and I won't let Aspen make me feel bad for wearing them.

"You're out of line, Aspen," Tris snarls, appearing at Aspen's side. "What Rowe wears has nothing to do with her magic."

"Of course, it does!" Aspen flings out a hand toward me. "How can she

take her craft seriously when she doesn't even take herself seriously?"

Behind him, I see Mel's face pale, and she self-consciously straightens her blouse.

My hand tightens on the wand I hold, my body trembling.

Tris's expression hardens. "You are dangerously close to digging yourself a grave down at the sheriff's office."

Aspen's head snaps back. "Did you just threaten me?"

The trembling increases, anger surging through me. Overhead, the clouds rumble, and the first fat drop of rain lands on the table.

Worried murmurs go through the coven as faces lift to the sky, and people begin stowing away their ingredients.

Mel pushes between Aspen and Tris. "Aspen, let's not make a bigger deal out of this than it needs to be. We're here to learn and grow together."

"No, we're here to teach, something you're clearly incapable of doing yourself," Aspen snaps, his tone cold.

Hurt flashes across Mel's face, and tears shimmer in her eyes.

Anger pulses through me, and I stand from my table. "Shut up, Aspen."

Either he doesn't hear me, or he ignores me as his focus remains on Mel. "These witches will never pass their first circle test if they can't learn to do the most basic of magic on their own. You're not strict enough, which is the real reason your mothers brought me in. Not for Rowe. They knew that *you* weren't ready."

"Shut up!" I shout, my voice cracking through the air.

Aspen's tirade cuts off, and his mouth gapes in shock as he turns toward me.

Overhead, the magical barrier that protects our town flashes with a brilliant light, the fractal patterns illuminating the darkened sky, drawing Delilah's and Aspen's gazes to the sky. Strings of light stream down from the barrier, connecting to each witch in the coven, and they all stand.

The strings reach out, connecting everyone together, including Mel, and leaving Aspen out. The threads bind us, making each of us stronger, just like they did when we faced the huntsmen.

My heart races, the frustration and anger of days of failure and being bullied boiling inside me. "No one cares about your stupid circles, Aspen! We just want to learn magic and live in peace!"

The wand in my hand splinters apart, and I drop the shattered remains to the ground. "We don't need your rules! We need each other, and Mel is a



better teacher than you will *ever* be.”

Lightning cracks overhead, and the skies open, dumping down rain.

## RUMBLES

Rain beats down, drenching us, and thunder rumbles from the dark clouds that hang over the garden.

Fists clenched with anger, I glare at Aspen, daring him to continue his tirade.

Haut and Ros run over, Ros rushing to help his sister to her feet, his auburn hair plastered to his head. "Everyone, get into the house!"

As the others gather their supplies and head inside, I remain where I stand. It feels like taking my eyes from Aspen will release him to continue spewing garbage.

Then Haut steps between us with a growl, his large body breaking the spell that holds me frozen.

Aspen shakes his head, his gaze rising to the sky once more, but the storm clouds block the view of the barrier.

He glances back at me, his lips parting, but Haut's growl cuts him off. "Rowe, get inside and dry off."

I glance around to find the garden empty, the tables cleared and the evidence of the wand-making now gone.

With a last look at Aspen, I turn and trudge toward the house, my unicorn sneakers squelching the entire way. The poor things might not survive this newest soaking.

Inside the house, I pass Tris hurrying down the stairs, his arms loaded with towels. Everyone else stands in the kitchen, dripping wet as they use paper towels to dry their grimoires and ingredients, the unexpected rain having drenched them.

Their quiet murmurs follow me upstairs to my room, where the rain

pounding against the windows drowns them out. The rapid tap of water against the glass grows louder, and a scratching sound joins the racket, coming from the walls.

My pulse quickens with fear, and I cover my ears, the wet strands of my hair tangling around my fingers, but I can't block out the incessant noise.

Dropping my hands, my fingers curl into fists, and I march into the closet, determined to discover the source of the sound. I climb up on boxes to grab the string for the access door. The ladder slides down, and I climb up into the attic.

The rain pounds even louder up here, beating against the roof, and the scratching noise vanishes.

Unable to hold back my frustration any longer, I stride to the stairs that lead to the widow's walk and step out into the downpour. Instantly, I'm soaked to the bone, my sweatshirt heavy and dragging at my shoulders.

Up here, all of Hartford Cove stretches around me, the forest on one side, the town on the other, and the ocean flowing into the horizon. Here, I can be alone, the storm drowning out the rest of the world.

I tip my head back, and rain drops beat down on my face. Dark clouds boil overhead, nature raging over our house. An answering rage fills me, and I tip my head back, screaming at the roiling clouds, releasing all the anger, frustration, and fear that's been brewing inside me.

The rain whips my cheeks, mingling with my tears, and hitting my tongue with the taste of ozone.

Chest heaving, I lower my head, letting the rain wash over me until the deluge lightens into a soft mist.

I wipe the water from my face and turn toward the attic door, only to jump in fright when I find Mel standing there, her clothes plastered to her body.

She smiles as she walks toward me. "Feel better?"

"A little." In truth, I feel drained, all the emotions that were roiling through me now gone, with nothing but exhaustion left. "I'm surprised it's you and not one of the guys coming to collect me. Didn't you learn your lesson last time?"

"I asked them to let me speak to you first." She stops a few steps away. "They made me promise not to let you fall off the roof."

That pulls a smile from me. "That's what the railing is for."

The rain eases up, and Mel walks to the railing, sits, and slips her legs

between the rungs.

She pats the wet wooden boards beside her. "Come sit with me."

I wring water from my hair as I join her, the roof beneath us slippery from the rain, but the railing keeps us safe.

Together, we stare out over Hartford Cove. The town glistens from the rain as the dark clouds disperse, and the late afternoon sunlight returns. Silence settles between us for a while as we breathe in the scent of freshly washed earth.

When Mel seems in no hurry to speak, I offer, "I understand why you're so annoyed that your moms want you to marry Aspen, if that's how he always is."

Mel's eyes remain on the town below. "He wasn't always like this. When we were kids, he was a bit of a rebel, and we were thick as thieves."

She lets out a heavy sigh. "After we started taking our circle tests, he changed. He became more critical of my..." Her lips twist in distaste. "He called it my lazy way of practicing magic. Eventually, he said I was holding him back from advancing."

"Asshole." I look at her. "What he said earlier about me. Is that why you dress and act differently around him?"

Mel's head drops to rest against the rung in front of her. "When he said I was holding him back, it hurt. More than I like to admit. When my moms informed me he'd be coming here, I wanted to prove to him that I take my craft seriously. You may have noticed that Aspen doesn't get to know people before making judgments. Once he's made up his mind, he's slow to change it."

I scowl. "Why can't you be serious about magic and also dress the way you like?"

Mel gives me a rueful smile. "I agree, but Aspen... Around the time he dumped me, he developed these rules for himself about how things have to be a specific way in order to succeed, and now he's stuck in that mindset."

"That's fine for him, but that doesn't mean he has to impose it on everyone else." I lean over to bump my shoulder against hers. "I like who you really are. No one should be allowed to make you feel like your real self isn't enough."

She glances at me, her blue eyes filled with gratitude. "I'm sorry I didn't stand up for you down there."

I pull back my shoulders. "I can fight my own battles."

“So I’ve seen.” Her gaze returns to the town. “You know, all I want is to be myself. But everyone else keeps telling me I need to be something different.”

“I totally understand.” I lean back on my hands, the rough boards squishing beneath my palms. “What’s so great about being a witch, anyway? Magic has done nothing but ruin my life. If my family weren’t witches, we wouldn’t have visited Hartford Cove, and my mom wouldn’t have died. If I weren’t magical, my dad wouldn’t have had to go into hiding, and the huntsmen wouldn’t have killed him. If I weren’t magical, I wouldn’t have thought I was crazy my whole life.”

Maybe I’m still crazy, though I keep that thought to myself.

I shake my head. “Everyone has so many expectations for what my life should be, but no one asks what I want for myself.”

“I get that.” Mel speaks softly, her words heavy with understanding. “Growing up as the daughter of a Trinity, I’ve had a lot of pressure to one day take over one of the spots when my moms step down.”

Surprised, I glance at her. “Is Aspen planning to be part of the Trinity, too?”

Mel nods. “It’s his life goal.”

I frown. “Do *you* want to be part of a Trinity?”

Mel shakes her head, longing in her eyes as she stares at Hartford Cove. “I just want a quiet life with a little shop in a quiet town where I don’t have to hide that I’m a witch, where no one looks at me like I’m weird.”

I gesture to the town below us. “There it is for the taking.”

“Why do you think I followed you here when you invited me?” Warmth twinkles in Mel’s eyes. “And I see how much effort you’re putting into preserving this place. You like it here, despite the history, don’t you?”

I purse my lips. “Aside from the whole witch thing and the potential danger? Yeah, I really do. And now that I’m not the only witch in town, my role here isn’t as imposing.”

“Or as demanding.” Mel smiles and bumps her elbow against me. “Delilah’s really good with pregnant women. I bet she’ll take over the belly rubbing soon. And Harper’s been talking about helping to create a community garden so that the food here can be locally sourced.”

I nod, happiness filling me that the others are finding a place for themselves that gives them purpose. “I enjoy seeing them settling in, and I want to help the vampires, too.”

Mel lays a hand on my shoulder, her touch warm and comforting. “And as a witch, you have the power to help in ways you wouldn’t as a human.”

I peek at her from the corner of my eye. “There’s a spell that can help them, something my ancestors performed, but I don’t think I can do it when I can’t even find my magic.”

“Then we’ll do it together.” She covers my hand. “Magic isn’t all bad, Rowe. It can be beautiful, too.”

“I know.” Without magic, I wouldn’t have met Haut, Owen, Tris, or Ambros, and I wouldn’t give them up for anything. “But Aspen sure makes me hate it.”

“He just needs to be reminded that life is about more than power.” She stands and offers me her hand. “Ready to go back inside and dry off?”

“If you insist.” I let her help me up and shiver. “That storm really came out of nowhere. The weather app promised clear skies until tomorrow afternoon.”

She studies me for a moment before she rolls her eyes. “When have weather apps ever been right?”

I walk ahead of her down into the attic. “You know, you still have some clothes here.”

She chuckles. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

Mel and I make our way back to my bedroom, where we find Haut waiting for me with a towel.

With a small smile, Mel leaves us to go find dry clothes, shutting the door behind her.

Haut steps forward and envelops me in warm terrycloth. He pats the water from my hair and face before dropping the towel to my shoulders and kissing my forehead. “Do you need me to bury him?”

Warmth fills me, and I lean against his warm body, breathing in his comforting scent. “You offering to kill for me is so sweet.”

A rumble vibrates in his chest. “He made you cry.”

I rear back. “What? No, he didn’t!”

Haut cups my cheeks and tips my head back, kissing the corners of my eyes, which feel hot and puffy. “Of course, he didn’t. My mistake.”

“Damn straight, your mistake.” I lean into him once more, pressing my ear over his steadily beating heart. “What if I can’t learn magic the way I’m supposed to?”

“Then you learn it the way you can. You’re putting too much pressure on

yourself to conform,” he says, the words matter of fact. “Your grandma didn’t have a wand, and she was a powerful woman. There’s more than one way to be a witch.”

I turn my head to smash my face against his chest. “Should I take the ADHD medicine? Will it fix my brain?”

He cups the back of my head, and his lips press into my hair. “Your brain is fine the way it is. It works in a way that’s different from others, but that doesn’t mean it’s wrong. If you want to take the meds and see if they help you focus, that’s your choice, but your brain isn’t *broken*.”

Would he say that, though, if he knew I was hearing scratching in the walls right now?

My arms tighten around him. “Will you rumble for me again?”

Engulfing me in his embrace, he rumbles until the comforting sound is all I can hear.

## HELPING MAGIC ALONG

When I go downstairs the next morning, I find the remnants of yesterday's magic class on the kitchen table.

I'm embarrassed to admit that I let Haut baby me last night, bringing me dinner in bed and watching shows with me on the laptop so I didn't have to go back downstairs.

The other guys had all popped in to check on me, bringing dessert and hot chocolate, but had otherwise left us alone. When Haut fell asleep, I laid quietly with one ear pressed against his chest and my hand over my other ear, trying to block out the noises in the walls.

Now, I stare with blurry eyes at the wrinkled wreck of our grimoires. A blow dryer lies on the table next to them, giving testament to someone's effort to save them, but the books will never lay flat again.

Steps heavy, I walk to the table and flip open the cover on mine to find the ink bloomed out in blue, black, and green splotches. I run a finger over my name and smear purple sparkles across the page.

Owen comes over with a cup of hot chocolate in his hands. "I'm sorry, Rowe."

"It's okay." I close the cover. "We have more journals. I can start over." I take the mug from him and force a smile. "It's not like I had much in there to lose."

"I take this as one more sign that handwritten books are bad." Tris slaps a handful of printouts onto the kitchen table. "Here are all my notes so far that we can use as reference. I've been copying them over at night. If we lived in pre-computer times, I'd be pissed, but as it is, this is just an inconvenience."

I pick up the papers and flip through them. He even made a table of



contents, small as it is this early in the training. “Think Aspen will notice if our new grimoires look the same?”

“Fuck what he thinks.” Tris’s eyes narrow. “He’s lucky I’m not still a wolf shifter, or he’d have no balls right now.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Ew, then you’d have ball breath, and I’d never kiss you again.”

“Oh, yeah?” He swoops in and takes the hot chocolate from my hand, setting it on the table before bending me over his arm and planting a kiss full of tongue on my mouth.

When he straightens, he licks his lips. “Mmm, chocolatey.”

Laughing, I push him away and reclaim my hot chocolate. “I hope this is just a precursor to breakfast at Nesse’s Diner. I have a craving for French fries and milkshakes.”

Haut comes out of his room where he’d gone to get dressed for the day just as a knock sounds at the front door.

With a scowl, he veers away from the kitchen and opens the door, growling, “What are you doing here?”

Aspen’s voice drifts through the house. “I’d like to speak to Rowe, if I may?”

“You don’t have to.” Shadows bubble from Owen’s skin, and his eyes flash red. “Say the word, and we’ll have him escorted out of town.”

After a moment of hesitation, I shake my head. “I’ll see what he has to say first.”

I brace myself as I walk to the foyer, where Haut’s large body blocks the door. Over Haut’s shoulder, the top of Aspen’s blond head is just visible.

Haut grips the doorframe, and a low growl of threat comes from him.

I touch his stiff back. “It’s okay.”

“Make her sad, and I’ll end you.” Haut steps to the side and glances down at me, his expression softening. “We’ll be right here if you need us.”

I pat his chest as I step past and close the door to give us a semblance of privacy.

Aspen moves away from the door. He looks less put together this morning, the seams in his slacks not as crisp as usual, and the buttons of his shirt don’t align with his belt buckle.

For Aspen, he’s a mess.

I take a few steps out onto the porch before stopping and crossing my arms over my stomach. “What do you want?”

He draws in a deep breath. “First, I want to apologize for my words yesterday. I was out of line. It was never my intention to cause you pain.”

I regard him for a moment. While his words made me angry, I’m not the one he hurt. “There’s someone else who deserves your apology more.”

He sighs, his gaze dropping to the floor beneath his feet. “You’re right, and I intend to speak to Melody—”

“Mel,” I bite out.

His eyes jerk up to meet mine. “Excuse me?”

My eyes narrow. “She prefers to go by Mel, which you know and disregard because you believe your opinion means more than her comfort.”

He stiffens before he nods. “You’re right. I will add that to my list of things to apologize for.”

“Good.” I study him. “You should also apologize to Delilah for ridiculing our bucket.”

A muscle in his temple jumps. “It was creatively decorated.”

“You called it childish,” I correct, “and said it wasn’t a magical tool.”

He pinches the bridge of his nose. “I realize you’re new to learning magic, so you don’t understand what qualifies as a magic tool, but just saying something is magic doesn’t make it so.”

“Do you know why it’s a special bucket?” I don’t wait for him to answer, because he’d never bothered to ask. “It’s the bucket I used to scry to speak to Delilah when she and the others were trapped in a well.”

His eyes widen, but I keep talking. “It carried the water that Delilah used to help lead us to where they were being held prisoner, where many of them had already died, so that we could dig them out of the ground.”

Aspen’s brows pinch together. “You were able to scry?”

Of course, that’s what he’d latch onto. “Yes, using *that* bucket. If it had been a more conventional bowl designed for scrying, would you have accorded it the significance it deserves? Is a witchy aesthetic more important to you than a tool that’s forged a genuine connection, even if that tool happens to be a bucket decorated with puffy paint?”

Something close to shame crosses Aspen’s face. “The connection always outweighs the appearance.”

I exhale, my shoulders slumping with fatigue at having this conversation with Aspen again. “I fear that our differences are too insurmountable for you to be an effective teacher. Both for me and for my coven.”

I turn my head away to stare down the driveway. “Hartford Cove is a

small town with small dreams. The coven here is filled with witches who were first hurt by witches like you, who didn't think they were worth training. That's how they ended up in the Sunlight Project. They were so desperate to find a place to belong that they walked straight into Bryant's trap."

Aspen takes a sharp breath.

I look back at him. "Bryant saw them, not as people, but as a means to gain magical blood. And you don't see any of us as people, either. You see us as notches on your magic belt toward the next step up in your rise to power. We don't need someone like you. We need a teacher who will help us practice our magic quietly and build a haven where we can exist without fear."

Aspen rakes a shaky hand through his hair. "May I be granted one more chance to show that I can be the teacher you all need?"

"Why should I give you that?" I shake my head. "I told you what we needed when you first arrived. I *warned* you, but you ignored me. Why should I think you're capable of change?"

"Yesterday was a low point for me. I'm not used to failing." His eyes meet mine. "You're right that I cherry-picked witches to train. I chose the ones with talent so that their success would make me look better. I forgot what it was like when I first started training, how much I questioned my teachers. I lost that spark somewhere along the way."

If I had to guess, he lost it when he cut Mel out of his life.

"But yesterday was eye opening," Aspen continues. "Let me try one more time to help you find your magic by starting with your wand."

I don't really want to go through that whole experience again, but his earnest expression cracks my defenses, and I find myself holding up a finger. "*One* more chance. That's it."

Relief relaxes his features, and he eagerly steps back toward the stairs. "Get your shoes on and come with me. Our time to do this is limited."

Confused, I go back inside and find Haut already there with my shoes, while Owen leans against the stairs, attempting to look casual. I take my shoes from Haut and walk to the formal living room, where I find Tris and Ros casually straightening the small space.

I shake my head. "Don't pretend you weren't listening at the window."

Tris steps forward. "I'm going with you."

I don't argue. I may be giving Aspen one more chance, but there's still a

killer we haven't uncovered, and if it's a witch, Aspen is my number one suspect as the villain.

With my shoes on, Tris and I step out onto the porch.

Aspen now stands at the back of his sports car in the driveway, its trunk open and what looks like branches sticking out of it. With a grunt, he heaves two potted trees out onto the driveway.

Next, he reaches into the trunk and pulls out a long duffel bag, slinging it over his shoulder.

A warm smile spreads over his lips. "Oh, good. Tris, can you help carry one of the trees?"

"Don't you think we have enough trees around here?" Bemused, Tris jogs down the steps and hefts one of the large pots into his arms. "What do we need these for?"

Aspen's eyes twinkle with excitement. "We're going to help some magic along down at the beach."

I balk at his suggestion. The beach and I are still on the outs since I almost died down there.

Tris jerks his head toward me in a *come-on* gesture. "Don't worry, sparky. I'll protect you from the evil ocean, even if I have to sit on you again."

Aspen's brows lift. "Why do you think the ocean is evil?"

I glance at the vast, churning expanse of water just past the dunes. "There are fish in the ocean that eat people."

His expression registers incredulity. "Are there man-eating fish in *this* part of the ocean?"

"Don't bother arguing with her," Tris advises. "She was traumatized for life by a movie about a killer shark."

Reluctantly, I follow them down the sandy dunes, the ground shifting beneath my shoes, and step onto the beach.

Aspen takes in the surroundings and walks a little farther before setting down his potted tree. "This should be a good location. Tris, please place yours a few feet farther down the beach."

As Tris walks past, Aspen shrugs off his duffel bag and drops it onto the sand. He crouches in front of it and unzips the bag to reveal a collection of metal poles.

Unwilling curiosity gets the better of me, and I shuffle closer. "What are those for?"

Aspen's tone carries a note of enthusiasm as he pulls one out. "They're lightning rods."

Tris comes over and takes one of the metal poles, spinning it in his hands. "Do you think Rowe's some kind of weather witch because of the storm yesterday?"

"No." Aspen grins and looks up at me. "I think you're an ethereal witch."

Tris straightens. "Hey, the creepiest of Mel's moms mentioned that."

Aspen pauses. "One of the Trinity already identified you as an ethereal witch, and you didn't think to tell me?"

"It's not like they tested me or anything." I lift my hands. "There was a lot going on, and it didn't hold any meaning for me, so I forgot."

Tris cocks his head to the side. "Funny that Mel wouldn't tell you, though."

Aspen clears his throat and focuses back on his lightning rods. "Yes, well, we have not been in agreement about how to perform the power tests."

"Shocking," Tris says dryly.

My brows pinch together. "So, what's an ethereal witch?"

Aspen thrusts the rod he holds into the sand and grabs another. "An ethereal witch is one who connects to the very energy of the world. Crow—the creepy one," he adds with a look at Tris, "is an ethereal witch herself. They're not common. I'm surprised she didn't want to take Rowe on as a student."

"Oh, she did," Tris assures him. "But Rowe said no."

That gives Aspen pause before he shakes his head. "I came about this conclusion yesterday. When you were angry, the barrier around Hartford Cove responded. Those strings that connected the members of the coven together? That was you instinctively protecting the other witches."

I stare at him in surprise. "You could see all that?"

Aspen's chest puffs out. "As a witch of the Second Circle, I am trained to see all forms of magic."

"You just really can't help with the bragging, can you?" I say, completely unimpressed.

"It's a great achievement," he says stiffly. "On the same level as obtaining a doctorate. I am one of the youngest in my circle."

"You know, only doctors brag about having a doctorate." Tris folds his arms. "Put your wand where your mouth is, and you won't have to wave your credentials around for everyone to see."

Aspen lets out a long sigh. “Anyway, being an ethereal witch means that the spells you perform with other witches work better because your magic strengthens theirs exponentially.”

That seems to be counter to what he said yesterday about learning witchcraft. “But you said witches need to perform magic independently.”

He walks a few paces away and stabs another rod into the sand. “That’s still true. Individual magic use is about personal strengths, which must be exercised, much like working out. You need to exercise your muscles to build strength. But if you want to lift a car, it’s easier with several strong people.”

I study the lightning rods planted in the sand, their tips reaching toward the sky. “But what are these for?”

Aspen plants a few more as he speaks. “Ethereal magic is different. It’s not about the typical ingredients you might find in nature. It’s about connecting to the energies that exist in the world. Were there any ingredients you used in your wand-making yesterday that called out to you?”

I shake my head no, but then realize that’s not true. “When I used the moonlit water, it tingled a little, and I saw silver strings.”

“I know you didn’t take part in creating the moonlit water.” Aspen holds up a hand to stop my protests. “It’s too advanced for your current skill level. I’m not upset. I’m simply saying that you don’t know how it’s made. During a full moon, a witch summons the power of the moon into purified water. Moonlit water holds the essence of moonlight. It’s an ethereal material.”

He straightens and looks at the line of lightning rods that pepper the beach. “Right now, we’re after more ethereal materials. Those lightning rods will draw the energy of storms to them, allowing us to harvest lightning sand and lightning-touched wood. It’s the beginning of your journey into ethereal magic.”

I hug my stomach. “What if you’re wrong?”

He lifts his hands. “Then we have some powerful materials to play with in class while we keep searching for an answer.”

Tris stabs the rod he holds into the sand at his feet. “Isn’t it cheating to use lightning rods?”

Aspen laughs and nods in agreement. “It is, technically, but I’m trying to step outside the box to support the witches under my instruction. Waiting for lightning to naturally strike the beach, especially with so many tall trees around, would take a lifetime.”

It might take a lifetime to train me, so I hope Aspen knows what he’s

committing to.

But as I gaze out over the potted trees and lightning rods, a tingle goes through me, followed by hope. Is that the connection the others felt when they chose their ingredients?

Has Aspen finally gotten something right?

## JUST LIKE THE PAST

When we return from the beach, the others are waiting on the porch, looking not at all casual this time. Haut's shirt rests on the rail, with his shoes on the steps, while Ros stands at the back of the porch, nearest the beach, with the safety clip on his gun holster unfastened.

Aspen's brows lift, but he doesn't comment.

Owen comes down the steps. "It looks like another storm is brewing. We should drive down to Nesse's Diner."

"Well advised." Aspen turns to me and Tris. "Would you like to ride—"

"We'll take our own cars." Owen catches my hand and tugs me away from Aspen. "It will make starting work after breakfast easier."

"Right." Aspen frowns and glances at the others before he heads to his car. "Then I'll just meet you down there."

We watch in silence as he slides into his car and drives off.

"Real subtle, guys." I poke Owen in the chest. "Why not just accuse him of having something to do with the murder?"

"We still don't know anything." Haut tugs on his T-shirt. "People are getting restless, though, and he has to have heard the rumors, unless he stays inside his house when he's not here."

Tom Arnold, who had been identified as the body found in front of my house, had been a recluse, living on the outskirts of Hartford Cove. He had a habit of vanishing for days, preferring his wolf form, which is how his disappearance went unnoticed for so long. But Hartford Cove isn't large enough for people to vanish forever without rumors spreading.

Ros joins us in the driveway. "It would be bold of Aspen to be part of this and keep showing up here every day."



“He’s cocky about his abilities,” Tris points out. “Even if he’s involved, he knows you didn’t smell him on the body.”

“No, we didn’t smell anyone on the body, which is a whole different issue.” Haut pulls on his shoes. “Can magic hide scent?”

“We could ask Mel.” When my suggestion earns head shakes from Haut and Ambros, I throw my hands up in frustration. “Come on, we *know* Mel’s not involved.”

“Her moms are powerful witches,” Tris points out. “If you were in danger here, they’d snatch you up in a heartbeat.”

“Why don’t we just start suspecting Delilah or Harper while we’re at it?” Exasperated, I climb into Owen’s car. “You’re all being ridiculous. Mel has nothing to do with this.”

I slam the door before they can argue, which only saves me until Owen slides behind the wheel while the others all get into Haut’s SUV.

“We’re just being cautious.” Owen turns on the car and heads down the driveway. “Until we know more, it’s better to keep this to as few people who know as possible.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “They already know about the body in the woods. And what’s your plan for figuring out the killer if the body didn’t give you any answers?”

His hands tighten on the steering wheel. “We’re still figuring that out.”

