

THE WAR BETWEEN WOLF AND

HUNTSMAN BEGINS AGAIN



A

WELL

FULL

A FEUD TO BURY

OF

WITCHES

L.L. FROST



A WELL FULL OF WITCHES

A FEUD TO BURY PART 4

HARFORD COVE

BOOK EIGHTEEN



L. L. FROST



A WELL FULL OF WITCHES

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ALL STOCKED UP



*A*t the next largest city over from Hartford Cove, we pull off the highway to gear up.

Owen, Tris, and I split off to the hardware store while Haut, Barron, Jesse, and Abony headed to a superstore that sells clothing, housing items, and groceries.

They don't know it, but we're in a race, and I'm pretty sure we're going to win.

Tris, Owen, and I dash through the store, raiding the shelves for anything that looks helpful for an excavation.

By the time we call it good, we have rolled up ladders, ropes, shovels, flashlights, tarps, shears, and several other items that might come in handy.

The cashier looks us up and down as we keep pulling items from the cart. Her expression is a mix of confusion and suspicion as she tries to decide if we're out to kidnap someone, bury a few dead bodies, or go spelunking.

She stays quiet as she bags our purchases, her eyes flicking back and forth between the items and our faces every so often.

I glance up at Owen. "Do you think we got everything we need?"

"No idea." He shakes his head. "This is my first time doing this, too."

I turned to Tris. "Should we get duct tape?"

His brow furrows as he studies the pile. “I mean, it never hurts to have duct tape, right?”

When I turn my attention to the cashier, she silently points to a display case right next to her register that features duct tape in a wide variety of colors and designs.

I grab the pink glitter one because these poor, buried witches will need a spot of brightness in their lives once we dig them up.

“Okay, I think that’s—” I cut off as I realize I’m missing a very important item. “Wait, what aisle are your buckets on?”

“Aisle five,” she says hesitantly.

“Okay, start ringing this stuff up.” I turn and scan the aisles for the right one before I hurry away from the counter. “I’ll be right back!”

“Rowe,” Owen calls after me. “What do you need a bucket for?”

“I need something to talk into!” I duck down the aisle and come to a dead stop.

Holy bucket galore. Who knew there was such a wide variety?

Big buckets, tiny buckets, semi-opaque buckets, white buckets, orange buckets... I’m in bucket heaven. The options nearly overwhelm me before I remind myself I don’t care about buckets.

I find the smallest one available that will hold a decent amount of water and rush back to the cash register and add it to our pile.

When Owen and Tris both look at me in question, I widen my eyes at them. “You would not *believe* how many options I had to choose from. But this one will work. I absolutely do *not* need to start a bucket collection.”

“Sure, protest a little more, and someone might believe you,” Tris teases.

“We don’t have space for a bucket collection,” Owen adds.

“Who wants a bucket collection?” I demand. “Not me or my giant, empty attic.”

Tris looks at Owen over the top of my head. “You better notify whoever runs our hardware store that Rowe’s not allowed to buy any buckets, no matter what she says to the contrary.”

“We can put Haut on patrol,” Owen says. “He’ll search Rowe and confiscate any unapproved buckets.”

If I didn’t plan to collect buckets before, I certainly do now. And Haut will help because he wants to make me happy. It will be a bucket extravaganza the likes of which the world has never seen.

“Oh, no.” Tris pokes my cheek. “Stop your plotting right now.”

“Never.” As Owen loads full bags back into our cart, I dance on my toes next to the credit card machine, my piece of plastic at the ready.

When the total appears on the screen, I try not to flinch and swipe my card with what I hope is a calm expression. While I know I’m filthy rich, the past me who was poor still can’t wrap my head around that fact.

As soon as we have everything, we head out to the parking lot and load up the back of the SUV.

“We should probably head over to the superstore.” Tris closes the trunk. “I think I saw her reaching for the phone.”

I pat the side of the SUV, where the word *Deputy* is displayed in enormous lettering. “It’s okay. We’re part of the law.”

“No,” Tris corrects. “Haut is part of the law, and he’s not with us. If the cops show up, we have no way to prove that we’re allowed to be driving this vehicle.” Alarm fills his eyes, and he turns to Owen. “Is Hartford Cove even registered with the state?”

“We are, but we still try to avoid interacting with outsiders.” Owen cast a worried glance toward the road.

“Something less flashy would’ve been better to be driving around out here.”

“As soon as we get back home, we need to buy new cars for everybody.” I open the front passenger door and scramble inside. “Just nothing brown. Not even if Ros begs for it.”

Tris slides into