“What if there was a spell that could have been used to figure it out?” I shift to face him. “Why rush to burn the body? Isn’t keeping it on ice until the crime is solved standard procedure?”

Amusement fills his eyes when he glances over at me. “If you haven’t noticed, we’re not exactly set up to keep bodies on ice. Not unless Rodney wanted to make room in the freezer at the butcher shop...”

When he trails off, his body tensing, I turn to look through the windshield, and my stomach sinks. A small crowd stands outside Nesse’s Diner, and I spot a few of the town council among them.

Since Nesse’s never has a wait to be seated, this can’t be good.

I slouch lower in my seat. “Can we circle the statue and go back home?”

“If we do that, they’ll just follow us.” He passes them to park in the small lot attached to the historical society where he keeps an office. “We’re lucky they didn’t ambush us on our porch.”

“Maybe my threat of turning them into toads last time kept them away.” Reluctantly, I unbuckle my seatbelt and climb out.

As we walk the short distance to the Sheriff's office to meet the others, the cool autumn air seeps through my sweater. Shivering, I burrow my chin into the wide collar of my turtleneck. At some point soon, I'll need to go shopping for a winter jacket.

When we join the others, Aspen stands with them, having parked at the station. The crowd in front must have stopped him from going directly inside.

Tris cuddles up to my side, wrapping an arm around me to share his body heat. "Looks like some people want to talk to you guys."

Haut's lips press together into a thin line. "So it would seem."

With long-legged strides, he crosses the street, with the rest of us following.

As we near, the crowd shifts, and a familiar-looking man steps to the front. I remember him from the single city council meeting I attended, as well as the infamous porch invasion. Herold, or Henry, or something like that.

Haut stops in front of me. "Horace, what's this about?"

Well, I got the first letter right.

Horace pulls back his shoulders, though he can't quite meet Haut's eyes. "We've heard rumors that Tom Arnold's body was found near the big house. People are scared to go into the woods, and the silence from the sheriff's department is making our citizens uneasy."

Restless murmurs go through the crowd.

Haut's gaze sweeps over them. "Folks, I understand your concerns. We did find Tom's body, but we're still investigating the circumstances of his death to determine what killed him."

"We heard it was a werewolf, just like that rogue who attacked Owen and killed the Wendall heir!" A woman in the crowd points an accusatory finger at Owen. "Everyone knows you can now change outside of the full moon. How can we be sure you're not involved in this? Maybe you lost control!"

The accusation hangs in the air, and my heart hurts for Owen. My mother's death had been a stone of shame around Owen's neck, the town turning their back on a nine-year-old child for something he had no control over.

Hurt flashes across Owen's face, and he stiffens. "I am not the enemy here. I've spent my entire life protecting Hartford Cove, and I would never harm any of you."

Emboldened by the mood of the crowd, another man steps forward. "Haut, you were the Alpha before Owen, and you led us through times of

peace. It's time for you to take back your position and deal with this new threat, just like your father did."

Haut's eyes narrow, and his jaw clenches. "My father wasn't the only one who joined the hunt for the rogue back then. Owen's father was the first to step forward to protect this town. And Owen won the position of Alpha from me through challenge. I honor and respect him as my leader."

Owen steps up next to Haut's side. "Haut and I are working together, just as we always have. We will find Tom's killer and deal with them. We understand your fear, but jumping to conclusions won't help anyone. Let us do our jobs, and we will find out what really happened to Tom. Now, everyone, go home."

The crowd's murmurs grow louder, and they exchange uncertain glances, torn between their fear and the order from their Alpha.

My gaze flits over the faces in the crowd, recognizing many of them. These are the same people who I've exchanged pleasantries with on the street and who have come to Owen to ask for help since the battle.

Now, they regard us with suspicion and fear.

The woman who accused Owen takes a step back, uncertainty in her expression. "I just want to know what happened to Tom. He may have been a recluse, but he was one of us."

Owen nods in agreement. "We all want answers, and we promise to find them. But ambushing us in front of Nesse's Diner is not the way to go about this. Now, *go home*."

The power in the command this time ripples through the crowd, and eyes drop, heads dipping in deference to their Alpha. However much they may question Owen's role, his authority can't be denied. No one among this crowd is strong enough to challenge him.

As the group disperses, I catch the flash of a familiar face at the back that makes my stomach plummet with fear. Bryant, healed from the gunshot wound, his eyes lit with feverish hunger when they meet mine.

The shifting crowd blocks my view of him, and my heart races as I push through them, terrified that if I lose sight of Bryant now, no one will believe me.

I spot him walking down the sidewalk, his head bowed, and I chase after him.

"Stop!" I call out, my voice a croak of fear.

I catch up to him and grab his arm, my fingers trembling. But when he

turns, I realize my mistake, and my heart sinks.

It's not Bryant.

Nervousness etches Rodney's face as he glances around the street. "Hey, Rowe, did you need something?"

I drop my hand, confusion filling me, and I scramble with a plausible reason for chasing after him that doesn't make me look completely crazy. "Are you okay? How are you feeling?"

"A bit scared, if I'm honest," Rodney says, his voice hushed. "Is it true about the werewolf?"

My stomach tightens with sympathy. Rodney is one of the town's three werewolves, and the change in attitude toward his kind must be scary.

I place a hand on his arm. "You can't shift when the moon isn't full. There's no reason for anyone to suspect you had anything to do with this."

He nods, but the confusion and fear in his eyes remains. "I know, but people... They're scared now. I might ask my boss if I can work in the back for a while, until they find out what really killed Tom."

I don't blame him for being cautious. "That's a good idea. Safety first."

His expression remains uneasy. "Owen should probably watch his back. The folks who were against him being Alpha might use this as an excuse to drive him out of town."

The words send a chill down my spine. I hadn't considered that angle, and the thought of how that would play out makes me uneasy. Sure, the Hartford family owns a lot of the town, but if enough people turn against Owen and take matters into their own hands, it will either mean another fight or being forced to leave to avoid more deaths.

Before I can respond, Haut catches up to us. "Why did you run off, Rowe?"

I can't bring myself to tell him that I thought I saw Bryant. He and the others already give me the side eye for thinking we have rats in the house.

Instead, I stick with my lie. "I just wanted to make sure Rodney was okay after all that."

Haut's gaze shifts to Rodney. "Everything okay with you?"

Rodney nods, but worry fills his face. "Deputy Arden should probably stop making house calls until this blows over."

Haut's expression turns grim. "You might be right. We need to tread carefully right now."

"Stay safe." With another nervous glance around the street, Rodney turns

and continues toward the butcher shop, his shoulders hunched.

Haut and I rejoin our group, and as a somber mood group, we head inside Nesse's Diner.

Inside, an eerie silence washes over us, and I glance around to find the faces of the diners inside all turned in our direction, their stares locked on us as we make our way to the back dining area.

There, we find Barron and Jesse waiting with Mel, and seeing her lifts my mood. Dark kohl outlines Mel's eyes, and she wears a ripped, rock-band T-shirt tucked into tight black pants with chains jangling from the belt loops. Her dark hair is pulled up in a messy bun with a pair of sticks poking out of the top.

Aspen's mouth drops open, and he blurts out, "What happened to you?"

Mel cocks her hip to the side, making the chains jingle. "I decided to stop being someone I'm not. I've realized I don't have to conform to expectations to be a good witch. This is the type of clothing that gives me confidence."

Aspen turns to me and raises an eyebrow.

I just stare back. I'm not the one who made Mel feel like she needed to change in the first place.

Barron interrupts the moment by asking, "What happened outside?"

They had seen the crowd gathering through the window but didn't catch the entire conversation from back here.

Haut explains as Abony brings in our usual breakfast orders.

She places an extra-large cup of coffee in front of herself before sitting.

"Why not just stick a straw in the carafe?" Tris teases.

"I had a late night." A blush darkens her cheeks. "I was working at the bookshop with Drake until almost dawn."

Curiosity piqued, I lean forward. "Just you and Drake, huh?"

Abony raises her large cup to block her face. "We were just working on the translations together."

Barron straightens in his seat. "I forgot to tell you all that I asked Drake to join the translation project since he's fluent in German."

"Great, another non-witch handling the grimoires," Aspen grumbles, but quiets when Mel elbows him.

We finish our breakfast, the tension from earlier making for a subdued meal.

With nothing urgent to do for the day, I leave with Barron to walk to his bookshop. I want to get more grimoires in case anyone else's books were

destroyed in the storm yesterday.

As we reach the entrance to Books & Blots, Barron freezes, his gaze fixed on the glass doors.

I stop next to him, my hot chocolate from breakfast suddenly uneasy in my stomach. “Everything okay?”

He turns to me. “Call Haut and don’t come inside.”

The urgency in his voice fills me with dread.

Ignoring his warning, I push past him and step through the doors. The moment I enter, the metallic smell of blood hits me, and I instinctively cover my mouth to stifle a gag.

Barron’s voice comes from behind me. “Rowe, go back outside.”

I ignore him and rush to the back of the shop, my heart pounding with dread.

There, I find Drake’s lifeless body on the worktable, a gaping bite taken out of his shoulder.

## HOW LONG?

I stand frozen, staring at Drake's lifeless body sprawled out on the table. Blood pools beneath the gaping wound in his shoulder and what's left of his throat. Dull red streaks splatter the wall behind him, as if someone had dipped a paintbrush in his heart and flung it out with abandon.

The carpet under the table, once a warm brown, now appears black beneath the overhead lights.

A hand grabs my shoulder, pulling me backward. Numb, I turn my head to see Barron's mouth moving, but the ringing in my ears muffles his words. Blood whooshes through my body like waves, still alive while Drake is not.

How long does it take blood to congeal? How long before it loses its vibrant shine? Abony said she was here with him until late last night. How late? Did she cross paths with the killer as she was walking home alone? The streets were probably deserted. How close had she come to being the next victim? And why had she left Drake here alone?

Barron never locks the door to the bookshop. It would have been easy for the killer to slip inside. Or had they already been here while my friends flirted over the translations? Did the murderer play eeny, meeny, miney, moe to choose which of their lives to end?

Barron forcefully turns my head away from the body, dragging me toward the entrance.

The front door bursts open, and Haut's large body blocks the frame. His moss-green eyes seek me out in a sweeping assessment to make sure I'm unharmed before he strides toward the back, making room for others to follow.

Jesse enters next, followed by Owen, the two men coming toward us.

In the next heartbeat, Barron's hands leave me as Jesse sweeps his mate up in a tight embrace.

Owen steps in front of me, his hands on my shoulders.

When his mouth moves, I shake my head, unable to hear him past the rising waves. My eyes roll toward the back of the shop, seeking the body that lies just past the shelves.

Owen cups my face, his palms blocking everything in my periphery, leaving only him.

He breathes in deeply, and my burning lungs follow suit, two balloons expanding until my head feels like it will float away. But the taste of pennies on my tongue and in my stomach won't let me escape so easily.

With an encouraging nod, he blows his breath out, and it fans across my face, warm and still smelling of coffee from breakfast.

The air escapes my lungs, my body folding in on itself. Had I been playing on the beach with Aspen and Tris while Drake lay here gasping his last breath?

Hot tears burn my eyes and leave fiery trails down my cheeks. I promised to protect our new citizens, but who am I to stand against a nightmare?

Owen's fingers slip into my hair at the back of my head, and he pulls me gently against his chest.

The next breath I take draws in Owen's comforting scent. My childhood friend. My protector. Hand lifting, I clutch the soft material under my cheek and sob out the ocean inside me.

I barely knew Drake, but he'd been someone I spoke to while on deliveries, someone I sat across the table from and shared a meal within my house. How can that have been so recently, and now will never happen again? So much potential just snuffed out.

Tears fall for a friend I almost had. For the place within our town that he was building for himself. For the blossoming romance between him and Abony that was crushed before it bloomed.

When the waves stop crashing through my body, other sounds replace them. Familiar, hushed voices, nearly drowned out by the pound of rain on the rooftop.

Owen strokes my back, his body rocking slowly from side to side, a motion meant to soothe.

Unable to bear the comfort, I push back.

His arms tense for a moment before they loosen, allowing the distance,



though his hands stay on me.

Outside the large display window, rain pelts the street and lightning flashes through the sky. The promised storm has come earlier than predicted, but the deluge isn't enough to chase away the people huddled under the eaves, peering into the shop.

Can they smell death like Barron could? Does knowing a vampire died this time instead of a wolf shifter offer some kind of relief?

Word will spread soon that another body has been found, this one in the heart of Hartford Cove. There will be no hiding it this time.

I peer toward the sound of other voices. "What's going on?"

"Dr. Lopez and Tris are back there, preparing to move the body." Owen rubs my arms. "Haut and Ambros are dealing with the crime scene."

My stomach lurches, my breakfast making a bid to revolt, but I choke it down. Death already hangs in the air. I won't add the stench of bile.

Owen cups my elbows. "I don't suppose I can convince you to leave?"

When I shake my head, he leads me over to the check-out counter and pulls a stool out for me to sit.

I stare out over the low bookshelves and tables, no longer finding comfort in this cozy space. The killer stole more than Drake's life when he murdered him here. The safety these walls provided was also taken.

First the body outside my home, where my mother died, and now my almost-friend, killed in the one place in town where I felt most secure, in Barron's bookshop.

The thoughts suffocate me, an inescapable curse.

Outside, I watch as Zane, Drake's roommate, arrives. The dark clouds blocking out the sun must have been enough for him to step out during the day.

He pushes past Deputy Arden, who guards the door.

As Zane enters the bookstore, his face crumples into a mask of grief and anger. "Where is he?"

Ros hurries forward from the back. "Zane, you shouldn't be here."

"What happened?" he demands, his voice trembling with emotion. "What killed my friend?"

"We don't know yet." Ros reaches out to him. "We're still investigating."

Zane's anger flares, and he slaps Ros's hand aside. "This is your fault! You were too hasty in disbanding the huntsmen. If we'd kept hunting down rogue paranormals, my friend would still be alive."

A stricken expression crosses Ros's face before he hides it. "We all want answers, Zane, and we want justice for Drake. But this is not the time for blame. For now, go home before the sun comes back out. I'll let you know when we figure out what's doing this."

Zane's lip curls back to reveal a sharp fang. "You think I'm safe, sitting like a stuck duck in my home, just waiting to see who's next? You promised us a better life here, but we're trapped like animals in our homes."

With an angry hiss, Zane turns on his heel and shoves his way back out the door into the downpour.

Ros remains where he stands, his face a frozen mask.

Unable to leave him alone in his pain, I slide off my stool and walk to his side. "Zane is just upset. He's confused and letting his grief speak for him."

Ros continues to stare at the door, his voice heavy with self-doubt. "But what if he's right? What if my hatred for the way my father corrupted the organization blinded me to the good it could have been doing? What if I made a mistake?"

"You didn't stop the work," I remind him. "The paranormal police are taking over. It's their job."

"But they're not *here*, and I *am*." He shakes his head and turns toward the back of the shop.

Sadness fills me at seeing him so defeated, but I don't know what else I can do to make him realize this isn't his fault.

Thunder crashes outside, making me jump. My eyes instinctively dart to the window, and my heart freezes as I lock gazes with a man who stands on the other side of the glass staring back at me.

Bryant.

He looks the same as he did in the street earlier, his crazed eyes fix on me, and a smile curling his lips.

My heart jolts painfully back into motion, and I blindly reach out.

Sensing my fear, Owen swiftly comes to my side. "Rowe, what is it?"

My lips part, my eyes burning as I refuse to look away from Bryant. "Do you see—"

The crash of the door opening again makes me flinch. When I look back at the spot where I saw Bryant just a moment before, I find the fear-filled face of a local staring into the shop instead.

Horace storms into the bookshop, flinging rainwater everywhere. Anger reddens his face as he shouts, "Haut, come out here! I demand answers! What

are you planning to do to stop these deaths?”

Haut’s disinterested voice drifts from the back. “We’re still investigating, Horace. We’ll find out what happened.”

“That’s what you said earlier, and now we have another body!” Horace’s gaze sharpens as he spots Owen, and his lip curls with disdain. “How can we trust your investigation when you’re sleeping under the same roof as one of the potential suspects?”

Haut’s growl precedes his appearance, and he looms over the smaller shifter. “Watch yourself, Horace.”

Horace sneers. “You’re no longer Alpha, Haut, so I don’t have to listen to you anymore.”

Haut steps closer, a constant, threatening rumble coming from his chest. “I don’t need to be Alpha to put you in your place.”

The older man skitters backward before his attention fixes on where I stand beside Owen, and his gaze fills with accusation. “Ever since you came to town and started making all these changes, nothing has been right. There are people who want Hartford Cove to go back to how it was before you arrived.”

The wolf flashes in Haut’s eyes, and the tension in the room rises. “Are you threatening my mate?”

Owen intercepts him, stepping between Haut and Horace, and his voice carries a note of authority as he addresses the council member. “Leaving town is no longer on the table, Horace. We fought for Hartford Cove and won the right to live here. If you don’t like the direction the town is taking, you and anyone else who disagrees are welcome to leave and start your own wolf shifter-exclusive town.”

Horace’s flush deepens, and he spits out, “Your father would be disappointed in how you turned out, Owen. A true Hartford would care about preserving our town. Don’t think that you’ll be able to throw around your weight forever.”

Haut snarls, and Horace leaps backward, slips on the puddle he created, and almost falls. His arms pinwheel as he catches his balance, then turns tail and flees.

In the silence left by his departure, I look at Haut and Owen. “Should we call Mel’s moms? The paranormal council can take over the investigation to ensure it’s impartial.”

Haut shakes his head. “No. The more we rely on the paranormal council,

the more say they'll have in how we run Hartford Cove. As it is, they're already too interested in our town."

Ambros, Tris, and Dr. Lopez join us, their expressions grim.

Dr. Lopez pulls off her gloves. "I'll have to do a full autopsy, but the MO appears to be the same. A single bite to the heart, though there's some blood left in this one."

Ambros frowns. "When was the last time Drake had a blood delivery?"

"Last Tuesday." I gesture toward Barron. "We did the delivery the morning he and Zane came over for dinner. Why?"

"Vampire blood loses the nutrients needed to fuel our bodies over the course of several days. It's why we need to ingest more blood." Ambros shakes his head. "If a vampire is responsible for Drake's death, it wasn't for food."

"A werewolf wouldn't hunt a vampire for the same reason." Owen's nostrils flare. "He doesn't register as food. A werewolf would only have attacked him if Drake was a threat."

We all look around the bookstore. There's no way Drake would be perceived as a threat while in the bookshop, translating my grimoires.

Barron seems to be on the same wavelength, because he says, "A werewolf also wouldn't have had the presence of mind to avoid ruining the books. They were all moved out of the spread of blood on the other side of the table."

I nod in agreement. "The only one who would want those books kept safe..."

Silence falls again before Haut growls. "No calling the paranormal council. For all we know, they're in on this."

"But a witch couldn't have created that bite. Or..." My brows pinch together. "Could they?"

Silence falls over the shop as everyone contemplates the question.

It looks like we're back to square one, only with another body added to the list.

## LINGERING STORMS

**I**t storms for the next three days, and tension fills the town as suspicions rise.

Everyone seems to hold their breath while Dr. Lopez performs the autopsy.

While we wait, Haut puts my job as a gofer on hold, and Tris takes over my blood deliveries.

I'm not the only one put on unofficial house arrest. Owen shares my fate after his office gets vandalized. The morning after Drake's death, Owen found the door to the historical society broken off the hinges, despite it being left unlocked, and his office trashed.

Nothing of any importance was destroyed, but it was enough to put Haut on full protector mode, growling every time Owen brought up needing to do something that required going outside. Reminders that Owen was his Alpha were just met with stony stares.

It seems Haut's acceptance of Owen's authority only goes so far, and Owen doesn't push back very hard. Instead, as each day passes, he becomes more and more resigned to the fear—and the hatred sparked by that fear—directed at him from the town's people.

Which just pisses me off.

These people haven't given Owen a fair shot for his entire life. He was born to be the Alpha of this town, and through a terrible accident in his youth, that was stolen from him.

Now that he's finally Alpha, despite his curse, those same people who rejected him as a child are stirring up discontent, preying on people's fears to take even more from Owen.

It makes me want to scream.

“Everything okay, Rowe?” Owen’s quiet voice breaks into my thoughts.

He stands on a ladder a few feet away, attaching strings of lights to the rafters to brighten the attic. Since we’re under house arrest, I thought now would be a good time to deal with the stuff in the attic.

“Never been better.” I yank the sheet off the pile of furniture, sending dust into the air. “Why?”

Owen’s eyes lift toward the roof where thunder rumbles overhead. “Just asking.”

All the weather apps had predicted the storm would be gone before dinnertime of the first day, but despite all the weather science that promised otherwise, the rain persists.

“Aspen said I’m not a weather witch.” I toss the sheet to the side, unsure if it can be washed or if we should throw it away. “This has nothing to do with me.”

“It just...”

When he trails off, I plant my hands on my hips and glare up at him. “What?”

He staples the string he holds to the ceiling, the spinning lights casting weird shadows over the large space. “It just feels like the storm is punishing Hartford Cove, don’t you think?”

I scowl at the dismantled dining table and stack of chairs I had uncovered before reaching for one of the large boxes. “Storms don’t have emotions, Owen.”

He climbs off the ladder to move it a few feet forward. “The streets in the residential area are flooding.”

I pause in the process of opening a large box. “How bad is it? The water’s not above the porches, is it?”

Owen climbs back up the ladder. “No, though some of the houses with basements are having problems.”

Worried now, I peel back the flaps to find a box full of quilts. “Are there sandbags to put in front of the ground-floor windows?”

“No, we had to ask Albert from the hardware store to go to one of the bigger towns to buy some.” Owen puts a staple into the string. “We never get rain like this here, so we weren’t prepared for flooding.”

“Sounds short-sighted to me,” I mumble as I pull the quilt out and set it aside to see what hides beneath. “Good thing we live on a hill away from

everyone else.”

“Yeah, good thing.” He moves the ladder a few more feet. “The people stuck inside their houses must have it hard, though. Hopefully, the rain stops before they run out of food.”

My stomach tightens at the words. I may be angry at how they’re treating Owen, but no one deserves to starve to death. “If it comes to that, they can just turn into wolves and swim out of their houses.”

“What about the vampires and witches?” he asks softly. “It’s not just wolf shifters living here anymore. And Deputy Arden has been sleeping at the sheriff’s office.”

“That sucks, but there’s a couch.” I focus on the hand-embroidered pillows I pull out of the box. “Have you heard how the brigade are doing?”

“Abony has been staying with Barron and Jesse.” The sound of the staple gun punctures the pounding of rain on the roof. “Their house is closer to town, so it’s not in danger.”

Relieved that my friends are safe, my shoulders relax.

Beneath the pillows, I find a large photo album, and I set it on the edge of the box to open the front cover. A petite, red-haired woman smiles out at me, her blue eyes crinkled at the corners. The Wendall house rises behind her, the white paint brighter than it is now, with flowers hanging in baskets around the porch.

Unexpected grief cuts through my anger, and I trace the freckles on my mom’s nose. I was so young when she died that the only part of her that stuck in my memory was the horror and pain on her face as the werewolf took her life.

Dad hadn’t kept pictures of her in our house. I used to think it was because it hurt too much for him to see her, but now I wonder if it’s because he was worried about the huntsmen finding him. If they tracked him down, he didn’t want them to have anything connecting him to the Wendall line or Hartford Cove.

But now I can see that she had a beautiful smile.

“You look just like her,” Owen murmurs, his arms coming around me from behind.

“Yeah.” I touch her pointed chin. “It must have been hard for my dad to be reminded of her every time he looked at me.”

Owen hugs me tighter. “I think it made him happy that part of her still lived on.”

“I don’t know.” My finger moves up to the house behind my mom. “He hated this place. Hated that I was a witch. He tried to bury it under medication, letting me think I was crazy instead of bringing me to people who could help.”

“He was probably afraid that if he brought you to a coven, they would take you from him.” Owen rests his chin on my shoulder. “They wouldn’t have let a vampire raise a witch child. It would have also exposed you both to the paranormal council and alerted the huntsmen to his location.”

“So instead, he locked me away.” I turn the page to find another picture of my mom, this one of her standing on the sand dunes, her long hair swept back by the wind from the ocean. “Does falling in love with my mom and then hiding me for all those years make up for all the evil he did with Bryant? How many witches did he force into the Sunlight Project before love changed him?”

“You can’t let questions like that shadow your memory of your father.” Owen kisses my head. “People aren’t completely black or white. Those who do bad things can also do good.”

“Not you.” I turn my head to kiss the corner of his mouth. “You could never do bad things.”

His lips curve beneath mine. “So sure of me?”

“Oh, yes.” I turn within his embrace, the photo album forgotten. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I pull him down to me. “You are the heart of this town and always stick to what’s right, even when the people here turned their backs on you. Anyone else would have become bitter, but you just keep putting everyone else’s happiness ahead of your own. If you were going to turn bad, it would have happened a long time ago.”

“I’m no saint, Rowe.” His head dips, his nose rubbing against mine. “I have dark thoughts. I get angry.”

“Of course, you do. You’re human.” I rise onto my toes. “But you’ll never be bad.”

Love shimmers in his eyes. “How can I when you believe in me so much?”

His mouth settles over mine in a gentle, unhurried kiss that slowly blooms, our lips opening, breaths mingling. When his tongue sweeps across my bottom lip, my breath catches, and I open wider, welcoming him inside.

With languid strokes, he stokes a fire inside me that grows as my pulse quickens and my heart races.



His hands drop to my hips, his fingers spreading to knead my ass, and his head lifts. “Do you hear that?”

I rise higher on my toes to nibble at his chin. “Hear what?”

He peers up at the ceiling and smiles. “The rain stopped.”

“Who cares about the rain?” I grab his cheeks and bring his face down to mine. “Back to the kissing, Owen Hartford.”

A smile spreads over his lips before they return to mine, and his hands tighten on my ass, lifting me until the toes of my shoes scrape the floor. He walks me backward until a large box presses against the back of my thighs, and he boosts me onto it, then steps between my thighs.

The hard ridge of his cock presses against my core, and my inner muscles clench with the desire to be filled.

His mouth leaves mine to trail kisses down my throat. Pleasure tingles down my body, tightening my nipples and bringing liquid desire to where our bodies press together.

I let my head fall back to give him better access as I wrap my legs around his waist, needing his body against mine.

His hands slip under my sweatshirt, his fingers tracing up my sides to dance along my ribs, teasing as they graze the undersides of my breasts.

A knock echoes through the house from the front door, and Owen’s head lifts, his hands freezing.

I tighten my arms and legs around him. “Just ignore it.”

“It could be important.” He rests his forehead against mine, his breathing fast. “Something could have happened in town.”

I moan with disappointment. “Why are you such a good person?”

“That’s what you love about me.” With a final, chaste kiss, he escapes my hold and adjusts himself before heading toward the open hatch that leads to my bedroom.

Left panting with thwarted desire, I slide off the box. Should I just wait for him to come back so we can pick up where we stopped?

I take in the partially strung lights, the weird shadows they cast in the attic, and hurry after him. We can finish what we started somewhere else.

The knock sounds again as we reach the stairs.

Owen quickens his stride. “Be right there!”

Who could be knocking in the middle of the day?

Apprehension tightens my gut, and I hurry to close the distance that Owen’s longer legs put between us. “Check out the window before you open

the door.”

He pauses with his hand on the knob to glance back at me in confusion.

“Why?”

“We don’t know who’s on the other side,” I insist. “It could be the killer.”

He swings the door open. “It’s just Aspen.”

I glare at my mentor. “My statement stands.”

Owen grips the door, and he stares at Aspen from the other side of the screen. “What can we do for you?”

Aspen peers past Owen to me. “The storm finally cleared. We should gather your wand ingredients before it returns.”

“Sorry, but Owen and I were just about to—”

“Sounds fun.” Owen releases the door to turn and give me a stern stare.

“Go get your special bucket. It’s magic time.”

I throw back my head with a whine. “But we were just about to do magic time!”

He chuckles. “Anticipation will just make it sweeter later.”

“You’re spending too much time with Ros.” Head lowering, I glare at Aspen. “This better be worth it. And in case you were unsure, magic time means sex. We were about to have sex.”

Amusement fills Aspen’s pale blue eyes. “Yes, I caught on to the meaning. Now, as Owen said, go get your special bucket. We have lightning to dig up.”

## FEEL THE TINGLES

**A**spen holds the lightning rod steady. “Be careful as you dig. Fulgurite can be delicate, and the pieces vary in size and formation.”

Owen and I kneel on the beach and carefully scoop sand away from the metal rod.

“Don’t be disappointed if we don’t find a piece right away,” Aspen continues. “Lightning won’t have struck every pole. We’ll be lucky if we get even one—”

“Found it,” I announce as I gently extricate an ugly black, tuber-shaped piece of something from the sand and hold it up. “Is this what you’re all excited about? The figirite?”

I don’t know what I was expecting, but the small, gritty blob I hold isn’t it. At the very least, I thought it would be somewhat clear.

“Fulgurite. Fulgur is Latin for lightning. It’s also called fossilized sand.” Aspen reaches down to take the small piece and gazes at it with excitement. “And, yes, this is what we’re hoping to find. Did you feel anything while holding it?”

“Underwhelmed?” I offer helplessly.

Aspen grimaces and passes it back to me. “Put it in your bucket, and we’ll move on to the next one.”

I brush off the loose sand and place it in the bucket that rests next to me on the ground.

Aspen takes the excavated lightning rod to the open duffel bag a few feet away and places it inside. Straightening, he walks to the next lightning rod and looks at us expectantly.

I meet Owen’s blue eyes. “We could have been post-coitus right now.”

He smiles. "We've only been down here for five minutes. I like to think we have more stamina than that."

"I'm going to hold you those words." Brushing my hands on my pant legs, I stand and move to the next lightning rod.

We're not so lucky this time. While we find some seashells and sea glass, no fulgurite. I add a couple of the shells to my bucket to give to Ginny before we move to the next lightning rod.

After three more failed digs, I start to despair that, despite the rampaging storm, lightning only struck once.

But then at the sixth pole, my fingers brush against a rough clump of solid sand, and excitement shoots through me. "I think we have another one."

Owen nods. "There's definitely something here."

We work carefully, brushing sand away from the little nobs of fossilized sand. We reach the bottom of the lightning rod, make sure the fulgurite isn't attached to it, and Aspen pulls the metal pole out of our way.

The hole we dig widens, revealing more knobs, which turn out to be the tips of delicate tendrils attached to thicker branches.

When at last we pull it free from the sand, I understand why Aspen was so excited. The piece we hold is nearly a foot across and twice as long, with the forked pattern of lightning caught forever frozen within the sand.

I blow on one fork, and the loose sand drifts away to reveal even smaller tendrils of glass, almost like bubbles on the branches.

Aspen squats next to us. "It's beautiful. The wildness of nature immortalized."

The large piece tingles in my hands, like static electricity, and the fine hairs on my arms lift.

Aspen studies my expression. "You sense a connection."

"Yes." I shake my head. "But breaking off a piece to make my wand would diminish the magic."

I gently set it on the sand next to my bucket, since it's too big to fit inside. "Let's keep looking."

We move to the next rod, then the next, but neither yields what we want.

At the final rod, apprehension fills me as we dig. There were no tingles from the first piece of fulgurite that we found, and I don't want to break up the second one. But if this lightning rod also turns out to be a dud, I may not have a choice, and the realization makes me sad.

Maybe I can just wait for another storm, and we can try again.

“I found one.” Owen sweeps the sand away on his side.

After a few seconds, he lifts out a small piece the size of my finger. One end looks bulbous, while the other ends in a point, and two small knobs stick out from one side.

I laugh and take it from him, turning it to put the bulbous end at the top. “It looks like a little man.”

“It does,” Owen agrees.

I smile as I wiggle the little man but feel nothing except amusement. With a sigh, I turn and place it in my bucket with the first piece we found.

Aspen lifts the lightning rod from the sand. “We got more pieces than I expected we would, so I’d say this was a worthwhile experiment.”

“Yeah, you have *some* good ideas.” I cup my hands around the dirt pile in front of me, ready to push it back into the hole when something in the hole left by the lightning rod catches my eye.

I reach for it just as Owen dumps in the sand from his side. It buries my hand, but not before my fingers close around a rough little piece of fulgurite that sends electricity skating up my bones.

A small *oomph* of surprise escapes me, and goose bumps rise all over my body. My pulse quickens with excitement, and I pull my hand from the sand, shaking off the granules to stare in amazement at the little piece of lightning I hold.

No bigger than the top knuckle of my pinky and looking more like coal than glass, I hold the first piece of my wand.

I twist to look up at Aspen. “This is it! I feel it!”

A smile breaks over his lips, and he crouches next to me to squeeze my shoulder. “I’m so happy for you.”

With a sense of purpose now, I turn toward the potted trees. Lightning had missed one, but the other lies on its side, the pot it came in shattered into pieces around the tangled ball of its roots.

I clutch my piece of fulgurite in one hand as I crawl toward it.

Owen scrambles to his feet. “Watch out for the pottery, Rowe!”

He lifts me onto my feet, and I pat his hands in thanks as I continue forward.

Lightning had split the center of the trunk down the center, with one side thicker than the other. Black char shows where it briefly caught fire before the heavy rain put it out.

I squat next to it and run my hand over the seam. Tingles rush over my

palm, up my arm, across my chest, and down my other arm, connecting with the piece of fulgurite I hold.

My hair stirs on my shoulders, and the top of my head buzzes like it did when I pulled the town's barrier through me. My lips part in a quick breath.

I thought this sensation was from the magic that generations of Wendall witches had set in place, that I had simply reinforced. But now I feel it again, with no other witch having touched it. Magic that calls to me, magic that sinks into my bones and rings inside my body like a bell, announcing its presence within me.

A lump forms in my throat, and I swallow it down as I turn to gaze up at Aspen. "I think I'm a witch."

I expect him to make a snide remark, since everyone has been telling me I'm a witch since I returned to Hartford Cove. And Aspen has spent the last two weeks trying to beat that knowledge into my skull.

But Aspen simply says, "Welcome home, sister."

Tears fill my eyes. "Don't make it weird."

"We are all bound by magic. Our coven is our family." He walks over to crouch across from me. "Are you ready to make your first wand?"

I blink away the tears and nod. "Yes. Teach me."



Owen's worried gaze sweeps over the widow's walk. "Tell me again why we can't do this in the workshop?"

"Because being underground isn't good for some witches." Aspen sets the box of tools on the rough boards and settles cross-legged beside them. "Rowe, especially, seems to struggle when cut off from the elements. This also seems to be the place she is most at home with her magic, so it's the most logical place for crafting her first wand."

I sit across from Aspen, place my bucket between my legs, and settle my new grimoire on top. "Come on, Owen, relax. I won't fly off the rooftop."

He grumbles and paces a few times before he comes over to join us. "You're *small* enough to fly off."

That earns him an annoyed squint. "Any more of that, and this will be the end of any magic time happening today."

The worried look doesn't leave his eyes, but he presses his lips together.

Who knew the threat of withholding nooky held such power? I make a mental note to try it on Haut later.

I open my grimoire, flipping past the title page that Tris had helped me cut out and tape into my new book. Seeing it still makes me smile, despite how warped the paper is and that I can no longer read half the comments.

The next page holds the printout Tris had made from his original grimoire's notes, as well as others I had copied from Delilah, since she obviously knows more about all this magic stuff.

Aspen frowns when he sees it. "That's not—"

"I'm bad at note taking and learn better from hands-on work," I interrupt, refusing to let him ruin this moment for me by listening to him harp about what my grimoire looks like. "Not everyone learns the same way, and combining what we *are* good at will help everyone advance."

"I understand what you're saying, Rowe, and if none of you truly have any interest in taking the circle tests, then I won't say anything further." Aspen rubs his hands on his thighs. "But if you *do* ever decide to take the test, that grimoire will automatically fail you."

My head lifts, and I frown at him. "Why?"

"The first part of the exam is to surrender your grimoire." He looks off into the distance. "If a witch can't properly record how to replicate the spells they perform, then it puts their future success at risk. Your grimoire is your first proof that you are responsible enough to wield magic."

"Wow, that must have really sucked during the Salem Witch Trials." I reach for the chalkboard and piece of chalk to draw out the diagram for the spell. "Back then, having a magic book would have gotten witches burned at the stake."

Aspen's lips part before they close, and a puzzled look crosses his face.

"A wand would have been dangerous, too." I focus on replicating the complex design before I look back up at him. "The Inquisition would have made having such obvious magic tools a death sentence, too."

"Yes, a lot of magical knowledge was lost during those times, when families burned their grimoires and magic was only taught through oral tradition," he admits.

"So, what did witches do for their circle tests back then?" I set the chalkboard aside. "Or did everyone just fail, and no covens were formed?"

"The tests changed to fit the times," he says.

"So nothing you teach now is set in stone." I pluck a piece of rough grit

sandpaper from the box. “Just because sharing knowledge isn’t currently in fashion doesn’t mean it’s wrong. People who want to be bakers aren’t forced to create recipes from the moment they pick up a mixing bowl.”

I smooth the sandpaper over the chunk of wood we cut off the tree trunk, careful not to touch the burned side. “First time bakers are given books that were written by people who are actually knowledgeable in baking. Most don’t even learn the science behind why the recipes work. They just follow the directions.”

Aspen frowns. “Magic is more dangerous than baking.”

“And don’t you think having a beginner’s book for magic would make it *less* dangerous?” I work the sandpaper over a small knot in the wood, smoothing it out. “Thinking witches should create their own first grimoire sounds like a recipe for failure. And then testing them on their ability to create recipes, when they’re still learning how to use their magic, is just stupid. Your current system sucks.”

His shoulders pull back. “It’s how things are done, and many fine witches pass the first circle test.”

I snort. “Yeah, all those fine, privileged witches who have the means to commit their entire lives to studying and practicing instead of having to work to pay bills or take care of family or who have learning disabilities. You should be very proud to belong to such an elitist group.”

He scowls. “You have a lot of opinions about an organization you’re not a part of.”

“Maybe because I’m not part of your organization, I can see how limited it is.” I stick out my arm to test the straightness of my wand. “Times are changing, so it’s time to change with them.”

He reaches into the box and hands me a finer grit sandpaper. “It’s not that easy to change tradition.”

I run the sandpaper over my wand, the wood vibrating beneath my touch. “Even harder when you’re not even trying.”

“Before Hartford Cove was established, wolf shifters never lived within a large community,” Owen murmurs, interrupting our conversation for the first time. “Outside of our town, most wolf shifters gather in small packs, with only one Alpha. Many remain lone wolves.”

He leans back on his hands. “But every year, more and more come to our gathering, and more choose to stay, because even if living in a large community isn’t tradition, it’s safer, and it nurtures their human side that



craves to be part of something bigger.”

“You still have the pack dynamic, though,” Aspen points out. “You’re the Alpha.”

“And not too long ago, Haut was the Alpha,” Owen points out. “In Hartford Cove, there are many capable of being Alpha. Outside of our borders, they would have been forced to fight for their position or be shunned from a pack and forced to become lone wolves.”

Owen tips his face up to the sun. “If I had not been bitten by a werewolf when I was a kid, I would have become Alpha simply by default, because the firstborn child of the Hartford family has always been Alpha since the town was built, and everyone would have been fine with that. Even if an outsider tried to challenge a Hartford, others in town were quick to shut them down.”

“That’s very...” Aspen struggles to find the right words.

“Counter to instinct,” Owen supplies. “But it’s what makes Hartford Cove special. It’s what keeps us thriving. Our Alphas are often a figurehead, and not the most powerful in town. But having a figurehead allows those who *could* be Alpha to relax. There’s no need for them to fight, and they can just be human. We evolved to fit our current world.”

Owen’s head lowers, and his warm gaze meets mine. “But now I’ll be the last Hartford Alpha, because all our children will be witches, just like their mom.”

“Not you, too,” I groan. “What is with you guys wanting to get me pregnant?”

He gives me an unrepentant smile. “Not all instincts can be ignored.”

“Then it’s a good thing science will stop you.” I pat my stomach where I imagine my IUD sits. “No babies are getting in here.”

I should probably have Dr. Lopez examine me, just to double check that it’s sitting right. With how persistent the guys are, I need to make sure my anti-baby maker is firmly in place.

After that, we lapse into silence, and I focus on completing my wand.

Once my wand is smoothed out, and the tip points straight when I hold my arm out, I rub it with moonlit water, then use Aspen’s homemade glue and twine to attach my little piece of fulgurite to the tip.

I stare down at the finished product, impressed that it actually looks like a wand.

“Now to link it to your magic.” Aspen pulls a small cardboard box of birthday candles from the box, along with a set of matches.

Excited to see something familiar, I eagerly take them from him and shake out the white, green, red, and blue candles. I've done this part of the spell a few times, first with the Maze of Misdirection Mel gave me, then again when I needed to scry for Delilah.

When I don't find sticky dots in the box, I use more of the glue and the app on my phone to position them on my chalkboard at the four corners.

With everything set up, I set my wand in the center of the diagram and light the candles, starting with East for Air.

I take the finger stick Aspen silently holds out and barely hesitate before pricking my finger. A couple of squeezes bring blood to the surface, and I drip it onto my wand as I request the protection of the Watchtower of the East.

Next comes South with the red candle for fire, followed by West with blue for water.

Last, I light the green candle for earth, invoking the Watchtower of the North.

A light breeze ruffles my hair, but the candles stay lit, the spell not yet complete.

I pop my bloody finger into my mouth, a copper flavor coating my tongue, and reference the spell for binding my wand to my magic.

Mouthing the words for practice first, I then turn to my wand. With one finger, I trace the innermost swirl of the diagram, wiping away the chalk as I speak the spell, moving outward until I reach the large circle that surrounds everything.

I erase the line, starting in front of me and moving widdershins around the circle. The vibration increases in strength until my finger ends at the starting point, and an inner click rings through me, like a key sliding into a lock.

Reverently, I lift my wand, and a tug comes from inside me, followed by a fizzy-bubbles sensation.

Aspen gives me a proud smile. "That's perfect, Rowe. Well done. How does it feel?"

Like I might float away. "It's magic—"

"Owen Hartford!" The shout cracks through the air, casting me back to earth. "I, Bruce Becker, challenge you for the right to be Alpha of Hartford Cove!"

# THE CHALLENGE

**T**he shout comes again. “Come outside, Owen Hartford, and face my challenge!”

I tuck my wand into the large pocket on the front of my sweatshirt, then scramble to my feet. Aspen and Owen rise easily, and we hurry over to the railing that overlooks our driveway.

The sight below makes my breath catch.

Dozens of people fill our driveway, most of them young men, though I spot Horace from the town council down there as well. A large man stands at the front, his hands cupped around his mouth as he yells at our house.

The crunch of gravel draws my focus farther down the driveway, where Haut’s SUV races up the hill.

“Dammit,” Owen swears and pushes away from the railing, running for the hatch in the roof. “He’s just going to make it worse.”

I look from him to the mob below and swing a leg over the railing.

Aspen catches my arm, his eyes wide. “What are you doing?”

“Taking the direct route.” I shake him off, climb over, and slide down to the overhang.

There, I grasp the edge and drop to the porch roof.

Below, Haut’s SUV slams to a stop in front of the crowd, and he climbs out. Even from here, I can feel the rage boiling off him. If he were still Alpha, the men laying siege to our castle would already have tucked tail and run for the hills.

I scoot down to the edge of the roof and dangle off, my feet reaching for the porch railing. As soon as my shoes find purchase, I release the roof and push sideways, hopping from the rail to the ground in front of the bushes.

A few more trips down from the roof, and I'll have my route perfected.

"What are you all doing on my property?" Haut growls, pacing toward the intruders.

A few step back in fear, but not Bruce the Mighty Challenger.

No, he pulls back his beefy shoulders and juts out his chin. "What you refuse to do. Our town is being attacked, and we need a real Alpha in charge. If you're not willing to take control, then I will."

Aspen drops to the ground beside me, making me jump. "So much for suppressing instinct and the Alpha being a figurehead."

My hands curl into fists. "Even dogs bite when backed into corners."

Bruce's gray eyes jump to me, and his lip curls back. "Who are you calling a dog, little girl?"

I step forward. "Who are you calling little girl, mutt?"

"Stay out of this, Rowe." Haut moves to stand between us. "Go home, Bruce, before I remind you of your place in this town."

"What's his place?" I whisper, not recognizing the man from my daily rounds. "Does he haul lumber or something?"

"Stay out of pack business, *little girl*," Bruce snarls. "And my *place* is about to get an upgrade."

I peek out from around Haut. "What exactly do you think being Alpha will get you? Because it's not a better house or a discount at Nesse's Diner."

His broad chest puffs out. "Respect."

"Ha!" I slap my knee. "Because you all have shown so much respect to Owen since he became Alpha. That's funny." I poke Haut in the side. "He's funny. We should have an open mic night once the town center is rebuilt so he can show everyone else how funny he is."

Bruce's nostrils flare. "Are you mocking me?"

"Not very bright, though." I look up at Haut. "Seriously, what role does he have in town?"

The corners of Haut's lips twitch. "He works on the forest clearing crew."

"Ha!" I slap Haut's muscular back. "I guessed it right."

"You did. Good job." Haut's large hand curls around my hip, and he moves me back a pace. "Don't come any closer. I'd hate to rip off hands that could be used to gather materials for our expansion."

I glance over the gathered crowd, only recognizing a couple of them from the confrontation in front of the diner. "Are they all part of the land-clearing crew?"

“Yeah, it’s a good place for hotheads.” Haut’s angry stare fixes on Horace. “Also, the only ones who could be stirred into issuing an actual challenge. You’ve sunk low, Horace.”

The older man’s chin tucks down. “I did what was necessary for the safety of our town.”

Bruce raises his voice again. “Stop hiding, Owen Hartford. Or aren’t you Alpha enough to hold your position?”

Haut cracks his knuckles. “If you want to challenge the Alpha, you have to get through me first.”

I dart out from behind him. “And me.”

Bruce gives me an incredulous look. “You can’t be serious. I could swat you like a fly.”

I lift my fists. “Try it, Paul Bunyan.”

“My name’s Bruce.” He smirks. “Memorize that, because you’ll be saying it a lot after today.”

“Huh?” I peer up at Haut’s enraged face. “What’s he talking about?”

“Did you just make a claim on my *mate*?” Haut snarls, and several more people back away from Bruce, including Horace, who suddenly looks less sure about who he chose to be his champion.

I realize what Bruce meant when he said I’d be saying his name a lot and level a deadly stare at him. “After Haut rips your arms and legs off, I’m going to help dig your grave. We’ll bury you on the beach with just your head poking out of the sand. If your wolf shifter healing powers keep you from dying of blood loss, the incoming tide can take you.”

When Haut growls with approval, three of the men turn tail and run.

The screen door bangs open, and Owen steps out onto the porch. “Stand down, Haut. This challenge is meant for me.”

Haut whips toward him. “Did you hear what he just said?”

“I heard.” Owen steps up beside us. “Let me deal with it.”

Bruce bares his teeth in victory. “You heard your Alpha. Back off.”

Haut turns to Owen and grips his shoulder. “Someone like this won’t be a fair loser. If you accept the challenge, you have to be prepared to end it.”

Owen swallows, but nods and turns to face me. “Once the challenge starts, you can’t interfere, Rowe. If you do, it invalidates my win.”

I glance at those who remain to bear witness. “Does that go for his people, too?”

“It does.” Owen raises his voice so no one can claim they didn’t hear him

later. “There will be no outside interference.”

Tension fills my body. How can anyone expect my gentle Owen to fight this battle?

As if he can read the words in my eyes, he cups my cheeks and leans down. “I’m not a saint, Rowe. And right now, I’m furious.”

I study his calm face. Despite his claim, I can’t find any hint of his inner rage.

Haut’s hand on my arm draws me away, and we go as far as the porch steps before turning back to face them.

The others form a loose half-moon on the other side of the driveway, with Bruce and Owen in the center.

As the two men strip, Horace steps forward. “As per tradition, only wolfman forms are allowed, and the loser will not seek revenge against the winner.” He looks at Owen. “That means no kicking anyone out of their homes or threatening to ruin people financially.”

Owen dips his chin. “I understand how a challenge works, Horace.”

Scared now, I grip Haut’s arm. Owen’s curse prevents him from turning into his wolf form. Will the shadow monster of smoke and burning-coal eyes be accepted as a wolfman form?

Haut catches my hand. “Believe in him. He can do it.”

But can he? As the two men face off from each other, the bodies bared to the bright light of day, the size difference between them becomes even more apparent. Heavy muscles cord Bruce’s shoulders, and when his biceps flex, they form small mountains on his arms. His thick thighs look bigger than my waist.

In comparison, Owen’s lean body looks frail, like Bruce can cut through him as easily as he takes down a tree.

Haut squeezes me again. “*Believe.*”

With a deep breath, I close my eyes, blocking out the obvious weight difference between the two men, and reach for that thread inside of me that connects me to Owen as his mate. It hums with vibrant power, strong enough to take down an entire forest.

I hold that feeling tight as my eyes open once more and watch as the two men shift.

Thick, brown bristles break out over Bruce’s body, and his bones pop as his legs and arms lengthen, thick claws pushing through his nail beds. His face collapses and pushes outward into a snout, and his broad shoulders

hunch forward.

Horror fills me as I watch. The shift from man to wolf takes place in a shimmer of magic, like the man fades from reality to allow the wolf to take his place. But the transition into this halfway form makes my stomach roil. I've only seen Haut's shift into a wolfman before, and it happened so fast that I never noticed his body breaking apart and reforming.

Why would they choose this form to fight in? The pain of the transformation has to put them at a disadvantage.

Haut leans down to whisper in my ear, "Only Alphas can maintain the mid-shift. That's why the challenge is done like this."

I huddle closer to him. "Stop reading my mind."

Unlike Bruce's shift, Owen's happens in reverse. First, the shadows of his curse boil out of his skin, smothering his body, and he grows in size, the werewolf in him far larger than Bruce's wolfman form.

Then the shadows compress in on themselves, peeling back to reveal a wolfman with sleek, black fur and blue eyes that glow red at their center. Compared to Bruce's shift, Owen's was fast and beautiful to behold.

I clutch Haut's hand. "How?"

Pride fills Haut's voice. "He's been practicing."

Those in the crowd stare in shock, and worried murmurs rise from their end.

Haut grunts with satisfaction. "They all thought he'd lose the challenge at this point."

"Cowards trying to use his curse to their advantage." I raise my voice. "You better hope he kills you, Bruce, because if he just bites you and lets you live, you're joining the moon-cursed side, and all your friends will turn their backs on you!"

Bruce snarls toward me, and Horace shouts, "Quiet! No one else speaks until the challenge is over!"

Not sure that I can stop myself, I lift Haut's hand and place it over my mouth.

The two wolfmen circle each other, gravel crunching beneath their large paws and their tails swishing as they search for an opening.

Bruce lunges forward, swiping a hand toward Owen's stomach.

Owen dodges to the side, kicking his foot out. His thick claws rip through the fur on Bruce's right calf, drawing first blood.

A howl of pain rips from Bruce's throat, and he races forward, arms

spread wide as if he wants to embrace Owen.

My mate ducks under one outstretched arm and spins to rake his claws across Bruce's back, leaving behind bloody furrows in his fur.

Bruce snarls and whips around, catching Owen on the side of the head.

Owen stumbles back, and Bruce pounces, taking Owen to the ground.

Terror rushes through me, and Haut pulls me against his chest, his hand over my mouth stifling my cry.

The two wolfmen wrestle across the gravel driveway, claws and teeth snapping. The gathered crowd jumps out of their way, and they tumble into the grass.

Bruce comes out on top, his body bowed over Owen's, but Owen gets his feet between them and shoves against Bruce's stomach, sending the other man flying.

Owen flows to his feet, shaking his head, and blood sprinkles the driveway from a cut on his scalp, just over one pointed ear. Bruce lands near Haut's SUV, skidding through the gravel, and Owen chases after him, pouncing onto his back.

His mouth opens with a growl, displaying sharp teeth meant for tearing into prey. But instead of sinking them into Bruce's throat, he swipes his claws through the back of Bruce's neck, severing his spine.

Bruce's body stops moving, and Owen stands to grab one hairy ankle and drag him back to the center of the driveway where they started.

There, he drops Bruce's leg and kicks him onto his back.

Bruce's eyes roll in his head, and blood seeps from multiple cuts in his body. But already, his toes twitch as his super healing repairs the damage to his spine.

I lift my hands to clutch at the one over my mouth, my wide eyes fixed on Owen as he raises his claws.

Then, Haut's hand covers my eyes, and darkness falls, followed by a wet, ripping sound as Owen wins the challenge.

Afterward, silence descends.



## BLOOD STAINS

**H**aut's voice breaks through the silence, quiet and deadly. "Call the winner, Horace."

The older man's voice wavers as he obeys. "Owen Hartford remains the Alpha of Hartford Cove."

"Now, pick up your defeated and get off my property," Haut snarls.

I spit in angry agreement against Haut's palm and blindly wave my middle fingers.

The sound of crunching gavel follows, along with the scrape of something being dragged away. Haut's palms remain over my face during the entire process, the scent of his skin blocking any other smells from reaching my nose.

My pulse beats wildly, my mind circling back to that last image I saw before everything went dark, of Owen with his claws raised, standing over a man twice his size, who by every law of physics should have crushed my gentle lover.

The crunch of footsteps on gravel fills the air, coming toward us, and I reach up to tug on the hand that covers my eyes.

Haut resists, though his hand falls from my mouth.

"Just wait for me to go inside," Owen says, a thickness in his voice that tugs at my heart.

I elbow Haut's hard stomach. "Let me go."

"You don't need to see this." His free arm curls around me, and he shifts us off to the side, out of the direct line of access to the door.

Owen's footsteps echo on the steps, heavy and dragging. He wants to go hide in the house, to wash away the evidence of what happened to spare me

the horror.

I shove at Haut's arms. "Let me go, or I'll aim the next elbow at your balls!"

"Rowe..." His heavy sigh ruffles the hair at the top of my head. "Just behave for a few more minutes."

Not offering a second warning, I swivel my hips to the side and swing my arm down, blindly aiming for Haut's groin.

With a startled yelp, his arms loosen, and I wiggle free of his grasp.

Sunlight blinds me, and I freeze as I wait for the world to come back into focus. Tears sting my eyes, but I squint through wet lashes at the railing in front of me and the driveway beyond.

Aspen stands where I last saw him, his back to the house and his gaze fixed on a large, dark patch in the gravel that glistens in the sunlight. It's the only sign that anything happened here. Everyone else has vanished as if they had never intruded on our peace and threatened our home.

Haut tries to reach for me again, but I swat him away, unwilling to be protected from this side of our lives.

Heart pounding, I turn toward the stairs, and my chest tightens at the sight of Owen, naked and covered in blood. Black smoke still writhes over his arms, and the shadows of claws extend from his bloody fingers. Dirt sticks to his body, too, cuts and claw marks painting the harsh story of his fight across his torso and legs.

The tightness inside me grows, and my body trembles, my hands curling into fists.

Burning-coal red eyes flick to me, then away, and his shoulders sag. "Please, don't look at me right now, Rowe."

The trembling worsens. "Did you kill him? Bruce?"

Owen's fingers flex, the shadow claws solidifying for a heartbeat before he forces his hands to relax.

On shaky legs, I step closer. "Owen, did you kill him?"

He flinches back from me. "Please, Rowe, just..."

I stop in front of Owen, the stair below that he stands on making us the same height for once in our lives.

Hand trembling, I reach out to grip his sticky black hair, pulling his head up so his glowing eyes meet mine. "Did you kill him?"

Resignation fills Owen's expression, and he fixes his gaze on my shoulder. "Yes."

“Good.” When his shocked eyes lift to meet mine, I release his hair to cup his bloody cheek, his skin fever-hot against mine. “Did you think I would hate you for killing him?”

A low whine rises from his throat, and his rough cheek presses against my palm.

“I hate that they forced you into this situation.” With my other hand, I wipe away the blood that came from his scalp wound. “I hate that you didn’t let Haut just kill every single one of them so that you would be spared from taking a life. But never think that I will hate you for protecting what’s yours.”

He reaches up to press his hand over mine, his lips hot against my palm. “I could have spared his life. I could have shown mercy.”

“He wouldn’t have shown you mercy.” The trembling in my body returns, rage at what my gentle Owen had been forced to do sweeping through me once more. “If you’d let him live, I would have killed him myself.”

An approving growl comes from Haut, and Aspen’s startled gaze turns to me.

I ignore both men, my gaze locked with Owen’s. His eyes may burn like the coals that belong to the nightmare of my youth, but despite so much blood covering the rest of his body, none touches his mouth. Even when fighting for his life, even when killing, Owen had not bitten the man who came here to hurt him.

Owen had shown restraint even when fighting for his life, refusing to pass his curse on to another, even if only for the brief few minutes the man continued to breathe. How can anyone suspect him of these murders when he keeps such a tight hold over his curse?

“I sensed through our bond that you wanted to kill him for coming after me.” Owen steps up onto the porch, the heat radiating from his body sinking into mine at the nearness. “I couldn’t let you stain yourself like that.”

That kind of stain would have easily washed off.

“Horace will keep causing problems.” I glare toward the beach. “We should dig holes for everyone who came here today.”

Owen closes the final inches between us, a fierce expression hardening his features. “I’ll deal with Horace and the others. There’s no need to bloody your hands.”

I hold up my red streaked palm. “Too late.”

With a growl, Owen catches my wrist, bringing my hand to his mouth, and his tongue drags across my palm, cleaning the blood away. His tongue

sweeps between my fingers before he sucks them into his mouth, making sure that no hint of red remains.

Pulse racing, I take a step backward and raise my other bloody hand.

The red glow in his eyes intensifies, and he closes the distance between us, catching that hand to bring it to his mouth. He tugs me closer in the process, the blood on his body staining my clothes. But I don't care as his hot tongue curls around my fingers, sending tingles through me. An answering tug comes from my stomach, and warmth pools between my thighs.

Owen's nostrils flare, and his eyes drop to my body. A low growl escapes him when he sees my bloody clothes, and he grips my collar, ripping my sweatshirt down the center. The warm material falls off my shoulders, my wand tumbling out of the torn pocket at the front.

Cool air sweeps through the thin material of my chemise, and my nipples harden.

Breaths quickening, I back farther into the house. Owen follows, catching me at the stairs, where he licks bloody smears from my throat, leaving red handprints on the cream material of my undershirt.

We make it up to the second floor, my torn clothes littering the stairs along the way.

On the landing, Owen pushes me down on top of the hall runner, ripping the thin scrap of my underwear off. Hands rough, he pushes my thighs open, exposing my swollen folds. He stares down at me, his chest heaving and a wild look in his eyes. My body clenches in response, and the shadows bubbling from Owen's arms spread to cover his torso.

His hands convulse on my thighs, his hungry gaze fixed on my slick center as he fights for control over his curse.

Hips tilting, I dip my hand between my legs, my fingers spreading my folds open and dipping a finger inside to gather my desire. Lifting onto my elbow, I extend my glistening finger to him. Hot lips take me in, sucking the juices from my fingers, his tongue curling around them.

A hungry growl rises from his chest, and his control slips. Shadows creep up his throat as he drops to kneel on the stairs between my spread thighs. Gripping the back of my knees, he hooks my legs over his shoulders before pressing his mouth against my aching heat.

His tongue, thick and rough, licks my folds, feasting on my desire. I gasp, my hips bucking against him, and his fingers dig into my thighs, claws pebbling my flesh as he holds me still. His mouth opens over my center, his

tongue pushing inside, and it goes deeper than usual, hitting places within my body never tasted before.

My fingers tangle in his hair, urging him closer. His hands move down my thighs, his thumbs finding my folds, and he spreads me open, his tongue thrusting even deeper. A moan of pleasure escapes me, and my back arches off the rug, my hands fisting in his hair.

With long, firm swipes, his tongue thrusts into my body, licking and pressing at my inner walls, driving me over the edge. My thighs tense on his shoulders, and breath sticks in my throat. Pleasure pulses through me, my inner muscles squeezing around Owen's tongue.

He growls against my throbbing flesh, and the vibration sends a second shock of pleasure through my body, making me come again.

Before the shock waves end, Owen gathers me in his arms and carries me to my bedroom, where he lays me on the bed. He crawls onto the bed over me, half man and half shadowed monster, to cover me with his body and capture my gasping lips, his tongue pushing inside.

The taste of my release fills my mouth, and I moan as I tangle my hands in his hair once more. My body arches to press against his, the shadows a soft caress against my skin before the heat of flesh meets mine. My hard nipples brush against the light dusting of hair on his chest, the phantom tickle of fur adding to the sensation, and my body quivers with desire.

Despite my release, I still yearn for more. For the connection of our bodies joining, of feeling him lose control within my embrace.

His hard cock bumps against my inner thigh, leaving a hot trail of pre-cum behind, and my body clenches with need.

I hook my knees around his trim waist and reach down to grab his ass, urging him forward. The head of his cock nudges against my slick entrance, and our moans mingle as he slides into my body in a single, long thrust until his hips rest flush against mine.

Shuddering with pleasure, his lips leave mine, and he presses his forehead against my shoulder as he gently moves inside me, his pelvis rocking against my clit with each careful thrust. He's still holding back, and I don't want that. I need all of Owen, the man and the curse.

My fingernails dig into his flexing ass, my hips rising to meet his, urging him to go faster, to let go and take me. But he maintains the gentle rocking motion, the slide of his cock in and out of my body maddeningly slow as he drives me back toward the edge.

A hot hand cups my breast, the rough pad of his thumb sweeping over my nipple. The friction sends jolts of pleasure down my stomach to the place our bodies join. I gasp and turn my head, raining desperate kisses over his temple and ear.

His touch leaves my breast to move lower, and long fingers slip between my folds, searching for the hard bud of my desire. He rolls it between his fingers, his body shaking with his self-restraint as he continues his gentle thrusts.

The combination sends me over the edge once more, and my knees tighten around his hips as my nails dig into his ass. With a groan, he holds still, his hard cock buried deep within my body as my inner muscles pulse around him.

“Stop holding back,” I gasp into his ear. “You won’t hurt me.”

His body shudders, and he lets out another groan that borders on pain. His cock jumps inside me, his hips twitching with the need to thrust.

With an abrupt motion, he pulls out and rises above me. The shadows nearly cover his entire body now, and his chest rises and falls with desperate pants.

Hands rough on my hips, he flips me over, then yanks my ass into the air. His cock slams back into me, rocking my body forward with the force. He pulls me back onto his cock as he surges forward again, his cock thickening and growing inside me.

I moan and clutch the comforter next to my head, my eyes closing as pleasure rolls up my spine. I rock back on his next thrust, the slickness of my desire easing the stretch of his new size. Owen could have died today, but he fought and killed for his place within the pack, and a primal desire rises within me to be claimed by this powerful man.

His hands on my hips grip me with bruising force, claws pricking at my skin. His heavy balls slap against me with each thrust, his strong thighs shoving mine farther apart, pressing my chest into the bed while keeping my ass tilted for my body to be taken.

Large hands leave my hips to caress my sides, then slip under me to squeeze my small breasts. The rough texture of his palms scrape against my hard nipples, pulling moans from my lips that the comforter muffles.

Hot breath ghosts over my spine, followed by a rough tongue as Owen licks up my back to the base of my neck, where sharp teeth clamp against my nape.

The slight shock of pain combines with the pleasure driving through my body, and I clutch the comforter tighter, my thoughts turning fuzzy.

Owen releases my neck to lean forward, his body covering mine, his panting breath hot against my ear.

Rough hands cover the backs of mine, and when I open my eyes, I see shadowed fur and claws instead of pale skin. Moaning, I lace our fingers together, pinned beneath Owen's weight and at his mercy.

His body moves over mine with powerful surges, the slap of joining flesh mixing with my moans and his growls. Then his hips shove against mine, the tip of his cock pressed against my womb, and pressure builds inside me as his knot swells, testing the limits of my body to hold him.

I cry out, release crashing through me, and clutch his hands tighter. The swelling continues, my inner muscles burning, and just when I think I can't take anymore, his cock pulses inside me, flooding my channel with hot cum.

Another rush of pleasure sweeps over me, then pulls me under, and the room blacks out. Or maybe that's just Owen's curse, wrapping around me, joining us together as intimately as Owen's body joins with mine.

I float in darkness, my racing pulse slowing, my ears filled with the sound of Owen's ragged breaths, in a state of semi-consciousness. A heart beats heavily against my back, like a drum that echoes through my ribcage, powerful and alive.

"What's with you guys covering my eyes today?" I grumble.

Owen's soft chuckle vibrates through me. "My werewolf likes you."

I reach out a hand and darkness tickles against my skin. "I like your werewolf, too."

Owen's arms tighten around me. "It will settle down soon. Probably by the time our bodies unlock."

At the reminder, my inner muscles clench around the knot buried inside me.

Owen groans. "Stop that or it won't go down."

I peer over my shoulder, sensing him without seeing him. "Is that a bad thing?"

His quiet growl fills the room, and a warm hand cups my breast. "It is if we want to shower and change the sheets."

"Overrated," I gasp.

Warm lips nuzzle the back of my neck. "You're exciting my werewolf."

"Good." I wiggle my hips against him, and the darkness thickens.

But this is a darkness I don't mind staying inside for a while longer.



## SHORT CIRCUIT

Owen's quiet breathing fills the room when the smoke that surrounds us finally dissipates, revealing that night has fallen.

The only light in the room comes from the moon as it peeks through the clouds covering the sky.

A shiver goes through me, and goose bumps rise on my arms and legs. Our combined weight pins down the comforter, which now needs to be replaced. Tears through the old fabric give proof to the times when the werewolf broke through Owen's restraints, his claws ripping through what I hope isn't a family heirloom.

The clouds shift, blocking out the moon for a moment before its dim light returns, highlighting the outline of antique furniture in the room and making shadows dance on the walls.

I stretch out my leg, searching the end of the bed for Greyson's familiar form, but I find it empty. I can't remember the last time Haut didn't sleep in here, in one form or another, but it looks like he decided to give us privacy tonight, depriving me of his furry warmth.

Pushing up on my elbow, I peer over Owen's body toward the closed bedroom door. It had been open the last time I remember, with lights on in the hall.

The room darkens once more, and a light scratching sound comes from near the windows. My pulse leaps, and I twist toward the sound, willing it to stop. I got enough sleep. Why would my mind mess with me now?

A sliver of silver light breaks through the clouds, and I flinch back from the man-shaped patch of darkness near the closet before I realize it's the shadow of the armoire.

The scratching sound comes again, and my gaze jerks toward the window. For a moment, terror shoots through me when I see an arm with long fingers scratching at the windowsill. Then my mind registers the shape of a branch knocking against the glass. It must have landed on the roof during the storm.

Eyes closing, I press a hand against my racing heart, willing it to slow. God, I'm going to give myself a heart attack.

With a steadying breath, I open my eyes and freeze in shock. Bryant, my personal nightmare, stands at the foot of the bed, his dark eyes locked with mine.

A scream bubbles up my throat and rips past my lips.

Owen bolts upright, shadows roiling from his skin. "Rowe! What's wrong?"

Panic laces his voice as he bolts from the bed, his blue eyes wide and searching as they move right past Bryant's form.

The evil man smiles and lifts a finger to his lips.

My breath comes in erratic bursts as I point a trembling finger at the intruder. "It's Bryant! He's here!"

Owen's confused gaze looks right through my tormentor before he turns toward me.

As he steps closer, the bedroom door bursts open, spilling a snarling Haut into the room. His moss-green eyes scan the room, his wolf slipping to the surface as he searches for the threat.

When he can't identify the danger, his focus settles on me. "What's wrong? Why did you scream?"

I can't tear my eyes away from Bryant's amused stare, and my hands claw at the shredded sheets as I struggle to form words.

Light floods the room, and more figures spill inside—Ros and Tris, armed and ready for battle.

"What's going on?" Ros barks, his gun raised, and his eyes scanning for danger.

Tris hefts the lamp in his hands, ready to wield it if needed. "Where's the danger, sparky?"

Haut's gaze falls on the bed, and his eyes widen at the sight of the torn sheets before he takes in the bruises and bite marks that pepper my body. His jaw clenches, and anger flashes in his eyes.

In a heartbeat, he grabs Owen, shoving him against the wall. "What the

hell did you do?”

Owen’s expression hardens as he stares at Haut. “*Calm down.*”

The command shivers over me, and Haut releases him with a growl.

“I’m not why Rowe screamed.” Owen pushes him back another step to focus on me. “Rowe, what did you mean that Bryant’s here? Where? Did you see him outside the window?”

My eyes burn as I refuse to blink. “You can’t see him?”

“Where, baby?” Ros moves closer to the bed, following my line of sight.

“Are you seeing him in the room with us right now?”

I lift a shaking hand to point at the end of the bed. “He’s right there.”

An uneasy silence settles over the room, all eyes now on me.

My chest rises and falls rapidly, a knot of fear tightening in my stomach. They can’t see him. I really am going crazy.

Owen sits back on the bed, taking my hand in his. “He’s not here, Rowe.”

Tears leak from the corners of my burning eyes. “But I see him.”

His fingers on my chin turn my head, breaking my eye contact with the monster. “He’s not here.”

Certainty rings in his tone, and when my eyes jump back toward the end of the bed, Bryant no longer stands there.

I blink quickly, the tears coming faster. “I don’t understand. Why is this happening?”

The men exchange worried glances, and Ros lowers his gun while Tris sets his lamp down. Haut paces at the end of the bed, walking through the space where Bryant had stood.

Owen’s gentle squeeze on my hand draws my eyes back to him. “Is this the first time you’ve seen him?”

I shake my head, uncertainty gnawing at me. “I thought I saw him at Books & Blots after Drake’s death, but then Horace arrived, and Bryant disappeared.”

Worry lines crease Owen’s brow, and he exchanges another glance with the others.

Ros breaks the silence, his gaze flickering between Haut and Owen. “Is there a chance he’s in the house?”

Haut shakes his head. “We would’ve smelled him if he were here. Just like we would’ve heard and smelled rodents in the walls.”

“So, it’s all in my head?” The words fall from my numb lips. “I’m crazy?”

Haut stops pacing to glare at me. “You’re not crazy.”

I pull my hand from Owen’s to clench the tangled curls at my temples. “My toaster will never be fixed.”

Tris comes around the bed, wrapping me in his arms. “Your toaster just needs a little break, sparky. You’re not sleeping, and it’s messing with your perception of reality. That’s why Dr. Lopez gave you the sleeping pills. You can’t work without power.”

Ros slips from the room. When he returns a moment later, he holds the bottle of sleeping pills that Dr. Lopez prescribed and a glass of water.

I hesitate, exhaustion and worry roiling inside. As Ros hands me the pills and the glass of water, I meet the worried gazes of my men, and that finally convinces me. With everything else going on, I can’t add the burden of my broken brain to the mix.

My hand shakes as I place the pills on my tongue, then chase them down with water.

Ros takes the glass back and sets it on the nightstand, along with the bottle of pills and his gun. Nudging Owen off the bed, Ros pulls back the comforter and quilt.

As I slip beneath it, warmth surrounds me, the heat from our bodies clinging to the blankets. Ros gestures for Owen to slide in next to me, and Owen cuddles close, leaving enough room for Ros to slip in beside him, close to his gun. Tris wiggles in on my other side, his body curling around mine until we practically share the same space on the mattress.

Haut walks to the wall to turn off the bedroom light but turns on the one in the hall. Then his body shimmers, and Greyson hops up onto the bed, draping his large body over our legs.

Surrounded by their body heat, the terror seeps away, and the pills take effect, dragging at my eyelids.

I blink slowly, startling back awake when a dark figure appears on the back of my lids, but eventually, I can’t resist the call of sleep, and my eyes don’t open again.



Morning light filters through the house as I shuffle toward the kitchen, the lingering traces of sleep clinging to me.

I feel both rested and like I could have stayed in bed for another few hours. But when I woke to find myself alone in bed, the memory of last night was enough to get me up and moving.

An ache fills my body, and my chemise irritates the love bites that cover my breasts and stomach. I had considered plastering my body with Band-Aids, but the thought of removing them later discouraged that idea.

The aroma of fresh coffee wafts through the air, and when I shuffle into the kitchen, I'm met with the comforting sight of Haut flipping pancakes at the stove.

The previous night's terror lingers in the back of my mind, but the strange scratching that's haunted me for the past week has vanished, leaving me with a newfound sense of hope.

Maybe everyone was right, and I just needed some sleep.

Owen rises from his place at the table to come over and pull me into his arms. "How are you feeling?"

I melt against his lean body. "A little groggy."

He nuzzles my ear. "And your body?"

"I'm good." I touch his chest where claws had ripped through his flesh yesterday. "How about you?"

"All healed up." He kisses my temple and lets me go.

"Morning, sparky." Tris greets me with a smile, his sandy-blond hair falling slightly into his golden-brown eyes. Concern fills his gaze as he holds out a cup of cocoa piled high with whipped cream.

"Thank you." I lick the cream before shuffling to the table to sit across from Ros.

His foot nudges mine under the table. "Did you sleep well?"

"I feel a lot better," I admit. "But I'm groggy."

Tris scoots his chair closer and sits beside me. "That's normal with sleeping meds. You didn't move all night, so we should try half a pill next time."

After weeks of tossing and turning, not moving doesn't sound like a bad thing. Should I reconsider the bottle of ADHD medication Dr. Lopez prescribed? Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, especially if it could help me focus better.

But one thing at a time.

Haut strides to the table and sets a big stack of pancakes on the table in front of me, then pours a long stream of warm golden syrup over the top.

Drool floods my mouth, and I reach for the fork he holds out.

The first bite melts on my tongue, and I groan with pleasure.

Tris chuckles and nudges Owen. “How does it feel to hear that same sound coming out of her over pancakes?”

Without looking, I reach to slap the back of his head.

Tris flinches back. “Hey, if you’re going to bang in the hall, then expect to be teased.”

Ros lifts his coffee mug, murmuring over the rim, “There was blood everywhere.”

Owen flushes. “Sorry about that.”

I pause with my next bite halfway to my mouth. “Is that why the hall runner is missing?”

The change in the hall had confused me when I stepped out of my bedroom, though it took me several steps before I realized that the long rug was missing.

Owen nods. “I’ll drop it at the cleaners later.”

I shove the large bite of pancake into my mouth, syrup dripping down my chin. As I chew, I glance at the others at the table, noticing a lack of breakfast plates.

I swallow the bite of pancake. “Why am I the only one eating?”

Haut shrugs out of his apron and sets it on the counter. “It’s after ten.”

My eyes widen as I glance toward the clock. “Why is everyone still home? Don’t you have work?” My focus jumps to Owen. “Or are we all staying home today?”

Owen shakes his head. “No. We need to show ourselves. Hiding will only make the town more suspicious. I need them to see I’m uninjured and that I’m still their Alpha.”

I nod in agreement, understanding the need to show a strong, united front. Especially with people like Horace stirring up the malcontents.

I finish breakfast, then put on my shoes while the others get ready to head into town.

As we leave the house, the crisp fall air greets us, and I shiver, tucking my hands under my arms.

Haut’s eyes narrow. “You need a winter jacket. Sweatshirts won’t cut it much longer.”

Tris perks up. “I smell a shopping trip!”

“You have to work at the clinic,” Haut reminds him. “You promised to be

in the office before noon.”

Tris slumps. “Remind me why I’m working when we’re loaded?”

I cuddle up against his side. “Dr. Lopez didn’t give you a choice once she found out you had training.”

“Oh, yeah.” Tris wraps an arm around me. “She’s terrifying.”

Ros pulls his phone from his pocket, and his body stiffens.

I instantly go on alert. “Something wrong?”

“I received a report from some of my field people.” His gaze meets mine. “They spotted someone who fits Bryant’s description a few cities over.”

My breath catches, and fear spikes through me. “Are you leaving?”

He hesitates for a moment before shaking his head. “I want to be the one who takes him down. Both for you and for my sister. But now is not the right time to leave Hartford Cove.”

Warmth chases away my fear. As much as I want to know that Bryant is finally taken care of, I don’t want Ros to leave my side right now.

We reach the center of town, and the people inside Nesse’s Diner stare out the windows with a newfound respect for Owen. Word of his defense of the Alpha title has spread, and the townsfolk now regard him with a mix of awe and deference.

I scowl at them. “Why are they so surprised you won the challenge? Did they think Haut just *gave* you the position without a fight?”

Tris nods as if he’s heard that exact rumor circulating. “And that Haut refuses to challenge Owen because he’s ashamed that he left town to chase after you.”

Haut bristles at the suggestion. “I’d never be ashamed of chasing after my mate. When I left, it was only to bring her home.”

I raise my voice. “Stop gawking! This isn’t a circus!”

The diner’s straighten in their seats, looking away, and I huff with satisfaction.

Tris hugs me closer. “Tiny but fierce.”

Owen turns to Ros. “Will you join me for a few hours? I want to bring together our new town council before Horace stirs up more unrest.”

“You guys should talk to Mrs. Smith.” When everyone stares at Tris in horror, he lifts his hands in self-defense. “I know, I know. But the old bat has had a change of tune while she’s been at the clinic. Someone has been bribing her with bacon and puzzle books.”

“You all have fun with that.” Haut grabs my hand and tugs me against his

side. “We will be at the clothing store having actual fun.”

Tris throws back his head and laughs. “You’ve obviously never been shopping with Rowe. Do you think it’s a coincidence I just buy all her clothes?”

Uncertainty fills Haut’s face, and I grab his hand before he can change his mind. “Ignore Tris. He’s a big fat liar, and we will have so much fun trying on clothes.”

Haut gives me a wolfish smile. “I look forward to the challenge.”



## LEARNING TO COURT

**A**s Haut leads me down the street, I ask about the flooding Owen mentioned.

“The roadways are mostly clear now that the storm has passed,” he reassures me. “We’re used to rain around here. This was just the first big one of the year, so it took a little longer than usual for the ground to absorb all that water. Things should be back to normal by tomorrow.”

“That’s a relief.” While I’m not happy with how people are treating Owen right now, I don’t want anyone stuck in their houses, starving.

Instead of the larger department store I expect to go to, Haut stops at a small boutique shop that displays dresses in the window and opens the door.

I give him a wary stare. If he thinks he’s going to stuff me into a skirt like what Mel was wearing around Aspen, then he’s mistaken.

A little bell jingles on the handle as we enter, and a voice calls out from the back. “I’ll be right with you!”

My suspicious gaze sweeps around the small store, and my shoulders relax. While there *are* dresses—quite a few of them, in fact—the center of the store is dedicated to everyday clothes.

A table at the front displays thick sweaters in several colors, and I lift a moss-green one that reminds me of Haut’s eyes.

“What can I— Oh, hello, Sheriff, what brings you in today?” asks a soft, feminine voice. “It’s been a while since you’ve stopped by to see me.”

My eyes jerk up, then narrow on the tall, slender blond making doe eyes at my mate. I’ve seen her several times around town and rubbed her belly for good luck. At the time, I assumed that it was good luck for her and her mate, but by the way she’s lustily creeping on my man, she’s still looking for her

baby daddy.

Haut doesn't seem to notice, though, as he wraps an arm around me. "We're just here to look around and maybe pick up a winter jacket."

The salesclerk—Heather, I think—turns to me and smiles uncertainly. "I'm not sure we have anything that will fit. All our clothes are adult size."

My hands tighten on the sweater I hold while I contemplate murder.

Haut's arm tightens around me. "We'll just browse and let you know if we need help. Thank you."

With a soft smile for him, she disappears into the back once more.

I lift my chin to glare up at him. "What kind of relations have you had with Heather?"

"Hillary," he corrects with a low rumble. "And the only one I'm having relations with is you, so sheathe your claws."

"Tone down your animal magnetism," I snap. "It's confusing the ovulating woman."

That rumble comes from him again. "I enjoy seeing you jealous."

"And I'd like to see you in this sweater." I shove it against his chest. "Go try it on."

He catches the sweater. "We're not here to buy clothes for me."

"You brought me to a place where your old lover works," I growl. "You will try on anything I want you to try on."

"Fine. But just one thing." He allows me to shove him toward the curtain-covered changing room at the back. "Then we're looking for clothes for you."

I push him into the small, curtained-off room. "Why didn't we just go to the bigger store down the road?"

"I wanted something nicer for you." He catches the curtain before I can close it and leans down to kiss the tip of my nose. "And Hillary is not a former lover, so no clawing her eyes out."

Slightly mollified, I give him a shove and whisk the curtain closed.

While he changes, I inspect the nearby racks. The clothes here really are nice, with expensive price tags to match. I pull several more shirts off their hangers.

My anticipation builds as I imagine him trying on different outfits. By the time Haut steps out from behind the curtain, my arms are loaded with several more options.

He stops to stare at me. "What's all that?"

“We’re playing dress up, and you’re going to be my doll.” I inspect the way the green sweater clings to his shoulders and brings out his eyes. “Yes, we’re definitely getting that one. Put it in the buy pile.”

He stumbles back as I shove the rest of the shirts at him. “We’re not—”

“I want to see every single one you try on,” I announce before whisking the curtain closed once more.

His grumbles drift out as I wander over to the section with pants. Haut mostly wears jeans or sweats when he’s not in uniform. Pants are harder to pick out, though, since I don’t know his size.

The curtain swishes to the side, and Haut glares out at me.

The cream sweater he wears washes the sun-kissed gold from his skin, and I give it two thumbs down. “Next.”

As he continues to try on clothes, I rate them by excellence and gather a small pile of shirts that I like him in.

When he steps out in the last shirt, looking a bit annoyed, I admire how the deep brown of the sweater brings out the red and gold highlights in his brown hair.

I grin at him. “Two enthusiastic thumbs up.”

He huffs out a breath. “Have I tried on everything in the store yet?”

I tap my bottom lip. “There’s still the pants section, but I wasn’t sure of your size.”

“I have enough pants.” He eyes the stack balanced on the chair next to the fitting room. “And we’re not buying all of those.”

Gasping in shock, I press my hands against my lips. “But they look so good that I just want to cuddle you all day.”

He hesitates. “I know you’re playing me.”

I widen my eyes at him.

A sigh of defeat leaves his lips. “Fine.”

I pump my arm in victory as he disappears back into the dressing room, then raise my voice. “Hillary!”

She pops out of the back room, a smile on her face. “Yes?”

I gesture to the stack. “We’ll take all of these.”

Her eyes widen, and she hurries over to gather them up. “That’s quite the haul.”

“We’re doing a closet makeover,” I inform her.

“No, we’re not.” Haut shoves back the curtain and adds the brown sweater to the stack. “You are not touching my closet.”

“But...” I clasp my hands and widen my eyes at him again. “Button ups aren’t snuggly.”

“That trick only works once a week.” He grips my shoulder and steers me toward the women’s side of the store. “Now, it’s your turn to be the dress up doll.”

Haut’s obviously never shopped for a petite woman under five feet tall. While I didn’t appreciate Hillary’s comment about only carrying adult sizes, she wasn’t wrong. There’s a reason most of my clothes come from the kid’s section.

Haut holds up various jackets and scarves, his eyes scrutinizing each one. I try on a couple to humor him, but they’re all too big. It’s sweet that he wanted to get me something nice, but the department store would have been safer.

With a frustrated growl, he wraps a long, red scarf around my neck, his fingers brushing against my skin. “At least this fits.”

I touch the soft material, which feels nicer than anything I’ve ever owned. “You don’t think the red clashes with my hair?”

He adjusts it to sit higher on my neck and shakes his head. “You look beautiful.”

Startled by the compliment, I squint up at him. “Why are you being so nice to me?”

He finds a matching hat and pulls it down over my ears. “Am I not allowed?”

I push the hat high enough to see him. “No, you’re allowed. It’s just weird.”

He picks up a pair of gloves, then sets them down with a huff of annoyance at their size. “I’m trying to court you.”

Bewildered, I tug the hat off. “But... Why?”

He picks up, then sets down a deep green scarf. “Because it’s what I should have done when I realized you were my mate.”

Regret fills his eyes when they meet mine. “If I had treated you as a human and courted you properly instead of relying on our mate bond to make you fall in love with me, things could have been different between us. Maybe you wouldn’t have run.”

Oh, so we’re talking about this. I thought we were just leaving it in the past. “When I ran, it wasn’t because our bond scared me. I ran because you attacked Tris and Owen.”

The muscles in his jaw tick as he nods. “I know, and I’ve never apologized for that.”

I cock my head to the side. “You still haven’t.”

He turns to face me fully. “I’m sorry.”

I tug off the warm scarf. “While I appreciate that, I’m not the one you attacked.”

“No, but I terrified you, and I’m sorry for that.” He takes the scarf from me. “Owen and I have made amends, and I’ll apologize to Tris, too.”

I shake my head in confusion. “Why are you bringing this up all of a sudden? Our bond is good now. You didn’t need to ever say anything.”

“Because, yesterday, I watched Owen step up and defend his position as Alpha. He never would have done that before. He’s changed, and that change has made him stronger.” Haut reaches out to catch my hand. “I don’t want to be the only one who can’t change. I don’t want you to only like me. You stare at Tris, Owen, and Ambros with so much love, and I want you to love me, too.”

My lips part, ready to tell him I love him, too, but he holds up a hand.

“It’s okay that you don’t love me yet. You had a bond with Tris and Owen that grew over years. And the bond you share with Ambros was forged during an intense time of pain and healing.” He looks away from me. “But we don’t have any of that. I lied to you. I pushed you, and I threatened those you care for.”

His gaze returns to mine. “Sure, we’ve moved past it, but we’ve never talked about it, so it’s still in the shadows, hovering over us. That’s why I want to court you. I want you to know that you’re more to me than the Wendall witch. And I want you to know that I’m more than a sexy brute.”

A smile tugs at my lips. “Nice self-compliment.”

He returns my smile. “I know which of my attributes you like the best.”

“I’m a simple woman.” He snorts, which I graciously ignore. “I know you’re more than a sexy brute, Haut. You’re protective, strong, and so pushy I frequently consider smothering you in your sleep.”

He purses his lips in consideration before he shakes his head. “That would never work. You’re not sneaky enough.”

“Agree to disagree.” I squeeze his fingers. “But I also know that I can count on you to stand up for what’s right. You’ve also always believed in me, even though I’m a terrible witch, and I’m easily distracted and erratic and don’t act like normal people do—”

His hand covers my mouth, and he gives a warning growl. “There’s nothing wrong with how you act or the way you think. And everyone is terrible at the start when they’re learning something new. You’ll get there with time and practice.”

There he goes again, believing in me when I struggle to believe in myself. I tug his hand down. “So, you’re going to court me?”

He gives a firm nod. “I’m going to court you.”

“What does that mean?” I’ve only read about that kind of thing in books.

“Well, I’m not sure,” he admits. “But we’re going to start with finding you a warm jacket. I can’t have my mate freezing in the winter.”

“I need slippers, too. The house gets cold, and now that we don’t have a hall runner, my feet are going to freeze.” I add the hat to the scarf he still holds. “You can buy those. But I’m buying the sweaters.”

“Wait, coming here was *my* idea,” he protests as he follows me to the cash register, where Hillary waits with our other items.

“Hey, this is the modern age, mister.” I pull out my wallet. “You’re not the only one who can go courting.”

Hillary giggles as she rings up all the sweaters, and I forgive her for lusting after my man. It’s not her fault he’s a prime piece of meat that I took off the market.

After Haut pays for the scarf and hat, he bundles me up in them before claiming the shopping bags to carry. Which I allow, because I may be a modern woman, but I’m not a stupid one, and those bags look heavy.

Back outside, the crisp air bites at our faces, and I snuggle my chin into my scarf.

Haut shifts the bags to one hand and claims mine with his other one, slipping it into his warm pocket.

Courting sure feels nice.

As we walk down the street to the larger department store, I consider ways for Haut to court my other hand, which is lacking the warmth of his pocket.

We reach the next stop before I figure out a subtle way to shove *both* hands into his pockets. Now wise to my shopping ways, Haut steers me straight to the section of store with the jackets and quickly finds me a red jacket with a fur-lined hood that fits.

He then takes me to the shoe section, where we find slippers and a pair of winter boots.

But he doesn't stop there. We also go the sock section, where he adds thick wool socks and lined leggings to our selection, and we find a pair of stretchy gloves that fit my small hands.

Haut pays for everything, then removes the price tags and bundles me up.

He pulls the hat down over my ears and smiles. "There we go. Now you're ready for winter in Hartford Cove."

Sweating under the indoor heater, I nudge the hat up farther on my forehead. "Can we go get milkshakes now?"

"Sure." He checks his watch. "We still have a few hours before magic class."

Drool fills my mouth. "And French fries?"

Haut curls his arm around me, the warmth from his body seeping through my puffy jacket and threatening to give me heat stroke. "And a slice of pie?"

My stomach gurgles with anticipation. How can this stupid man think I don't already love him? If he wants to work for it, though, who am I to argue?

## ROWE, THE TEACHER?

I'm glad for my new winter gear as I sit in the garden later that afternoon, waiting for our class to begin.

Greyson paces at the edge of the forest, his watchful gaze on the coven members as we gather. The late fall afternoon bathes the garden in a warm, golden glow, while the crisp air reminds us that winter is on its way.

Harper arrives with the others, and they take their seats at the tables, murmuring softly among themselves.

Ambros arrives shortly before class starts, bringing Delilah. She leans on him less and less every day, and not for the first time, I wish that she had magical healing powers like a wolf shifter.

The other witches that we saved have mostly recovered now, but she was the weakest out of everyone, stuck in a coma and wasting away even after we got them safely back to Hartford Cove. Little by little, though, her health improves, and soon she'll be able to walk up the driveway with everyone else.

As they enter the garden, the sunlight catches in their matching auburn hair, casting a fiery glow over the siblings.

Ambros helps her into her chair at our table, then leans over and kisses my cheek. "That's a lovely shade of red on you, Rowe."

I lift a hand to the soft hat on my head. "Haut's trying to buy my love."

A barked reprimand comes from Greyson, causing Ambros and Delilah to laugh.

"I'd best go join him on guard duty." Ros kisses me again. "Have fun and don't blow anything up."

"I make no promises!" I yell after him, admiring his firm ass as he strides



away.

“Is that a new wand?” Delilah asks, her soft voice drawing my attention away from her brother’s fit rump.

Excited, I turn to her and pick up the wand, which I had spent the afternoon decorating with purple glitter. “Yes! Aspen helped me make it.”

I explain how we’d created lightning sand and lightning touched wood to harness the ethereal energies, then performed the spell on the roof.

“Aspen even suggested using the moonlit water, even though he knew I hadn’t helped you make it,” I tell her. “And he didn’t throw too much of a fit over my new grimoire, either.”

“It sounds like he’s starting to unbend.” She points to the sparkling base of my wand. “And the glitter?”

“It needed some pizzazz.” I tilt the wand back and forth so the glitter can catch the sunlight. “I used the same glue that we used to stick the glass to the top, then blessed it again for good measure. Aspen said we should use items that call to us, and glitter calls to my soul.”

She smiles. “I think it perfectly reflects your personality.”

My hand tightens around my wand, which buzzes with untapped potential. “I haven’t used it yet. The Alpha challenge interrupted us. But I can feel the energy filling it.”

Harper tilts her head, her long blond hair falling gracefully over her shoulder. “What’s it like?”

I consider the question, letting the sensations wash over me. “It kind of buzzes, like licking a battery.”

Horror fills Harper’s face, but Delilah just laughs. “Mine is like a quiet hum. I focused on garden magic when I made it, because I wanted to emphasize healing and growth.”

“How come you didn’t add the other elements?” I ask, curious since she has a strong affinity for all of them.

She lifts a shoulder. “I have an affinity, but fire and air don’t currently call to me. There’s no reason to add them to this wand, when my focus is on earth and water. The other two elements would just weaken the spell by muddying the purity of the elements being summoned. If I want to perform a spell for something outside of gardening, I can always make a second wand. There’s no rule that says I can only have one.”

“Are you sure about that?” I purse my lips. “Aspen might say otherwise.”

“Contrary to his belief, Aspen doesn’t know everything.” She turns to

Harper. “What about your wand?”

Harper pulls her slender wand from her pocket and balances it on her palm. “Mine’s more like a comforting weight. It just feels right, you know?”

Fascinated by their descriptions, I study their wands. If I ignore the glitter I added, our wands look similar, since they all have wood as their base, but the power they represent are all different. “Don’t tell Aspen, but I’m becoming more optimistic about him as our teacher after this experience.”

The garden gate creaks open, and Aspen and Mel step inside.

I straighten with alarm, afraid he overheard me praising him.

If he did, he doesn’t let on as his icy-blue eyes scan the garden. “It looks like the only one we’re missing now is—”

“I’m here!” Tris rushes into the garden, still in his scrubs and out of breath. “Sorry, we had a last-minute discharge at the clinic.” His golden-brown eyes meet mine. “The witch has left the building.”

I raise my hand, and he high-fives me as he strides for his seat at the back, where his grimoire and wand wait, because I’m the bestest mate and got them from the house for him.

Aspen clears his throat. “Well, now that we’re all here and everyone has their wands, Mel and I have been discussing trying out a few group spells.”

Mel steps forward, her darkly outlined eyes sweeping over our group. “You’ve all been through a lot in the last month. Both with escaping imprisonment and with the battle that shook Hartford Cove. It’s left the energies here out of balance, which feed dark thoughts and actions. It’s time we focus on healing and positive energy, as well as protection.”

“If you will all bring your wands and grimoires with you, we are going to take a trip down to the beach.” Aspen gestures toward the sand dunes behind us.

Excited murmurs rise, and chairs scrape back as everyone rises. Mel takes the lead, carrying a large bag over one arm.

I stick with Delilah, offering my arm to lean on, and Aspen surprises me by joining us on Delilah’s other side.

“I saw the notes Rowe copies from your grimoire, Delilah,” he says as we trail behind everyone else toward the beach. “The technique you used differs from how we were trained.”

“Delilah was just telling us we could have multiple wands,” I inform him, a note of challenge in my voice. “What do you think of that?”

He pauses for a moment before he dips his chin. “I’d like to hear more

about it.”

Delilah nods, her smile brightening. “I’d like that. My mother taught me magic, and she encouraged the creation of multiple wands for specific outcomes. It’s more about precision than incorporating all the elements.”

Aspen raises an eyebrow. “An intriguing idea. Maybe we can sit down and discuss your training sometime?”

I lean past Delilah to stare at Aspen. “Who are you and what have you done with our stuffy teacher?”

His blond brows lift. “I believe your words were that I needed to pull the wand out of my ass?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t think you’d listen.” I bounce on my toes, then settle when I realize it might throw Delilah off balance. “Dare I hope we’ve got some unconventional magic brewing in our coven?”

His lips twitch, though he keeps the smile off his face. “I’ll let you be the judge of that.”

We carefully make our way down to the path behind the house, the soft ground tricky even under the best of circumstances. The weight of Ros’s worried gaze follows us the entire way down the dunes. Then the beach comes into view, the vastness of the ocean stretching out before us.

I’ve grown less fearful of the beach since the lightning project, but the ocean and its questionable residents still triggers unease within me.

If Aspen’s group project involves going into the water, I’m out of here.

By the time we rejoin the others, they’ve already formed a large circle in the sand.

Delilah and I join the circle, while Aspen steps into the center to stand beside Mel.

Mel clasps her hands together. “We’re going to do three spells today. Some of you are already familiar with the first one, while it will be new to others. It’s a spell that calls on the forces of nature to protect us but does not require a specific affinity to complete.”

“I’d like one of our own to demonstrate the spell.” Aspen’s piercing blue eyes fix on me. “Rowe, please come to the center of the circle and show everyone how to summon the watchtowers.”

“Me?” My heart skips a beat, and I glance at my new, untested wand.

Fear that it might not work, or worse, that it will break, gnaws at my already shredded confidence.

Aspen walks over to me and leans in to whisper, “It’s the same spell as

the one you performed yesterday, just on a larger scale, with you at the center of the circle instead of an object. You've done it, even without a wand to assist you."

I swallow hard and nod, stepping into the circle.

Mel gives me an encouraging smile as she holds out the bag she carries.

Inside, I find four candles and a book of matches.

"First, Rowe will draw the circle," Aspen explains, and passes me a piece of driftwood. "The circle sets a boundary for the spell, giving it a limit on how far it can reach."

"Make it big enough to stand in without risking tipping over the candles," Mel whispers.

Nodding, I press the end of the wood into the sand and start drawing.

"This spell can be performed solo, but it is often performed in groups of four, a witch for each element in nature," Aspen continues. "It can be small, or it can be large, but it is always the same spell."

I glance at the members of our coven. While Delilah and Tris wear expressions of understanding, the rest seem captivated by the unexpected lesson. Did they not all perform the wand spell the same way I did?

Aspen gestures toward me. "Rowe has summoned the watchtowers several times, even though she's not an elemental witch. It's a testament to the spell's flexibility."

My mind races, piecing together the puzzle. I copied the diagram from Delilah's grimoire, but I don't remember Mel or Aspen teaching the summoning spell. The others might not have performed the ritual to create their wands.

I hesitantly pull out my phone for my compass app, my shoulders stiff as I wait for Aspen to berate me for not being able to tell my directions.

Instead, he just continues to explain as I stuff my colored candles into the right spots in the sand.

Green candle in the North for earth.

White candle in the East for air.

Red candle in the South for fire.

And blue candle in the West for water.

"First, Rowe will demonstrate the spell, then we'll go over it again in case anyone misses the words." Aspen and Mel step off to the side, out of the way of my circle so everyone can see. "Summoning the watchtowers is to ask for protection from the energies of the world around us, a request to bless what is

in the center of the circle. It's a good spell to cast before performing a greater spell that has the potential to cause harm."

Nothing to it. As Aspen said, I've performed this spell a few times now. This is just the same on a bigger scale.

I pull a finger stick from the bag, leaving a dozen others behind, and grab the matches before setting the bag outside the circle.

Crouching in front of the white candle for air, I light it, then prick my finger and drip blood into the flames.

My voice shakes as I raise it to be heard above the crash of the waves. "Guardians of the watchtower of the East, I summon thee. Lend me your protection."

I step to the right, moving to the red candle for fire and repeat the process. "Guardians of the watchtower of the South, I summon thee. Lend me your protection."

Next comes the blue candle for water. Blood now drips freely from my finger as I drip it into the flame and summon the watchtower.

Last comes earth, and even before my blood sizzles in the flame, the sand beneath my feet trembles.

I step back, pointing my wand at the candle. "Guardians of the watchtower of the North, I summon thee. Lend me your protection."

The top of my head buzzes, and halos of light circle the flames before a great gust of wind sweeps in. It lifts my hair, bringing with it the fresh air of the forest, the warmth of the sun, and the taste of salt on my tongue.

Then the candles snuff out, leaving me standing in the center of the circle, tingling from head to foot.

I turn to grin at Aspen, who smiles back, pride filling his eyes.

"A perfect summons." Aspen clears his throat and turns to the rest of the coven. "Would anyone like to go next? Or do we need to go over the spell again first?"

Tris waves his arm in the air, wiggling with excitement. "I'll go!"

My legs tremble as I walk back to Delilah's side, and my BFF takes my place within the circle.

Having seen me perform the spell before, Tris doesn't need to be reminded of the steps, and soon, a great gust of wind sweeps through his circle, lifting his sandy brown hair and pulling a delighted laugh from him.

Delilah goes next, her wind arriving the moment she lights her last candle, and she giggles through the rest of the spell.

After three demonstrations, no one needs to be reminded of the spell, and one by one, the rest of the coven step into the circle to summon the protections.

Once everyone performs the spell, a new energy fills the coven, and they stand straighter, holding themselves with new confidence.

Mel steps forward to wipe out the circle in the sand before rejoining our circle. “Wands away for this next one.”

I slip my wand into my pocket, while others set theirs on the ground at their feet.

“Join hands with the person on either side of you,” Aspen instructs, taking Mel’s hand and then reaching for Ginny’s.

I clasp hands with Delilah and Tris, who had come to my side of the circle after he completed his spell. Blue sparks dance around our clasped hands, displaying our mate bond. His eyes meet mine, and he gives me a tight squeeze, his love tugging at the strand of magic that binds us together.

“Now, close your eyes and focus inward on your magic,” Mel instructs, her voice carrying a soothing cadence. “Let it flow from the top of your head to your toes.”

My eyes close, and the rhythmic sounds of the ocean fill the silence. That subtle buzz returns to the top of my head, confirming that the buzz is my magic and not just what I associated with the barrier.

“Concentrate on bringing your magic to your palms,” Mel continues. “Then let it spread to the hands you hold, connecting with each other.”

I follow the instructions, focusing on that buzz until it flows down my arms and into my hands, where it meets with a quiet hum from Delilah’s palm and a bubbling sensation from Tris.

Then other sensations follow, as Harper’s magic flows through Delilah into me, and the same happens with Ambyrlynn on Tris’s other side, until a touch of magic from every member of our coven flows into and through each other.

My eyes open, and I see a glowing wheel of colored light weaving through us, growing stronger and brighter. Across the circle, I meet Aspen’s awe-filled gaze as he, too, witnesses the power of our coven.

“Now, let the magic fill your bodies once more, up to the top of your heads and down to your toes,” Mel instructs, her eyes still closed. “Then, let it go. Allow the magic that isn’t yours to return to its owner, and allow your magic to return to you.”

I feel the release of the others' magic and my own returning, but even after the spell finishes, I can still sense each coven member inside of me, similar to the threads of magic that bind me to my mates, but on a different level.

Delilah squeezes my hand with new strength before she releases me, and when I look over at her, a healthy flush fills her cheeks, as if she just woke from a week-long nap.

Invigorated by the shared magic, Aspen announces, "There's one more spell for us tonight—one to banish negativity."

We follow his instructions and gather driftwood from the beach to build a pyre, the energy we had released swirling in the air around us.

As the structure takes shape, Aspen calls forward the witches with affinities for fire.

Their eyes sparkle with excitement as they step forward, eager to lend their magic to the upcoming spell.

Together, they conjure flames, and the wood ignites, sending sparks into the darkening sky.

The bonfire flickers, casting dancing shadows on the sand. The warmth of the flames against my skin brings with it comfort and power. Without being told, I clasp hands with Delilah and Tris once more, our shared energy contributing to the growing warmth.

Laughing, we dance around the growing flames, and magic rises with the smoke. It touches the barrier that surrounds our town and lights it up, fractal patterns blooming across the darkening sky, spreading our magic outward and sweeping away the negativity that's hung over our town since before the battle began.

Head tipping back, I take a deep breath and let it out, imagining it sweeping away the lingering traces of madness brought on by the poison Bryant pumped into my body and leaving only goodness behind.

## DANCE AWAY THE BAD

The fire lighting the sky draws people to the beach.

First Owen, Barron, and Jesse arrive, and our circle opens to include them, their energies joining ours. The wildness of their wolves and the darkness of Owen's curse hold a power all their own, adding to the strength of our circle and uplifting everyone.

Wonder fills Owen's face, and his voice is breathless as we dance in a circle around the fire. "What are we doing here?"

"We're banishing negativity." My eyes skip between the mesmerizing flames and the flashing barrier overhead. "Cleansing our town and welcoming positive energy."

Barron lets out a laugh. "My whole body is tingling!"

More people trickle down to the beach, curiosity drawing them closer until a small crowd forms around the bonfire. The circle expands as more people join, and I tap out, breathless from dancing.

Tris and Owen join me a moment later, their faces flushed and their eyes bright.

Owen's arms circle around me. "This is incredible."

"It is." My gaze sweeps over the circle.

While more and more witches step out, their places taken by wolf shifters and vampires, the glow of energy that surrounds everyone remains strong and vibrant. For the first time in a while, the citizens of Hartford Cove find harmony with each other and the world around them.

So much magic fills the air that it I could float away on it, all the way up to the barrier, which forms a solid glow around the town now, stronger than it's ever been before.



My lips part in a quick breath as realization strikes. Hartford Cove doesn't need the Wendall witch, or any singular witch at all, so long as the barrier stands. No yearly spells to renew the camouflage, no panic if their precious Wendall disappears.

All they need is *this*. To come together in peace and harmony. It generates enough magic to keep the town hidden forever.

Aspen approaches us, magic dancing in his eyes.

I point up at the sky. "Do you see it?"

"I do." A light breeze dances his fine blond around his head. "The wolf shifters here are more powerful than normal. Maybe because they've lived surrounded by magic their entire lives. It's wonderful and unheard of."

Slowly, the dancing breaks up, but people linger, and a lively gathering forms. Blankets appear, along with food and beverages.

I find myself on a blanket with Tris and Owen, sharing a bag of pretzels and a lemon-lime soda that tickles my nose.

The fire continues to burn, pushing back the cold ocean breeze, and someone produces a Bluetooth speaker. Soon, music fills the air, and dancing of another kind starts up between the blankets where people sit and laugh.

Ginny comes to claim Tris, laughing as she pulls him off our blanket, and they disappear down the beach.

When they return, they carry a shirt full of clams dug up from the beach.

Tris nudges Owen with his sand-covered foot. "Tell me you know how to do a clam bake, because Ros was useless last time."

Laughing, Owen takes charge, demonstrating the clam bake process by digging a pit in the sand.

Ros joins me on the blanket, leaning back on his elbows as he gazes around at the festivities. "It was never like this before."

I dig my toes into the sand. "I don't think clam bakes are normal anywhere except near the beach."

"Not that." His arm sweeps out. "This. The celebration. The mingling of different races. This is special."

I turn to study his fire-lit face. "The witches and vampires never mingled in your mole city?"

He shakes his head. "Only if they were mates, and then only within the family group. Otherwise, the witches stayed separate. I always thought it was to protect them, but now I wonder."

When his gaze settles on his sister dancing with Ambyrlynn, sadness fills

his face.

I cover his hand with mine, offering silent comfort. No words can erase what happened in the past, but Ros is taking steps to ensure that, at least among the huntsmen, it never happens again. He may doubt that he was too hasty in disbanding the organization, but I'm proud of him. Do away with vigilantes and let the paranormal council be the police.

Tris returns, handing me a bowl filled with steamed clams, and I stare down at them doubtfully.

"Just try one." He scoops a hot shell from the bowl, tossing it from hand to hand before he pries it the rest of the way open and scoops out the inside with his fingers. "Open up."

My nose wrinkles, but I open for him, and his fingers slip inside.

My lips automatically close, and I suck the salty juice from his fingers as he pulls them from my mouth, leaving behind a tender morsel that bursts with briny flavor.

Tris laughs at my expression. "Good, right? They're even better with wine, garlic, and butter."

Leaving me with the bowl, he returns to the pit where Owen stands.

My stomach rumbles with hunger, and I use my fingers to break open the hot shells, reveling in the messiness of the experience. The burn on my fingers adds an extra layer to the delight of eating the small morsels.

Ros chuckles and reaches out to wipe the juice from my chin. "You're making quite a mess there."

I grin, unapologetic, and pop the last clam into my mouth, barely chewing before I swallow.

A playful glint fills Ros's eyes, and he leans in to lick the juice from my chin. He catches my surprised gasp with his lips, and his tongue dips in to playfully curl around mine. I tip my head to the side, returning the kiss, the heat of his lips warming me more than the fire in front of us.

When we part, Ros wraps his arms around me, pulling me to sit between his legs, the warmth of his body at my back ensuring that the chilly night won't reach me.

His chin settles on my shoulder. "Thank you, Rowe."

My brow furrows in confusion. "For what?"

His head turns on my shoulder, his focus on Delilah, who now stands with Harper and Ginny. "For all of this. Seeing Delilah surrounded by a community, happy...alive. It means the world to me."

Sensing he needs to talk, I hug his arm closer and stay silent.

“My stepmother didn’t like me much. I was a necessary evil, the pureblood vampire heir, in the house of her mate, my father,” he says. “She gave all her attention to Delilah, which I didn’t understand when I was younger. Not until I was old enough to move to the barracks, and I realized that, to have me, my father cheated on his mate.”

I squeeze his arms tighter.

“But Delilah never treated me as less. We were both isolated and lonely, and we bonded over that.” Sadness fills Ros’s voice. “Which is why I never told anyone when I caught her sneaking out top-side. She always came back filled with so much happiness that I didn’t want to steal her moments of joy. When she disappeared during one of her top-side visits, I felt so guilty. If I had told on her, maybe I could have prevented her disappearance.”

My fingers trace circles on Ros’s arm. “She was in love with a wolf shifter. They were mates. Had she stayed underground her entire life, she never would have found him and had those months of happiness. If you ask her, I believe she’d tell you it was worth all the pain to spend even that short time with him.”

Ros remains silent, watching his sister.

Delilah’s laughter rings through the air, and he glances at the people gathered around us.

He pulls me closer. “I hope she finds love again. She deserves the same happiness that fills me when I’m with you.”

“I would go through it again, too, you know. If it meant finding you,” I whisper.

A shaky sigh leaves his body, and he presses his cheek to the side of my head.

Together, we watch the night unfold, the bonfire’s glow casting a warm blanket over the impromptu celebration.

As the moon rises in the night sky, Tris returns to our blanket and holds out a hand. “Dance with me, sparky.”

I shake my head. “You know I’m a terrible dancer.”

“But I’m a fantastic lead.” He wiggles his fingers. “Trust me.”

I roll my eyes but accept his hand, and we join a group of people swaying to the music.

When my feet tangle together, Tris laughs. “You’re stepping on my toes.”

“I did warn you.” I stare down at our feet, trying to find the rhythm.

Tris tugs me closer. “Stand on top of mine. That way, you can’t trample me.”

I follow Tris’s lead, standing on top of his feet as we dance. He twirls us, reminding me of the time we performed the barrier spell together, and laughter escapes me, the joy of the moment infectious.

Tris’s eyes meet mine, and I’m swept away by the sheer happiness of being here, surrounded by friends and loved ones.

As the song ends, Owen steps in, claiming me from Tris.

A slow song starts, and a sheepish smile crosses his face. “I’m a terrible dancer.”

“Then we’re perfectly matched.” I wrap my arms around him, and we sway together.

Owen’s arms encircle me, and his whisper fills my ear. “I’m so happy you came back to Hartford Cove. I love you.”

Curious, I pull back to gaze up at him. “Would you have come for me if I hadn’t returned?”

He shakes his head. “No.”

The response both surprises me and doesn’t. “Why not? Aren’t wolves pushed to claim their mates?”

Haut had certainly been pushed, chasing me up and down the coast, wearing himself ragged and halfway to feral.

Owen hesitates for a moment. “After your mom died, and I realized I was cursed, I didn’t want to bring that kind of darkness back into your life. I wanted to protect you from the monsters.”

My fingers thread through his soft black hair. “You’re not a monster.”

“I was, for a long time.” He looks away from me. “I had no control over the werewolf curse. Only Haut’s strength kept me and the others from hurting people.”

His soft gaze returns to mine. “But it was your belief in me and your magic that allowed me to accept the curse and control it. And your love brought me peace with who I am.”

I rise onto my toes as his head dips, and we share a tender kiss filled with the weight of our shared history and the forgiveness we both needed to reach this point together.

The song ends, switching to something faster, and Haut taps Owen’s shoulder. “May I have this next dance?”

We separate, and I twirl away with Haut, my feet not even touching the

sand. Then Ros steps in before I find myself back in Tris's arms. After that, Harper pulls me in with her and Delilah, and magic pulses through us as we spin together, hand in hand.

After the dance, Delilah leans on me, breathless.

Worried, I cup her elbow. "Let's get you back to your blanket to recover."

She shakes her head. "All the magic and celebrating have worn me out. Can we go up to the house? I'd like to rest."

"Sure. I'm getting tired, too." I catch Ros's eye and gesture to myself and Delilah, then point toward our house, outlined against the night sky.

He joins us, and together we stroll up the beach, the night air cold outside of the fire's embrace and the sand slippery beneath our feet.

At the sand dunes, we pause, and Ros turns to Delilah, scooping her up to carry her to the top.

I slip and slide behind them, the music and laughter from the beach growing distant with each step we walk away from the party.

Back in the house, blessed silence replaces the noise.

Ambros sets Delilah on the couch with gentle care. "How about some hot chocolate to end the night?"

"You're speaking my language." I grab a cozy blanket from the back of the couch and drape it over us, banishing the lingering chill from the walk back up.

"Tonight was amazing." Delilah leans her head back on the soft cushions behind her. "I haven't felt this alive in years."

I curl my legs up. "This was my first party. Now I understand the hype in the books I've read."

Ros returns from the kitchen with two steaming mugs of hot chocolate.

"Here you go." Ambros settles on the armrest of the couch. "For my two favorite ladies."

"Corny," I tell him while Delilah giggles.

He hands us each a mug, and I wrap my hands around the warmth, taking in the scent of chocolate and the familiar hint of cinnamon that Ros added.

Delilah takes a careful sip, her eyes closing in appreciation. "This is heavenly. Thank you."

"It's made the way you taught me." He glances toward the dark windows. "Why don't you stay the night, so you don't have to go home to a cold house? You can sleep in my room, and I'll sleep with Rowe."

Delilah turns to me. “If I’m not a bother?”

“Of course not.” I take a long sip of hot chocolate, enjoying the sweet burn on the way down. “Ros can take Tris’s side of the bed.”

Ros nods solemnly. “It’s only fair since he’s still down at the beach partying. Besides, when was the last time he slept in his own room? At this rate, you’ll need a bigger bed.”

“Any bigger than what I already have, and the entire room will be nothing but mattress,” I point out.

Ambros grins. “Sounds cozy.”

Delilah sighs into her hot chocolate. “You two are so adorable together. When is the wedding?”

I fake yawn and stand, depositing my empty mug on the coffee table. “Well, look at the time. I better head to bed now. Have a good night, Delilah.”

As I head for the stairs, Ros calls after me, “You leaving won’t stop us from planning a wedding! Right, Delilah?”

Delilah laughs. “Absolutely!”

“I hear nothing!” I yell back.

Their laughter follows me up to the second floor. I brush my teeth before changing into one of Haut’s T-shirts and set my wand on the nightstand next to my water glass before slipping between the cold sheets.

Through the window, I watch the fire’s light dance against the glass, and the distant sound of music reaches me, combining with the soft murmur of Ros and Delilah talking downstairs.

All this talk of weddings fills me with happiness, but also with worry. I don’t want to marry just one of my mates, I want to bind us all together. But how can we do that?

Despite my claim, energy still buzzes through me, too much to sleep despite the late hour. I roll onto my side and stare at the bottle of sleeping pills that sit on the nightstand.

If I want to function at all tomorrow, I need to get some rest, and I *did* sleep a lot better after taking the pills.

With a sigh, I sit up and shake out one pill before hesitating. Tris had said I should try taking half of one, but I don’t want to go back downstairs to find a knife. And is being a little groggy that big of a deal?

Tossing it into my mouth, I swallow it with a sip of water before setting the bottle aside.

I lay back down, snuggle into the soft down pillows, and pull the blanket up to my chin. Someone had replaced the quilt with a down comforter, its weight both light and warm on top of me.

I stare up at the ceiling, watching the dance of light across the plaster as sleep slowly claims me. I blink slowly, the time between when my eyes open and when they close lengthening as the shadows shift with the dimming bonfire.

Then a noise startles me awake, and my eyes snap open to find a dark figure leaning over my bed. My first thought is that Ros came to join me, but the shape is all wrong, and his voice still mingles with Delilah's downstairs.

Fear grips me as Bryant's face comes into focus.

"No, you're not real," I whisper, trying to convince myself. "You're just a figment of my imagination."

Bryant smiles, displaying sharp fangs.

I attempt to move, to turn on the light and banish the image, but my body feels sluggish. Despite the terror flooding my system, the weight of sleep drags at me.

Bryant reaches out, his hand brushing my hair back, and my heart slams with new terror. "You've been a very bad little girl, but don't worry, I'm going to fix everything. Soon, it will just be you and me, Rowe, a family at last, just like I promised your father."

I fight against the heaviness, reaching for my wand on the nightstand.

Cold fingers wrap around my wrist, his touch chillingly real.

Panic sets in as I cry out for help, my weak voice drowned out by the distant music.

We struggle on the bed, but Bryant overpowers me, his strength crushing. Desperation floods through me as he leans in, his mouth opening over my throat.

Then agony shoots through me, burning and intense, and the room spins, darkness dragging me into a nightmare.

## BRING THE SPARKLES

**A** gony courses through me as Bryant gnaws on my throat, my blood pumping out of my body.

I struggle to fight him off, to push him away, but my limbs feel like lead. My vision blurs, and I cry out for help, the feeble sound dying before it can reach Delilah and Ros downstairs.

My hand stretches toward the wand on my nightstand, just out of reach as darkness creeps over my eyes.

Bryant pulls back, blood staining his fangs, and strokes my hair with chilling tenderness. “Just one more bite, my dear Rowe, and we’ll be bonded forever.”

The very idea floods me with terror, and I desperately reach for the threads of magic within me, for the buzz at the top of my head, for the barrier that surrounds Hartford Cove. I did it once on instinct to defeat Ros’s father, but now, when it means saving myself, the elusive magic slips through my grasp.

Bryant strokes the throbbing bite on the side of my throat, sending pain blazing through me. “I know it hurts now, but you’ll heal. It’s unfortunate, but it wouldn’t be appropriate for me to use my venom on you. That’s not the kind of family we’ll be.”

Nausea twists inside me, my stomach rolling at how Bryant has twisted what I’ve shared with Ros into this horror. Terrified, I find the threads of the bonds I share, and I grasp onto them with desperation.

*Help me. Anyone. Please help.*

Light flares from outside the window, bright as daylight, flooding the room in stark relief.



A crash comes from downstairs, followed by Ambros's urgent shout, while outside, the howls of wolves fill the air.

Bryant's head jerks up before he smiles down at me, his fangs wet with my blood. "Always the clever girl. But I'll keep my promise to your father, and we'll be a family soon."

The bedroom door bursts open, and Ros charges in. The air crackles as his gaze locks on Bryant, and he hisses, exposing his fangs.

Ros flies across the room, and Bryant meets him at the foot of the bed. The two men collide, grappling with each other.

With supernatural strength, Bryant throws Ros against the armoire, splintering the wooden doors. Pushing free, he wrenches one broken door free and swings it at Bryant.

Bryant ducks with a laugh. "You're a decade too early to best me, boy. I've been doing this for years!"

Focus on them, I press a hand against the wound in my throat as I scramble across the bed, reaching for my wand.

My fingers brush the glitter-covered grip just as Bryant slams against it, the antique side table crumpling beneath his weight. I jerk back with a shriek, falling backward in my desperation to get away from him.

With a snarl, Ros pounces on him with a primal fury twisting his face. They roll across the bed in a dark blur, thudding to the ground on the other side.

Breaths ragged, I go for my wand again, desperate to help. I spot it halfway under the tall bed, and I fall onto the hardwood floor in a tangle of blankets.

Heavy thumps come from the other side and, as I reach for my wand, I meet Bryant's eyes from under the bed. He grins at me, a crazy light in his eyes, before he heaves Ros off him.

A heartbeat later, the sound of shattering glass fills the room.

I grab my wand and struggle to my feet. The room is empty, with broken furniture everywhere.

Jagged shards of glass stick to the edges of the window frame, while more glitters on the porch roof outside my window. Cold wind blasts into the bedroom, making the curtains dance, but an eerie stillness comes from outside.

A wave of dizziness sweeps over me, and I press a hand against the mattress, leaving bloody streaks on the sheet. Slowly, I crumple forward to

lie on the bed, my heart pounding, and warmth spreading beneath my cheek. Searing pain burns my throat, and the metallic tang of blood fills the air.

The howls of wolves continue from outside, too slow to help.

“Rowe!” Delilah’s panicked voice sounds muffled in my ears.

I struggle to gather my strength, to rise and see what’s causing her so much distress. She sounds in pain. I need to help her.

Gentle hands grip my shoulders, rolling me onto my back.

The glow that fills the room illuminates Delilah’s terror-filled eyes as she presses her hand against my throat. “Oh, god, Rowe.”

Aching and disoriented, I lift a shaking hand and tap my wand against her auburn hair. “You’re an angel.”

“Ambros! Where is Ambros?” She looks away from me. “Help! We need help!

Another angel enters the room, this one with a fiery halo glowing around his head. “Move! I can help her!”

Delilah hesitates. “You can’t. We should wait for Ambros...”

“He’s not coming. Would you rather she bleed out?” The angel shoves Delilah out of the way to straddle me, and Zane’s face swims into focus. “Rowe, I need to bite you.”

Fear rises, but I push it down and tap my wand against his freckled cheek. “Repair service granted.”

Zane catches my hand, turns my wrist toward his mouth, and sinks his fangs into me. A comforting tingle fills me, and the pain in my throat recedes to a dull throb.

He swallows a mouthful of blood before dropping my hand and claiming my other wrist. I barely register his fangs piercing me. He sucks hard, and the tingles increase, pushing toward pleasure.

Dropping my hand, he leans over me, tilting my head to the side to expose my throat.

“I’m so sorry, but it’s the only way,” he whispers before he bites into the ragged wound Bryant left.

Pain jolts through me, followed by another by a rush of tingles, and the top of my head buzzes. The bright glow flooding the room flickers.

“Oh, god, please.” Delilah takes my hand, desperately squeezing my fingers. “Hang on, Rowe. Just a little longer.”

I blink slowly, my eyes drifting past her to the broken window as the glow fades. A distant crackle of thunder resonates, and clouds roll in from the

ocean, obscuring the moon.

Footsteps pound into the room, and panic cracks Tris's voice. "What's happening? What's Zane doing to Rowe?"

I open my mouth to speak, but no words come out.

"He's bonding her." Delilah offers me a watery smile. "Without Ros here, it's the only way to heal the amount of damage done to Rowe."

"Rowe!" Haut's voice thunders through the house.

"Fuck," Tris curses. "If he comes in here now, he'll kill Zane."

"Hold him off." Delilah glances toward the door. "He's almost done."

A door slams, followed by shouts and a crash from out in the hall.

The buzzing intensifies, like electric ants running under my skin, before the sensation settles within me, and a new awareness of Zane fills me.

He sits up with a gasp, his blue eyes flashing with lightning. Blood darkens his lips, and his freckles disappear within his flushed cheeks. His Adam's apple bobs as he licks his lips and swallows. Then he bends back over me, his tongue hot as he licks my wound.

Another jolt of pain goes through me, the numbing tingles no longer separating me from the throbbing ache. I groan and squeeze Delilah's hand tighter. Zane's vampire saliva does its magic healing thing, but I forgot how much such fast healing hurts.

After only a moment, though, the pain vanishes, leaving me lightheaded from its sudden absence.

Zane straightens once more and shakes his head. "What did you take?"

His words slur, and his eyes lose focus.

I tap him with my wand. "Night, night."

His eyes roll back in his head, and he slumps onto his side, one leg still draped over my waist.

Another crash comes from out in the hall, followed by a roar. The door splinters as it bursts inward, and Haut's rage fills the room with a writhing red light I've never seen before.

Haut's anger is so pretty.

A giggle escapes me. "The room's on fire."

"Fucking hell." Tris appears above me, his hair mussed and his shirt ripped. He shoves Zane's leg off.

Losing its weight leaves me unanchored and floaty.

With gentle fingers, Tris checks my neck before rolling my head toward him. "Okay, sparky, your wound is closed, but we need to get you some

blood.”

“All the blood went away.” I loll my head toward Haut, who clenches his hands open and closed as he looks for an enemy to destroy. “Don’t be angry.”

Tris lifts me into his arms, jostling me so that my head flops onto his chest. He turns toward Haut and snaps. “Either help me or go back outside to help the others. Just standing there and growling isn’t doing anything.”

Delilah stands from the bed. “Where’s Ambros?”

Tris carries me toward the broken door.

Haut rips his gaze away from the sleeping Zane to stride out into the hall ahead of him. “I’ll drive us to the clinic.”

“Call Rodney and tell him we need bags of O negative brought to the clinic.” Tris holds me tight as he hurries down the stairs.

Delilah’s light footsteps chase after us. “What’s happened to my brother?”

The front door stands open, and Haut holds the screen door for Tris. As soon as we’re out of the house, he races down the porch steps to his SUV and opens the back door. The howls of hunting wolves fill the air, and the crack of gunfire echoes through the night.

Tris slides in backward, cradling me on his lap.

Delilah catches the door before Haut can close it. “Where is Ambros?”

“He’s already on his way to the clinic.” Haut yanks open the driver’s door and climbs in. “Whatever attacked Rowe ripped his throat out.”

Delilah gasps, tears flooding her eyes.

Tris reaches out to grip the handle. “Get in the front seat if you want to come, but we need to go.”

The tears spill over, and Delilah releases the door to rush around to the front passenger seat.

As soon as we’re all in, Haut revs the engine, and the SUV races down the gravel driveway. The shadowed forest whips past the windows, the trees blurring together. Or maybe that’s just my eyes losing focus. My heart feels heavy in my chest, and sleep drags at my eyelids.

Tris shakes me. “Keep your eyes open, Rowe. Don’t you dare go to sleep.”

I roll my head on his shoulder. “Make the sparkles.”

A strained smile curves his lips, and his fingers weave through mine. When he lifts our joined hands, only a few blue sparks dance across our knuckles.

He trembles as he brings our hands to his lips. “Come on, you can do better than that.”

I struggle to lift my wand, but it falls from my numb fingers.

Tris’s head lifts, and he yells, “Drive faster!”

“We’re almost there.” Tension fills Haut’s voice, and I try to look at him, but my head refuses to move.

The only sounds in the car come from the hum of the engine and the occasional muffled sob from Delilah. Tris keeps our hands pressed to his lips, worry etching his features as the blue sparks slowly fade.

The tires screech as Haut slams to a halt, barely waiting for it to come to a complete stop before he leaps out to yank open the back door. He reaches in to take me from Tris, cradling me against his broad chest.

As my forehead presses against the racing pulse in his neck, I whisper, “Bad wolf. So greedy to get your hands on me.”

A thick laugh leaves him. “Every time I take them off you, you’re getting in trouble, bad puppy.”

The clinic’s door swings open, and Dr. Lopez’s eyes widen before she motions for us to hurry inside.

In the examination room, Haut gently places me on the bed. Dr. Lopez brings over a metal pole with a bag of clear fluid hanging from it while Tris swabs my arm with alcohol.

Rodney comes running inside, bags of blood in his hands. His eyes widen in alarm when he sees me on the bed, and a tremor goes through his body.

“Bring it over here,” Dr. Lopez snaps as she examines me. “I don’t see a wound. Where is she bleeding from?”

“Zane closed the bite,” Delilah says from where she hovers in the doorway. “My brother? Is he alive?”

Dr. Lopez pushes up my eyelids and waves a light in my eyes. “He’s doing better than Rowe is. He’s in exam room one if you want to be with him.”

Haut catches Dr. Lopez’s eyes, his voice steady but filled with desperation. “Can you save her?”

She takes the bags of blood from Rodney and adds them to the metal pole. “It’s bad. But it’s a good sign that she’s still awake. I’ll do everything I can.”

Tris attaches monitors to me, and a slow beep fills the room.

Exhaustion drags my eyelids down, but a sting in my arm brings them

back open. Tris and Dr. Lopez move around me in a whirlwind of activity, while Rodney hovers in the corner, his eyes wide and unblinking.

A warm blanket drapes over my body, and I realize shivers wrack through me, but I can't feel my limbs. I want to look for Haut and Delilah, but I can't move my head, and my focus remains on Rodney, who shifts from one foot to the other with discomfort. A quiet whine joins the beeping, and Rodney tries to look away from me, but even though he turns his head, his eyes stay fixed on me.

"Just leave," Haut barks, making the other man jump. "Stay close, though, in case we need more blood."

Rodney dips his head and scurries from the room. With my point of focus now gone, my eyes close again, and distantly, I hear the beeping stop.

White light floods behind my eyelids, and a tall figure steps forward. Grandma Wendall, strong and vibrant.

Her hands reach toward me, and I race forward, yearning to feel her embrace again.

But instead of drawing me against her plump bosom, she shoves me backward. "Now is not your time, Rowe."

I gasp in a breath, my lungs on fire, and fluorescent lights blind me.

"She's back."

"Stay with us, Rowe," Haut commands.

"Not the Alpha," I mumble.

"You tell him, sparky," Tris says, his voice thick.

"We've done all we can," Dr. Lopez says, her voice tired but resolute. "Now, we wait."

## BEEPING

**A**n incessant beeping drags me from sleep, and I blink my eyes open to stare up at the darkened overhead lights. Shadows fill the room, the only illumination coming from the machines attached to my body and lights near the floor.

The beeping quickens, and a scuff comes from my right.

Panic seizes me, and the beeping sound screams with alarm.

“Rowe, it’s okay. I’m here.” Tris appears above me, his hair ruffled and deep wrinkles in the scrubs he wears.

He reaches out to turn down the beeping machine before taking my hand and bringing it to his heart, which beats at a slightly slower pace than mine.

Blue sparks dance around our clasped hands, stronger than they were... yesterday? I scan the room, searching for some sign of the day. But without windows, it could be three in the morning or the middle of the afternoon.

“How long?” I croak, the words dragging against my dry throat.

“It’s been three days since the bonfire.” Tris releases my hand to grab a plastic cup that rattles with ice. He uses a spoon to scoop up some ice chips and feed them to me. “You’ve been in and out of consciousness. Do you remember?”

Pain, followed by sweeping numbness and a bright light.

I swallow the ice chip on my tongue. “Grandma.”

Tris pauses with another spoonful near my lips. “What about your grandma?”

“I saw her.” I lick my cracked lips. “She was mean.”

He spoons the ice into my mouth and waits for me to swallow before asking, “Why was she mean?”

“She said it wasn’t time.” Heaviness drags my eyelids closed. “I thought she was going to hug me, but she shoved me back.”

“Good.” His cool hand touches my forehead. “I hope she keeps shoving you back. I’m not ready to lose you.”

“Not going anywhere.” I try to open my eyes but can’t muster the energy.



The next time I return to consciousness, the lights blind me, and I quickly shut my eyes with a groan.

“Sorry,” Delilah whispers. “Let me dim those for you.”

The light leaking in through my eyelids fades, and I risk cracking them open again. Delilah hovers next to my bed, her long, auburn hair unbrushed and dark shadows under her eyes.

“You look worse than when we brought you up from the well,” I croak.

“It’s been a long week.” She pulls over a wheeled tray table, which holds a single-serve Jello, a cup of ice water, and a puzzle book that makes me smile. “Do you think you can eat some Jello?”

My stomach rumbles in response. A hollow ache fills it, like I haven’t eaten in days. Which...maybe I haven’t. I remember waking up and Tris being here, but how long ago was that?

Delilah chuckles and peels off the tinfoil lid of the Jello cup on the tray table. “Tris said you like strawberry.”

I struggle to sit upright, and a sharp tug comes at my elbow. Frowning, I stare down at the tube in my arm in confusion.

“Here, let me help.” Delilah presses some buttons on the side of the bed, and the top half raises me into a sitting position. “The IVs are giving you fluids to make sure you stay hydrated. Once you’re awake and drinking on your own, they can come out. I remember how annoying they are. Just try not to move your arm too much.”

“Where’s Tris?” I ask before opening my mouth for the spoonful of Jello.

Delilah’s hand trembles, and I quickly eat the jiggling pink blob. “He’s checking on Ambros. I told him I’d sit with you while he was gone.”

The Jello squeezes past the restriction in my throat as other memories flood back. Of Ros falling through the window, and Haut’s voice saying that Ros’s throat had been ripped out.



“How is Ros?” I choke out.

Delilah offers me a shaky smile. “Luckily, he’s a vampire, and Owen found him in time. With enough blood, he’ll heal, but he can’t talk right now.”

Relief sweeps through me. Drake hadn’t been so lucky, and neither had Tom Arnold. Both of them were mauled by an animal, but also drained of their blood. It’s too much of a coincidence that Bryant reappeared at the same time. He has to be linked to these attacks.

Leaving both bodies near the places in town where I spend the most time is some kind of twisted message for me. He wants me to know I’m not safe here, even surrounded by a magical barrier and my powerful mates. He can still get to me.

“Is she awake?” Haut’s quiet question precedes him into the room.

When he sees me sitting up in bed, relief washes over his stern features, and he rushes over to gather me into his arms.

The IV tugs at my arm, and I let out a pained protest.

“Sorry.” He eases his hold but doesn’t step back.

Instead, he rubs his scruffy cheeks over my face, scent-marking me like a dog.

“Stop,” I protest. “I already stink.”

He snuffles around my ears. “You really do.”

The blunt agreement makes me smile, and I let him continue to sniff and rub against me until he licks my ear.

That earns him a weak smack with my good arm.

His head lifts, and he rumbles at me in offense.

“Shave before you give me beard burn, you bad wolf.” My stomach rumbles again, and I turn my head toward Delilah, opening my mouth.

She dutifully spoon-feeds me more Jello.

“Here, I can do that.” Without waiting for a response, Haut snatches the little cup and spoon from her.

Delilah pushes the wheeled table over my lap. “There’s ice water, too.”

Haut grunts and sits on the edge of my bed, feeding me one spoonful at a time until he scrapes the cup empty. Then he holds the water cup to my lips, demanding I take small sips until my teeth hurt and my mouth goes numb.

Once he’s satisfied, he pushes the small table away, banishing the plastic cups from view.

Eating left me tired, but I struggle to keep my eyes open. I’m afraid that if

I fall asleep again, I'll lose more days.

Tension tightens Haut's features as he reaches out to touch the side of my throat. "You still smell like that vampire. I don't like it."

Bryant's face flashes through my mind, my blood on his lips.

"Zane saved her life," Delilah murmurs.

"Which is the only reason he's still alive," Haut growls. "Every fiber in my being wants to kill him for bonding with her."

"No!" I reach out to grab Haut's arm. "You can't hurt Zane."

"This is what I mean." His lips peel back. "You don't even know him, but you're protecting him."

I open my mouth, then close it, unable to deny his words. While logic tells me Zane is only a casual acquaintance, a deeper part of me senses him nearby and wants to make sure he's okay.

It feels similar to the bond I share with Barron, Jesse, and Abony. Like Zane is someone I've known all my life, and I cherish him as part of my chosen family.

I shrug helplessly. "He saved my life. I gave him permission to do what was necessary, so you can't hurt him for that."

"Which is why I'm not," Haut grits out. "Look at me being reasonable."

I stroke his firm bicep. "Good boy."

"Ambros may not be so reasonable once he awakens." Delilah settles into a chair near the door. "Such bonds are sacred. Or, at least, they're meant to be. They're usually reserved for family and lovers."

"Why did he need to bond me to heal the wound?" I ask, my thoughts sluggish with the desire to sleep. "Isn't vampire saliva healing on its own?"

"For small injuries, yes. But not for substantial wounds." Delilah hugs herself. "Your throat was ripped open, and you were hemorrhaging blood. The monster that attacked you—"

"Bryant," I say. "Bryant attacked me. I don't know how I could see him when no one else could, but that night, he really was in my room."

Delilah's eyes widen in alarm, and the blood drains from her face. "But... how? You and Ambros killed him."

"I'm sorry, Delilah." My stomach twists around my meager meal. "We thought he was dead. He was shot in the head by a huntsman who was supposed to be using silver bullets."

My gaze drops from her stricken expression. "But the huntsman who took the kill shot was working under orders from your father to keep Bryant alive."

He wanted to interrogate Bryant to find out where he had stashed you and the other witches from the Sunlight Project.”

I swallow down the bile threatening to rise. “I last saw Bryant still alive at a vampire-run facility. He was still badly injured, his head half gone, but coherent enough to speak. That’s when I found out that your father had ordered the death. And now Bryant has some twisted fixation on me, like he’s trying to replace my father, because they used to be friends.”

She shakes her head in denial. “But then, why did he try to kill you?”

“He wasn’t planning to kill me.” I lift a hand to my throat. “He already bit me once before he took me to the cabin. The night he attacked me, he was planning to form a bond, but then Ambros must have heard me calling for help, because he came into the room, and they fought.”

“It wasn’t just Ambros who heard you call for help. The entire *town* heard you,” Haut says. “The barrier over our house lit up like a beacon, and then we all felt your pain, even the people who didn’t have a direct bond with you. It spread through the Alpha bond and Ambros’s connection to his vampires.”

“Every witch screamed with it.” Delilah holds herself tighter. “It was like being back under his control again.”

Horror fills me. “I’m so sorry. I never meant for you to experience that again.”

“No, *I’m* sorry.” Tears fill Delilah’s blue-green eyes. “If I had known he was still alive, I could have helped protect you from him.”

My heart breaks at the guilt that twists her features. “It’s not your fault Ros and I kept it from you. We should have trusted you with the knowledge, but Ros was so sure he could track Bryant down and kill him before he became an issue.”

She shakes her head. “You don’t understand. I was Bryant’s favorite meal. You said you’ve been seeing him around town, but no one else could, right?”

I nod slowly. “I saw him in my room before, too, but the others couldn’t see him, so I thought I was going crazy.”

“You’re not crazy.” She squeezes her eyes shut, and tears leak down her cheeks. “He consumed so much of my blood that he gained a portion of my powers. He was using my magic to project himself into your mind to play with you. When we were still under his control, he would torment my mind, to remind us he was always there even when he was away.”

A ringing fills my ears. “Like you did when you pretended to be my mom

to summon me to you?”

Eyes still squeezed shut, she nods. “I’m so sorry, Rowe. This is all my fault.”

“No.” Her eyes snap open at the firmness of my tone. “You were a *victim* and *desperate to live*. None of this is your fault. If Ros and I had been truthful with you from the beginning instead of trying to protect you, then you would have told us about his powers, and we could have guarded against them.”

She straightens in her seat. “We need to guard against him *now*. We all share a bond with him.”

“Does this power have a range limit?” Haut asks.

Delilah lifts her hands helplessly. “I was only able to reach Rowe from such a distance because of the bond she shared with Ambros. I’m not sure if Bryant can reach that bond through me, or if he’d need to be close by.”

“We found a campsite in the woods close to the peninsula, just within the barrier,” Haut reveals. “It looked like it had been there for weeks. We’re guessing he snuck through the barrier during the battle and has been biding his time.”

“He’s part of whatever is attacking Clearhelm.” My hands curl into fists. “I know it.”

Haut nods. “It explains the blood being drained from the bodies. Drake may not have been a good source of food, but taking all his blood was the only way to kill him without using silver.”

His brow furrows. “But what about the werewolf bite?” He looks at Delilah. “Can Bryant transform into a wolf, the same way your father could transform into bats?”

I shake my head before she can answer. “Ros said vampires can’t transform into wolves. They can’t transform into fog, either.”

“Thank god for that,” Haut mutters. “Owen led the hunt the night he attacked you, Rowe, and they chased him back through the barrier before losing his tracks at a gas station. We think he stole a car to get away.”

“We need to reinforce the barrier.” Delilah stands. “And guard our minds from future influences.”

“I have a Maze of Misdirection,” I offer.

“We’ll need more than one.” She turns toward the door. “I’ll speak with Mel and Aspen. You focus on resting.”

“I’ve rested enough,” I protest, even as I yawn.

Haut rises to walk around the bed, pushing the wheeled tray table farther

away. With a press of the buttons on the side of my bed, he lowers me back to a supine position.

I glare up at him. “You’re being bossy.”

“You need to sleep to recover.” He leans down to kiss my forehead. “I’ll turn down the lights.”

Stepping away from the bed, he fiddles with the switches on the wall until shadows fill the room. Then he strips off his shirt, and his body shimmers.

A moment later, Greyson jumps up onto the hospital bed to lie across my legs.

Unable to resist the draw of his soft gray fur, I reach down to stroke his head until sleep claims me.

## SOUR APPLE MARSHMALLOW

The door creaks open, followed by the shuffle of feet across the floor, closing in on my bed.

I keep my breathing steady and my eyes closed as I wait for the intruder to come closer. The weight of the Maze of Misdirection sits heavy on my chest, lending my mind armor against invasion, while constant visitors guard my body.

Another two days have passed, and my times of being awake have lengthened. Owen, Haut, Tris, and Delilah use my room like a revolving door, rarely leaving me alone.

Earlier, Owen had stopped by to have lunch—consisting of bland, beige foods—and I had dozed off after eating. Since the intruder just walked in, that means Owen has left, likely to join the patrol team to make sure Bryant hasn't snuck back in. Now that they have his scent, they're on constant lookout.

Which has left me alone and vulnerable to a sneaky visitor.

The rolling tray table squeaks softly, and my hand darts out, latching around a bony wrist. "Aha! I caught you!"

A slender, paper book raps against my knuckles. "What are you doing? Trying to give me a heart attack?"

I open my eyes to stare at Mrs. Smith. "If you want to see how I'm doing on my puzzles, you don't have to sneak into my room. You can just come visit me."

She sniffs and lifts her chin, revealing the waddle of loose skin beneath. "I don't know what you're talking about. I just wanted to stop by and make sure you weren't giving the staff a hard time."

“Tris likes it when I give him a hard time.” I release her wrist. “And I haven’t started on the puzzles.”

“Why?” She squints at me. “Are they too hard for you?”

“I’ve been sleeping.” I reach out to take the puzzle book from her and flip through it. “Though, I don’t actually know how to play sudoku. Can you show me?”

She purses her pruny lips. “You think I have that kind of time on my hands?”

I lift a brow. “Got a pie in the oven or something?”

“Not at the moment.” She pulls up the chair and sits. “I suppose I can spare a few minutes to educate you.”

With patience, she explains how the boxes with numbers work, and the best method for figuring out what goes in the empty squares. The ones at the front of the book are pretty easy, with only six by six graphs, but the ones near the back look intimidating.

I fill in a number five square. “You know, you’re not so bad since you got stabbed.”

“And you were more pleasant when you were unconscious.” She jabs a finger at another five in the same line. “You got it wrong again.”

“So I did.” I erase the five and write a six. “How’s it going, now that you’re back home?”

“It’s quieter.” A long pause follows. “I miss the bacon deliveries.”

I peek at her from the corner of my eye. “Are you asking me to be your best friend?”

She snorts. “No, I’m telling you I like bacon.”

“Then go to Nesse’s Diner.” I write in a four, then erase it when she twitches. “It’s not like the bacon fairy was making it herself.”

“So the bacon fairy only cares about little old ladies when they’re still recovering from being stabbed after saving their life?” She points to an empty square. “Three.”

I set down my pencil to look at her. “If you want the bacon fairy to bring bacon, then you should invite them over. Entering a house without being invited is a felony.”

She squints at me again. “Do bacon fairies need a written invitation?”

“I mean, it couldn’t hurt.” I pick up my pencil and write in the number three. “The bacon fairy has never received a written invitation before.”

A *harrumph* comes from her. “That’s because electronics ruined the

world.”

“Well, the bacon fairy frequently misplaces their phone, so a letter would probably be better.” With no more empty boxes, I give myself a one-hundred percent in the top right corner and add a star for good measure.

“You’re nothing like Charlene,” Mrs. Smith announces.

I pause in the process of starting a new puzzle. “Should I say thank you? Or how dare you?”

“Your grandma was a noble woman,” Mrs. Smith says. “And by all accounts, a great witch.”

“So I keep hearing,” I mutter.

“But she never ate at Nesse’s Diner except on special occasions,” Mrs. Smith says. “And she didn’t go out of her way to visit the injured or take a personal interest in the town. It’s easy to admire a figurehead, less easy to tolerate a yipping pup dancing around everyone’s ankles.”

“Am I the yipping pup?” I ask, already missing the bacon fairy title.

“Charlene never tried to change anything, except for that one time she petitioned for your father to be allowed within the barrier.” Mrs. Smith’s eyes grow distant. “She wanted your mother to come home, and she kept attending the town council meetings until we finally gave in. I guess you share her stubbornness. But she never once simply put her foot down or used threats to get her way.”

“Instead of blaming me for that, blame the system that relies so much on the Wendall and Hartford families that it can’t function without them.” I run my finger down the seam of the puzzle book to flatten it. “And I refuse to be a figurehead. I’ve brought you a dozen witches to fill in the Wendall spot, so go elect one of them.”

“That’s something else Charlene never would have done.” Mrs. Smith leans back in her chair and folds her hands in her lap. “She enjoyed being special on her hill, looking down on all of us.”

My head snaps toward the little old lady. “You didn’t like my grandma, did you?”

“I liked that she minded her own business.” Mrs. Smith looks away. “But, no, I didn’t like your grandma.”

I push the table aside and turn to face her, glad Dr. Lopez had removed my IV yesterday. “Go on.”

“It’s not a very unique story. Suffice it to say, I had a lover.” She rolls her eyes when I shudder. “We were young and in love, despite not being mates.



He was an outsider who moved to town after one of our gatherings.”

“Orgies,” I whisper.

She ignores me. “We planned to have pups. But I made the mistake of taking him up to the big house for a blessing.”

Already seeing where this is going, I raise my hands to my mouth. “Oh, no.”

She huffs. “I told you it wasn’t a unique story. Needless to say, I didn’t get a blessing, and my lover moved into the big house.”

“Granny, the home wrecker.” I shake my head. “You should have kicked her ass and stolen him back.”

Mrs. Smith leans forward to jab a bony finger at me. “Listen to me, girl. *Never* fight for a man who’s wandered. If his love is that easily swayed, it’s not worth chasing after.”

“You’re my new hero.” I grasp her hand. “We will eat bacon in front of your fire, and you will impart all of your wisdom to me.”

She snatches her hand back. “What I’m trying to say is that I didn’t like you from the start, and your yapping just made me dislike you more. But I’d have to be blind to not see what you’re doing here, and how much you care about the town. It’s good you’re not like your grandma. As you said, the town shouldn’t *need* a figurehead, and it shouldn’t need to rely so much on the Hartfords and Wendalls.”

“Preach, sister!” I raise my arms and make jazz hands. “Finally, someone has seen the light.”

Drawn by my shout, a small wolf pup comes careening into the room, barking his little head off.

“Sing it, Westen!” Throwing back my head, I bark back.

Mrs. Smith winces. “Please don’t do that.”

I grin at her. “Why? Am I saying naughty things?”

“You’re saying gibberish.” She glares down at the pup. “And you, be quiet.”

Westen stops barking and sits on his haunches to stare up at her.

“You know, Westen *also* loves bacon,” I say.

Westen’s mouth drops open, his tongue lolling out, and his tail wags so hard his whole rear end shakes.

“And he’d get rid of all that pesky quiet you have at home,” I add, just in case I’m being too subtle.

“I don’t need a housemate, Ms. Wendall. Especially not one who will shit

in the yard.” Mrs. Smith frowns down at the pup, though her eyes soften. “Someone will step forward to take him in.”

“Yeah, because this town is so big on taking in orphans.” When her head lifts, her brows crinkling in confusion, I say, “Owen.”

“He was older—”

“Nine,” I bite out. “He was *nine*. And he didn’t poop in the yard.”

“There were other reasons.” She looks away. “Werewolves used to be driven out of packs. We let him and the others stay, despite the danger.”

“How very kind of you.” I glare at her and wish my eyeballs were lasers. “You’re not the only one who had a bad impression, only for me, it’s the entire town. Don’t you think it’s time we all be better?”

Now, she glares at me. “I’m an old lady, or have you missed the wrinkles?”

“You took down a huntsman while he was stabbing you,” I counter. “Wrinkles just mean you have experience.”

Westen presses his head against her leg and whines softly.

“Come on. I know you let him sleep on your bed and cuddle with you while you were here,” I say, driving the nail into the coffin. “He’s been moping since your discharge.”

She stiffens with affront. “Your mate is a gossip.”

“And you’re just a big marshmallow under all that sour apple.” I settle back in my bed, enjoying my victory. “Send me an invitation. You can even save a stamp and just give it to Tris to deliver. I’ll bring bacon, and we can do a puzzle.”

Mrs. Smith rises. “That vampire is making a nuisance of himself. Deal with him before he sets himself on fire in front of the clinic.”

With that last jab deflating my bubble, she sweeps from the room, Westen on her heels.

I already know that Zane is outside the clinic.

His restlessness pricks at my senses. He knows I’m awake now, but Haut refuses to let him inside to see me. Apparently, his acceptance only goes so far where my new bond...mate?...friend?...brother?...is concerned.

I pluck at the ugly hospital shirt I wear. A giant opening at the back allows cold air to blow on my ass every time I get out of bed to use the bathroom.

Which is a small blessing. At least I’m not in a diaper or have a catheter.

But my request for real clothes was met with a resounding denial. There

seems to be a fear that real clothes will free me to get up to mischief.

My, how my mates continue to underestimate me.

Sliding out of bed, I pull off the sheet and wrap it around myself like a toga. My aim is Greek goddess, but the reality is probably closer to a drunken Alpha Phi girl.

Mmm, pie.

I poke my head out of the doorway to make sure the coast is clear before I hurry down the hall toward the entrance.

With how little free time I've had lately, I need to hustle before my next babysitter shows up.

I don't spot Westen pouting in the reception area. Hopefully, that means Mrs. Smith's heart grew two sizes today, and she took him home with her. With somewhere to live, the poor pup may decide to become a real boy once more.

Zane's shock of tangerine-red hair paces past the glass doors, but he freezes as I near, spinning back toward the clinic.

His hand touches the door at the same time mine does, and I have to sidestep as he pushes it open. "Thank god you finally came out."

"Why aren't you at home?" I eye the overcast sky. "Do you want to be a crispy critter?"

"No, I want this bond broken." He shoves an old book at me. "Hurry up, before Ambros recovers enough to kill me."

I fumble to catch the book, which I recognize as one of the old grimoires from Books & Blots. A piece of paper sticks out of the top, and when I open it to that page, I find a translation of the spell written out on notebook paper.

"My German isn't as good as Drake's was, but that's the spell we need to undo this link." He gestures between us. "So, get with the magic making."

"Well, hello to you, too," I grumble. "Nice to see you're unharmed and that the sleeping meds wore off."

"Yeah, glad you're not dead, too." He peers over his shoulder. "Just hurry. I saw Haut go into the diner a few minutes ago, so he'll be here soon."

My head jerks up. "Do you think he's getting me a milkshake? Please don't say it's vanilla. Don't get me wrong, I'll drink it, but I won't like it."

Zane turns back to stare at me. "How do you get anything done with so much *noise* in your head? It's like having a hundred radios on all at once."

I wrinkle my nose. "No one listens to the radio anymore."

He taps the spell book I hold. "Please, focus."

As directed, I glance down at the spell. “Will Ambros really kill you?”

“We’re not family, and I bonded his mate.” Zane dances from one foot to the other. “That’s grounds for death among our people, because that’s usually the only way to sever a bond without going before the paranormal council. But I found this in your books.”

No wonder he’s been an anxious thorn in my side. Or, rather, my mind.

This spell is a pretty big deal, though, and may win Zane a hearty pat on the back. “So this will break the bond between a vampire and the person they bonded with?”

“That’s what it says.” He jabs a finger at the title. “To Undo a Bond Forged In Blood.”

Excitement zips through me. This means we can undo the bond between Bryant and the witches.

“It looks simple enough,” Zane continues. “Just say some words, spill some blood, and *voilà*, we’re divorced.”

“Divorced? Are we *married*?” I screech before the rest of what he said sinks in. “Wait, what blood?”

“Yours and mine.” He rakes frustrated hands through his hair. “The two who are bonded. It’s all right there if you’d just read the spell.”

My gaze drops back to the spell, and sure enough, it requires us to spill our blood into a vessel, and then burn it.

But we don’t have Bryant’s blood.

*Pop!* My excited bubble bursts, crashing me back into the reality where there’s a crazy vampire out there who wants to be my daddy, and not in a sexy way.

More like in a Rapunzel-locked-in-her-tower-by-an-obsessed-parental-wannabe kind of way. Which is far more terrifying, because my hair isn’t nearly long enough for my knights to climb up and rescue me.

## LIKE A GODDESS

**A** *bloop bloop* cracks through the air, making me jump and fumble the grimoire.

The piece of notebook paper flutters out of it, Zane and I both diving toward it at the same time. Our knees knock together, and I lose balance, toppling onto my ass.

The fall jars up my spine, and the cold of the cement sidewalk seeps through my thin sheet.

“Sorry.” Zane reaches toward me, then freezes at the sound of a car door opening.

I push to my feet, grit from the sidewalk sticking to my palms, as Deputy Arden climbs out of his truck.

He comes toward us slowly, his sharp gaze locked on Zane. “Everything okay here, Rowe?”

I roll my eyes. “It was until you scared the crap out of me.”

“We had a call about someone loitering outside the clinic.” His hand drops to the gun at his belt as he joins us, his eyes still on Zane. “You’ve been told to stay away before. This is your second warning.”

“Oh my god!” I throw my hands up in exasperation. “Did Haut tell you to harass Zane? Bad Deputy!”

“Why don’t you go back inside?” Deputy Arden’s eyes flick to me. “It’s cold out, and you’re not dressed for the chill. Not sure you’re dressed at all, actually. Don’t let Haut catch you out here like that.”

“Excuse me?” I straighten my spine and smooth a hand over my toga. “This is the height of fashion, you backwater lawman.”

His lips twitch. “Still not enough to ward off the cold.”

Zane takes a step to stand between us. “A little more distance, please. I’ll leave peacefully once Rowe is back inside.”

Protectiveness comes through the bond I share with Zane, his fear of Deputy Arden a sour underscore.

Why didn’t I feel the others’ emotions this strongly when we bonded? Am I more conscious of Zane because he’s *not* my mate? And is his protectiveness being pushed on him by this false sense of closeness?

I reach out to touch Zane’s back. “It’s okay. Deputy Arden won’t hurt me.”

Zane shifts toward me but keeps Arden in his line of sight. “He’s a werewolf. People are being killed by werewolves. A little caution is warranted.”

Easily overhearing the hissed words, Arden grimaces. He can’t deny what he is, but I no more think Arden is ganging up with Bryant than I think Owen is. Haut trusts him, and I therefore trust him.

I take the translated spell from Zane. “Go home for now. I can’t do the spell this second, anyway, unless you brought a thimble and a candle?”

Frustration flattens his lips, and he shakes his head.

“Since you’re not confident of your German, I’ll talk to Owen to make sure the translation is right, and then we’ll get together to perform the bond-breaking.” I touch Zane’s arm, then pull away when Arden stiffens. “We’ll do it as soon as I’m released from the clinic, okay?”

Zane looks unhappy but nods. “Go back into the clinic before I leave.”

Arden takes a step to the side, his hand still on his gun as he waits for me to scurry back to safety.

Geez, aren’t four overprotective mates enough?

Besides, if I wasn’t safe in my bedroom, what’s to stop someone from coming after me in the public space of the clinic?

A shiver goes down my spine, earning an alarmed look from Zane. Yeah, that can end ASAP.

I clutch the grimoire to my chest as I scurry as directed, the clinic’s glass doors closing me safely within the lobby.

“Rowe!” Tris yells from behind me, making me jump. “What the hell are you doing out of bed? And what are you wearing?”

“Praise my toga!” Heart pounding, I spin to glare at him. “I am a Greek goddess!”

Tris’s hands move to his hips. “Well, Aphrodite, if you don’t get your wet

tush back to your room, you'll miss Dr. Lopez, and then you'll have to wait until tomorrow for the all-clear to go home."

"I'm going home?" At his nod, I jump up and down. "I'm going home!"

Loosened by the excitement, the knot on my toga unravels, and the sheet falls to the floor.

Cold air brushes my bare skin, and I fling my hands back, using the grimoire to cover my ass. When I twist to stare out the glass doors, Zane and Deputy Arden pointedly look the other way.

"Don't you both have somewhere to be?" I yell through the glass.

Arden tips his hat toward me, then glares at Zane until the vampire waves and heads down the sidewalk toward his house. Once he's out of view, Arden climbs back into his SUV and drives off.

The sheet settles back over my shoulders, and Tris turns me toward the back hall. "Come on, Flasher, step away from the windows."

"Who designed this gown?" I clutch the edges of the sheet in one hand and the grimoire in the other. "I'd like to write them a letter about how stupid they are."

"I'm sure they'd love to receive a letter like that." Tris sneaks a hand under my sheet and cups my ass. "I'll add a letter of my own praising their genius."

I slap his hand away, and the sheet slips.

In my fumble to catch it, I knock the grimoire against my chin, and yelp with pain.

Tris laughs as he comes to my rescue and takes the grimoire from me. "What's this? Did Zane bring it by?"

At least Tris isn't freaking out about Zane like Haut and Owen are. "Yeah, he found a spell to break the bond."

Tris pulls the scrap of paper from the pages of the book. He reads it over and frowns. "Sounds way too easy."

I had the same thought. An actual divorce would be more complicated. "I'm going to have Owen look over the original spell, then run it by Aspen and Mel before doing anything." I lean against Tris's side. "We don't want another goose incident."

"I don't know. Zane as a goose would probably make Haut smile." Tris pushes the door to my room open. "Lord knows we need something to counteract his grumpiness."

"Welcome back, Rowe," Dr Lopez says from next to my bed. "Come on

over so I can check your vitals.”

I dutifully hop up onto the bed, then huff and puff to prove that my lungs work and stick out my tongue when directed.

After much prodding, I receive the all-clear and a warning to keep resting.

As soon as Dr. Lopez sweeps from the room, Tris produces a bag that was hanging on the door handle. It contains a pair of black leggings and an oversized cream sweater that smells like Owen.

Changed out of the hospital gown, I feel more normal, though I won't be fully back to myself until I've showered and gotten Zane out of my head.

And danced on Bryant's corpse. But one step at a time.

We stop by Ros's room before I leave, but he doesn't open his eyes. If not for the steadily beeping machines and the strength of our bond, I'd worry that he's still sleeping. But apparently, it's normal for vampires to go into a type of hibernation to heal massive damage.

Thick white bandages cover his throat, but Tris assures me every time I come to see Ambros that the wound continues to close, and he doesn't even need a breathing tube anymore.

Delilah sits in the chair beside his bed, looking tired, but she smiles at seeing me dressed in normal clothes. “Are you finally getting released?”

I nod, my throat tight. “Yeah, but I'll be back later to sit with him so you can take a break.”

She shakes her head. “Don't you dare come back until morning. You need to sleep in a real bed and get more rest so you can be healthy when he wakes up.”

“You should take your own advice,” Tris tells her. “He won't be happy if you set back your healing by driving yourself to exhaustion.”

Her focus shifts to her brother. “I want him to know he's not alone.”

“He won't be.” Tris grips her frail shoulder. “I'm taking the night shift tonight.”

Tears fill her eyes. “Thank you. I'm so glad he has all of you.”

Owen and Haut have both taken shifts to sit with Ros, too, which surprised me when I learned of it. They hadn't been thrilled when Ros first joined us, but somewhere along the way, they accepted him as part of our family.

I hug Delilah, and squeeze Ros's limp hand, sending healing vibes through our bond, before Tris and I leave the room.

When we walk out of the clinic, the sheriff's SUV idles at the curb, Haut



leaning against it.

“Behave for the grumpy ex-Alpha.” Tris kisses the top of my head. “I’ll be home in time for breakfast.”

Haut strides forward to take me from Tris, practically carrying me around to the passenger side, where he stows me like special cargo. As he shuts me in the SUV and hurries around the front, I spot the to-go bag from Nesse’s Diner in the back, and I twist around to grab it.

He climbs behind the wheel and sighs when he sees me peeking into the bag. “Wait until we get back to the house.”

“Did you get me fries and pie?” I eagerly open the top container and stare in confusion at the contents inside. “What is this?”

He pulls away from the curb and drives us toward home. “Poached chicken breast and white rice.”

“But...” I look up at him. “*Why?*”

Haut glances at me from the corner of his eye. “Dr. Lopez said to ease you back into regular food.”

“Did she also tell you to *torture* me?” I search the cup holders. “Did you at least get me a milkshake?”

“No dairy,” he grunts.

I shut the to-go box and drop the bag to the floor at my feet. “I want to return to the clinic. At least they gave me Jello.”

Without taking his eyes off the road, Haut reaches behind my seat to grab a second bag and plop it into my lap.

I peer inside to find a dozen Jello cups, all strawberry. “I suppose this is a start. Are you going to spoon-feed me again?”

His hands tighten on the steering wheel. “Once I get you settled, I need to join Owen.”

I gape at him. “You’re ditching me on the day I get to come home?”

The muscle in his jaw clenches. “This is why I told Tris you should stay at the clinic until he came home tomorrow. But he said you’d be mad if you found out you could have left earlier.”

“Damn right, I’d be angry!” I reach out to touch his tense arm. “What’s going on?”

“We caught a scent trail near the road. Abony is with Owen, trying to figure out which way it leads.” He catches my hand. “We’ll catch him this time.”

I shiver. “Maybe I *should* have stayed at the clinic.”

“Jesse’s at the house waiting, and Barron will be there soon,” he assures me. “They’re planning blankets on the couch and a movie night.”

“That sounds way better than puzzles at the clinic.” And if Jesse’s there, I can convince him to make us pie.

“That’s what Tris said.” He lifts my hand to his lips. “Arden will be on patrol, too. You’ll have more guards than you did at the clinic, and Aspen and Mel warded the house, so no one who isn’t pre-approved can get inside.”

“Wow, you guys have been busy.” Happiness fills me as the big house comes into view, followed by relief. I had worried, after my attack, that I’d be scared to return home. “Did they ward all the coven members’ houses and get Mazes of Misdirection made?”

“Yeah, and they warded the clinic and the shops on Main Street, too.” Haut pulls up next to the front steps. “But the clinic wasn’t as secure. They couldn’t limit who entered, only ill intent.”

“Well, Mrs. Smith got back in, so they failed.” I unbuckle and reach for the door handle, then when Haut growls in warning, I release it without opening the door.

With a huff, I settle back in my seat to wait like a good invalid while he hurries around to my side.

Haut yells toward the house before he opens the car door. He reaches inside to scoop me out, then dips me backward. “Grab your food.”

“Can’t I just leave it in the car?” When that earns me another growl, I grab the bland takeout and my Jello bag.

Haut straightens and carries me up the steps, where the front door opens, and Jesse steps out to hold the screen door.

The courtesy earns him a grunt, and Haut sets me safely inside. He turns me to face him and cups my cheeks, tipping my head back.

My pulse quickens, and my eyes close as I pucker up.

“Don’t step a single foot outside the house,” he growls.

I crack open one eye. “No kiss goodbye?”

His lips crush mine, making up for leaving me hanging. Then he steps back, points at me, points outside, and shakes his finger.

“Yeah, okay, I got it.” I shove him out the door. “Go be manly and hunt bad guys while Jesse and I super enjoy this dinner.”

“Bland food only,” Haut warns as he backs down the stairs.

“Rowe’s House has no rules!” I slam the door and thrust the bags at Jesse. “Make this edible before Barron arrives.”

Chuckling, Jesse heads for the kitchen. “Let’s see what we’re working with.”

I follow and perch on the edge of a kitchen chair while Jesse whips up a teriyaki glaze to make my dinner more palatable. It’s not French fries or pie, but it’s better than what I’ve been eating the last couple of days.

The food fills me up far faster than expected, and I close the lid with half the rice and chicken still left.

As I place it in the fridge, I catch Jesse looking at the clock, and frown. “What time was Barron supposed to arrive?”

“Five minutes ago.” Jesse finishes putting the dishes away. “I’m sure he’s fine.”

Despite the words, worry fills his voice.

“Call him while I get out blankets for the movie.” I head toward the archway. “You’ll feel better knowing where he is.”

“Yeah, I’ll just be a minute.” Jesse pulls his cell from his pocket. “He probably just got distract—”

The phone tumbles from his hand, clattering to the floor. He lunges for it, stabs at the screen, and the blood drains from his face.

My gut tightens as visions of Barron maimed flood my mind. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

“He had some kind of relapse from the silver poisoning.” Jesse lurches for the door. “I need to go to the clinic.”

At the door, he freezes with his hand on the knob to turn back to me.

“Go.” I wave at him. “I’m safe behind the wards here. Let me know what you find out.”

When he continues to hesitate, I open the door for him and point at his car. “Go now. Your mate needs you.”

Jesse stumbles down the porch steps, making me worry about him driving, but the clinic isn’t that far.

I close and lock the door, then putter around the kitchen, pulling out ingredients for hot chocolate. If I’m babysitter-free, no one can stop me from getting dessert, and I need the comfort of the familiar while I wait for news.

As the microwave beeps, the sound of crunching gravel comes from outside, and my heart lurches. Did Jesse come back? Or is this a new babysitter? Maybe Mel? That would be convenient. We can go over the bonding spell.

But when I peek out the kitchen window, I see the delivery van from the

butcher backing into the driveway.

Is it meat delivery day? I don't even know what day of the week it is.

I head to the door to unlock it. "Hey, Rodney, sorry, I didn't know you were coming."

"Sorry for the late delivery." He jumps out of the cab and walks to the back of the van, opening the doors. "Mr. Evans has been down with hip pain all week, so I'm covering the shop and doing deliveries."

"Sounds stressful." I push open the screen door but, mindful of Haut's warning, I hover on the threshold.

Rodney stretches and rubs his lower back. "I won't lie. It's taking its toll. My body is killing me."

Concerned, I shuffle out onto the porch. "Have you asked to hire more help?"

"Every day for the last two years." He offers me a pained smile. "Mr. Evans thinks things are fine the way they are. And that's usually true, but he's getting on in years. Super healing only does so much."

He steps between the open doors and groans as he reaches into the truck.

Guilt brings me down the stairs. I know Haut said to stay inside, but Rodney's here. Bryant won't attack me with someone else so near.

"Let me help you." Gravel crunches under my socks.

"No, stay inside," he says, pain in his voice.

I quicken my step. "If you hurt your back, the butcher will be closed, and then everyone will be in trouble."

"Wait." A thump sounds against the bed of the van. "Don't..."

Too late, I round the open door and stare in confusion at the empty back of the van, and fear spikes through me. "Rodney, what's going on?"

As I turn toward him, I spot a swollen bite wound on his inner elbow, the remnants of a bandaid on the ground at his feet.

He grunts and stumbles back from me as shadows boil out of his skin, and fire flickers in the eyes that fix on me. "I'm sorry, I can't stop it."

I shake my head, stumbling away, only to come up against the van door.

Bones crunch, and his legs lengthen until he towers over me. He lurches toward me, his motions jerking like a marionette.

Sharp teeth push from his gums as his mouth opens, and he screams, "Run!"

## ALL YOU'VE GOT

**T**he shout jolts me out of my shock, and as Rodney swipes at me, I dodge to the side, falling to the gravel driveway.

Sharp claws screech against the van door, making my heart jackrabbit with panic.

Rocks dig into my palms as I scramble toward the porch stairs, my terrified gaze fixed on the open door. Haut said the house was warded. Rodney won't be able to get to me inside, and then we can figure out what's going on with him.

It's not the full moon, so he shouldn't be able to change right now. Something else is controlling him.

A metallic shriek comes from behind me, and I duck by instinct.

The door to the delivery truck slices through the stairs, wedging to a stop at the top step to block my way.

In my scramble to avoid running into it, my sock-covered feet shoot out from under me, and I fall to the ground.

A shadowed blur flies over my head, coal-red eyes fixed on me.

Rodney lands amid the broken remains of the stairs and growls.

The hungry sound vibrates through my body, and my heart stutters.

"Run."

The guttural word kicks my prey brain into gear, and I scramble to my feet once more, racing toward the garden. If I can make it to the dunes, there's the back entrance to the basement.

Claws scramble onto the porch railing, and black shadows flow alongside me.

Before I reach the gate, Rodney leaps down to block my way.

I spin on my heel, gravel cutting through the thin material of my socks, and race for the driveway.

Shadows flow past me, blocking my way, and I let out a sob, tears blurring my vision.

The command comes again, "Run."

Turning, I turn into the woods, the trees closing around me.

Branches whip across my face, leaving stinging cuts behind. I run blindly, Rodney's presence nipping at my heels, blocking my path when I veer toward town, herding me deeper, away from anyone who can help me.

"Help!" I scream, the trees eating up the word.

Tears flow down my cheeks, blinding me to my surroundings. I stumble into the trunk of a tree, the rough bark scraping my hands.

Then a growl behind me demands I keep running, and my legs carry me deeper, deeper, deeper into the nightmare woods where my mother died, and where I'll soon join her.

Why, all those years ago, didn't I listen to the warning not to go into the woods at night?

And why, now, didn't I listen to Haut and just stay inside the house?

Rain starts to fall, fat drops that mix with my tears. I lose my direction, unsure which way I came from or which way leads back toward home.

My heart flutters frantically, feeling like it's about to give up, to do the werewolf's job and just end me now.

I stumble through a tangle of bushes, my legs and lungs burning, and fall out the other side into a small clearing. A dilapidated cabin sits at the center, the roof caved in and the porch's overhang sagging down so far it nearly blocks the door.

It looks ready to fall in on itself and is likely the only chance I have to survive.

With renewed strength, I run across the clearing, the rain beating down harder without the protection of the trees. I climb over the broken stairs and duck under the roof to reach for the door.

The knob refuses to open under my desperate turn, and I shove my body against it, trying to break it open.

"Come on," I sob, bruising my shoulder against the solid wood. "Please, open."

A blood-thirsty growl comes from behind me, and I shove harder, my desperate pleas drowning out Rodney's approach.

The shadows on the porch deepen as his massive body blocks out the rays of sunlight filtering through the tree branches, and hot breath pants against the top of my head.

“Please,” I beg, falling to my knees.

The knob turns within my grasp, and the door creaks on rusted hinges as it swings inward.

Mud-covered boots fill my vision, and light fingers touch the top of my tangled hair. “Are you finally giving up?”

My head jerks up, my eyes meeting Bryant’s triumphant gaze. “No.”

He kneels in front of me. “It’s okay, Rowe. You put up a good fight. You were just outmatched.”

“How?” I risk a look backward at Rodney, frozen in front of the cabin, then peer around at the sagging porch. “How did you do all this?”

A pleased smile spreads over Bryant’s face, revealing his fangs. “It wasn’t hard. I came in through the barrier while the huntsmen had everyone distracted. I planned to take you then, but you surprised me by being in the thick of the battle. So I bided my time, waiting for an opportunity.”

His focus shifts to the werewolf at my back. “Dear Rodney practically fell into my lap, so I created a bond between us. I knew his werewolf would be useful while I had my fun.”

“You killed Tom Arnold,” I whisper.

“No, Rodney did,” Bryant corrects. “He had the misfortune of stumbling upon our little hideout, but I made sure he stayed dead. Then I put him to good use, stirring up trouble for the townsfolk.”

My stomach tightens. “And Drake?”

“You already have that brat, Ambros, living in your house,” Bryant sneers. “I couldn’t have you getting chummy with *another* vampire. I told Rodney to take care of that other one, too, but he’s made himself too much of a nuisance, and your wolf shifter has eyes on him all the time, so Rodney couldn’t get near him.”

Fear shoots through me at how close Zane came to dying, too.

“Did you hurt Barron?” I demand.

Bryant’s gaze searches my face as if deciding how much he wants to hurt me. “No, Rodney just drew him away, then used the clinic’s phone messaging system when no one was looking to summon his mate. But if the wards hadn’t let him inside the building, we would have gone with Plan B.”

Relief rushes through me, and I fall forward on my hands, my head

bowing. “How did they not find you in this cabin?”

“Magic, of course.” Pride fills his voice. “Your measly coven aren’t the only ones in town with magic, you know. I’ve been feeding on witches for decades now, so I’ve learned a few tricks.”

My hands curl into fists, wood scraping against my palms. “Like using Delilah’s magic to mess with my mind.”

“That was fun, wasn’t it?” He sighs at the memory. “You’re so fun to play with.”

“Screw you,” I whisper, the words drowned by the crash of rain on the broken rooftop.

“Is that the best you’ve got?” He stands and extends his hand toward me. “Come inside now, so we can finish our bond.”

My hands clench, splinters biting into my flesh as I look up at him. “So, what’s your plan from here? Wait until they stop looking for me and then sneak me out of town? Did you stock up on soup? You remember how much I like canned soup, right?”

His eye twitches as he offers me his hand. “I underestimated you that time. But there’s nowhere for you to run now, so get up.”

“I don’t need your help to stand,” I spit.

He drops his hand. “Still stubborn, I see.”

I shift, planting one foot on the worn boards, and Bryant takes a step back to give me room.

With all my strength, I push upward, bringing the board in my hand with me. The end I hold lifts, and the end under Bryant’s foot snaps.

His leg crashes through the rotted floor, and I dive sideways, slipping through the broken porch rails before he can muster the magic to command Rodney to catch me.

Wet leaves and twigs squelch under my feet as I race away from the cabin, the wind burns the cuts on my cheeks and branches rip at my hair. Rain pelts down, flattening my hair and making it hard to run.

With no idea where I am within the woods, I follow the angle of sunlight through the forest, chasing sunbeams and praying that they’ll lead me home.

The crash of pursuit keeps me running long after I can gasp breath into my lungs and my legs grow numb from exertion.

Howls sound off in the distance, coming closer. If I can just hold out long enough, someone will come. Someone will save me.

But then the trees around me vanish, the forest giving way to a sheer drop



off, with nothing but ocean below.

I fall to my knees, skidding in mud toward the edge of the drop off. Eyes closed, I wait for that moment when the ground vanishes beneath me, when I become weightless before the fall.

Better a plummet to my death than whatever Bryant has planned for me.

But the fall never comes, and when I crack my eyelids open, I see the ledge a hand's breadth from my knees.

With a terrified shout, I scramble backward, away from certain death. Maybe I'm not so eager to take that plunge.

The rain pours down harder, blocking out the sun, and lightning crashes so close that it raises my hair before thunder shakes the ledge I sit on.

Energy buzzes around me, as if I can reach out and grasp hold of it.

Bryant steps out of the trees, Rodney a dark shadow behind him.

Bryant shakes water from his hair. "You just keep surprising me, Rowe. But it's time—"

"Stay back!" I grab a slender branch and point it at him. "Don't come near me!"

He throws back his head and laughs. "What are you planning to do with that?"

The branch trembles in my hand.

Bryant snaps his fingers at Rodney. "Bring her to me."

The shadow monster lurches forward as if pulled by a string with no will of his own.

"Please, Rodney," I beg. "I know you're in there. *Fight his control.*"

Rodney stops, his coal-red eyes swing toward Bryant.

The other man snaps his fingers and hisses, "*Bring her.*"

The shadows roil around Rodney's body, and he swings back toward me.

A sob lodges in my throat. "Please, stop. You don't want to do this."

"He doesn't have a choice," Bryant says. "So be a good little girl and don't fight. I'd hate to have him bite you."

"Get away from her!" A flash of tangerine-red darts out of the forest, and Zane tackles the werewolf.

Time slows as the mud slips beneath Rodney's large feet, and the two men sail over the edge of the cliff.

"No!" Bryant shouts, lunging forward.

Around me, the air buzzes with an impending lightning strike, and I raise the branch I hold high over my head.

A brilliant light flashes across the ledge, and a buzz shoots through me so strong that it lifts me from my feet.

My arm swings downward, the branch in my hand now buzzing with magic. A brilliant white light arcs from its tip, slamming into Bryant.

His eyes widen, and his mouth gapes open on a scream as the lightning rips through him, burning away his blood and turning his insides to dust.

For a heartbeat, I take pleasure in knowing that he's finally dead, that the monster who tormented me and so many others will never do so again.

In the next heartbeat, reality strikes as I realize my feet really did leave the ground, and they're not coming back down. Wind cups around me, the stormy sky overhead and nothing but ocean below.

And then I fall.

## CORD AND KNOT

“**A**re you sure you want to do this?” Mel’s eyes twinkle with amusement.

Around the room, the guys groan at her delay.

“Yes,” Zane thrusts his hand out. “The sooner the better.”

“Hey.” I shove his arm. “Be a little less eager to divorce me. I’m a catch.”

“I’ve caught you enough for a lifetime.” He wiggles his fingers at Mel. “Make with the magic and break this bond so I can go back to living in peace.”

A week had passed since Bryant tried to kill me, and Zane had caught me before I plummeted to my doom. He had clung to the side of the cliff with one hand, keeping us both from the crashing waves below, until the guys arrived to pull us up.

Rodney had not been so lucky. His body had washed up on shore the following morning. We buried him in the graveyard behind the sheriff’s station to honor his sacrifice.

Bryant’s body we burned. There would be no third chance for him to return, and our coven danced on the ashes left from his pyre, grinding them into the sand.

Zane had been welcomed into our fold as a hero, but as the days passed, the bond got on both of our nerves.

So after Mel and Aspen helped me perform the spell to break vampires free from their chains to darkness, we returned to our house to break one more chain.

Zane and I now stand in the kitchen, a candle lit on the table and a vampire marriage to do away with.

Mel hovers the slender dagger over Zane's hand. "Last chance to change your mind."

"Just do it already!" Tris yells from the stairs. "I love you, Zane, but you need to go. There's only room for one vampire in this pentagouple!"

Zane's lips twitch. "I'm sure."

"You're no fun," Mel sighs. "You could have given me drama for *weeks*."

"Don't you have enough drama?" Haut drawls from the kitchen doorway. "Or were you *not* making out with Aspen at the bonfire?"

Mel's cheeks turn red. "There was alcohol involved, so it doesn't count."

"Or in the alley next to the pizza parlor." When Mel's glare shoots to Owen, he shrugs. "It's right across from my office."

"And what about in the garden two days ago?" Ros's scratchy voice comes from the living room where he reclines on the couch.

Contrary to Zane's fear, when Ros woke up, he didn't instantly try to kill Zane, but that might be more a lack of strength than desire, and Ros is getting stronger every day.

For now, the couch is Ros's second favorite spot to recline while he continues to heal. His first favorite spot is the covered porch, which is how he caught Mel and Aspen playing tonsil hockey.

"Or in his car in the driveway earlier today." I had been both horrified and delighted to catch them going at it in the front seat. "His fancy sports car needs darker windows if you're going to let him put his hand—"

"Get over here," she hisses, brandishing her blade.

I eye the sharp instrument as I shuffle closer. "Tell me again why we can't use a finger stick? We only need enough to fill a thimble, right?"

She glares at me. "Just shut up and let me cut you two so we can get on to the main event."

Zane and I hold our hands out, and she knicks our ring fingers, which apparently have magical meaning and aren't just for wedding bands.

Blood pools on the tip of my finger, and I position it over the tiny thimble she holds out. It takes longer than expected for it to fill to the brim, and longer still for Mel to drip the contents into the candle's flame one drop at a time as she murmurs the spell to unbind us.

Acrid smoke fills the kitchen, and Owen cracks open the window, letting cool air slip inside, bringing with it the sound of the celebration happening down at the beach.

I look at Zane and grin as the bond between us dims. "Smells like

divorce.”

He grins back. “It’s a pleasure to be out of your head.”

“Shut up.” I narrow my eyes at him. “My head is *delightful*.”

“You tell him, sparky.” Tris bounces into the kitchen.

Haut catches him before he can come in farther. “Let the spell finish before you get too excited and knock the candle over.”

Tris huffs with irritation, but stays put, his gaze fixed on the spitting flame until the last drop burns away.

“It’s done.” Zane sags with relief, and I realize that the tension inside me was from my bond with him when it vanishes.

“You’re a free man.” Mel sets the thimble down and snuffs out the candle. “What are you going to do now?”

“First, I’m going to join the party. I want to see the sunrise.” Zane looks toward the window, where the beginning of dawn lightens the sky. “After that, I’m going to take Drake’s ashes to his family.”

Ros shuffles into the kitchen, his throat still pink with new skin from his recovery. “Will you be back to Hartford Cove?”

Zane shrugs. “I’m not sure.”

“Whatever you decide, you’re always welcome here.” I squeeze Zane’s hand. “I owe you my life, so if you ever need anything, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Thank you.” With a nod to everyone, he heads for the door. “I may see you around, but it won’t be anytime soon.”

His departure leaves a sad weight in the air, and Mel clears her throat to break the silence. “Are we ready for our next spell?”

My heart thumps. “Can we do it in front of the stairs?”

Owen walks over to take my hand. “Anywhere you want it to be.”

Together, we move to the stairs to stand in front of them, with Mel in front of us.

She holds up a handful of colored cords. “Who wants to go first?”

“I will.” Owen steps forward and grasps the other end of the cords. “How does this work again?”

Mel’s expression softens. “Choose your color and knot it around the other strings while thinking of what you intend to bring into this relationship.”

While it’s not quite marriage, Delilah had suggested the cord and knot ceremony as a way to equally honor the bond between my mates and me, and Mel had eagerly agreed to perform the spell.

With a deep breath, Owen selects the black cord and carefully ties it

around the others. “Honor, for both the past, the present, and our future.”

“You didn’t have to say it out loud,” Mel whispers.

“Some things should be given voice.” Owen releases the cord to step back, and Haut takes his place.

Without hesitation, Haut chooses the green cord, and carefully ties it around the others, an inch of space between his and Owen’s knot. “Strength to overcome past hurts and to stand against future trials.”

Warmth spreads through me at his words, and I blink back the sting in my eyes.

Tris leaps off the stairs and grabs the pink cord. “Laughter and healing.”

Ros pats him on the back as they pass, and he claims the red cord. “Protection of home, heart, and soul.”

The stinging in my eyes worsens, and I swallow the lump forming in my throat.

Since we decided to perform the spell to deepen our bond, I’ve struggled to come up with what I can bring to our family.

But as I step forward and lift the blue cord, a single word spills from my lips. “Love.”

I tie the knot an inch below Ros’s but hesitate before releasing it. What if that’s not enough? It’s so broad and ambiguous at the same time.

“It’s good, Rowe,” Mel whispers. “The cord knows what you intend.”

Nodding, I step back and link hands with Haut and Tris, who in turn link hands with Owen and Ros. A knot in the cords of each other’s lives.

Mel lifts the cords, now formed into a single thick rope, and ties the end to the beginning. “I bind your cords as you bind yourselves to each other. Let this cord represent your unity in mind, heart, and soul, in this world and the next. Live true to your promises, and may your ties never be sundered.”

As she weaves the last of the ends together, creating a complete circle, the bonds within me ring with magic.

Haut’s and Tris’s hands squeeze mine in answer, and the love that spreads through me echoes back fourfold.

Blinking away tears, Mel steps forward and holds out the circle. “Who wants to take it.”

I release the hands I hold and leap forward at the same time Tris tries to snatch it, but Ros keeps hold of Tris’s other hand, and his fingers just brush the circlet before he’s pulled back.

Triumphant, I take the thick cord and then stare down at it with

uncertainty. It's too big to be a bracelet and too small to be a necklace.

I look back up at Mel. "What do we do with it?"

She shrugs. "My moms displayed theirs on our mantel."

I cast a dubious stare toward the living room. "Above the *fire*?"

She laughs. "Some put it under the stairs to the house."

"No way." I shake my head. "We just had those fixed."

"Hang it from your bedpost," Tris suggests, waggling his eyebrows.

"My bed doesn't have posts," I remind him.

"There's no rule about what you do with it," Mel says. "Just keep it somewhere safe so the knots can't be cut."

My hand tightens on the circle. "Got it."

Haut claps his hands together. "Now that we're married, the next natural step is—"

"Babies!" Tris thrusts his arms in the air. "Let's get started!"

"Not happening." And having just gone in for my check-up, where Dr. Lopez confirmed my IUD is still in place, it's not happening any time soon. "Next option."

"Let's grab the pie from the fridge and watch the sunrise on the back porch," Ros suggests.

I stare at him in awe. "I knew there was a reason you're my favorite."

"Hey!" Tris straightens with alarm. "Aren't *I* your favorite?"

"He who offers pie is always the favorite." Ros uses their linked hands to pull Tris toward the kitchen. "But he who has the forks probably comes in second."

Owen steps toward Mel, his hand outstretched. "Thank you."

"Hey, this is my first time performing one of these bonding ceremonies, so it was fun." Mel shakes his hand before grabbing her coat from the coat rack near the door. "I'm going to head down to the beach to watch the sunrise."

"With *Aspen*?" Tris yells from the kitchen.

Red creeps into her cheeks. "Shut up! You know nothing!"

Kissing noises come back in answer, and Mel stomps out of the house.

Haut touches my back and gestures toward the hall that leads to the covered porch. "Shall we?"

The cords weigh heavy in my hand. "Give me a second, and then I'll join you."

He frowns. "Where are you going?"

“Upstairs, you worrywart.” I look at Owen. “Will you please keep him down here so I can pee in peace?”

“You can pee in the hall bathroom,” Haut grumbles as I run up the stairs.

At the landing, I stomp toward the bathroom and turn on the faucet before I tip-toe into Owen’s room.

I drop onto my stomach to crawl beneath the bed and wiggle up the loose floorboard. From the dark depths, I lift out my special bucket of secret things and open the lid.

Inside, the bat-shaped stone that represents Ros’s dad’s power rests on one side, with a new, rectangular stone on the other. The symbol engraved onto the front looks like the sign for female, only with horns. I had to look it up to discover it’s the alchemy symbol that represents Spirit.

I had found it on the beach under Bryant’s pyre once it burned to the ground and slipped it into my pocket before the others saw it.

Now, I have two stones of power, one for transformation and another for the soul.

I didn’t tell the others about it, not after the fear Ros showed when he gave me the first. Without asking, I know they’re not something I should have, and they might even get me in trouble.

Which is why they’re hidden under Owen’s bed. My dad’s huntsmen equipment hid under here for fifteen years, so it seems like a safe place to stash things I don’t want others to find.

Carefully, I add our knotted cord to the bucket and seal the lid to keep out dust or any curious mice before I drop it back into the hole. As I do, the sleeve of my sweatshirt rises, revealing a black squiggle. It had appeared on my inner wrist the morning after I killed Bryant, and no amount of scrubbing can erase it.

I tug my sleeve down before replacing the floorboard and crawl back out from under the bed. On tiptoes, I return to the bathroom and flush the toilet before turning off the faucet.

Then I grasp the thick handrail and slide down it, where Haut catches me at the bottom.

His moss-green eyes meet mine. “Everything settled?”

Suspicious, I stare up at him. Does he know about my secret hiding place?

He arches his brows in question.

Naw, I’m far too sneaky for him to have caught on.



I take his hand. “Everything’s great.”

We walk to the screened-in porch where the others wait with blankets against the early morning chill and pies for our stomachs.

Huddled together for warmth, we watch the celebration on the beach as the sun rises.

The End...For Now



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

L.L. Frost lives in the Pacific Northwest and graduated from college with a Bachelor's in English. She is an avid reader of all things paranormal and can frequently be caught curled up in her favorite chair with a nice cup of coffee, a blanket, and her Kindle.

When not reading or writing, she can be found trying to lure the affection of her grumpy cat, who is very good at being just out of reach for snuggle time.

To stay up to date on what L.L. Frost is up to, check out her website: [www.llfrost.com](http://www.llfrost.com), join her [newsletter](#), or follow her on social media.

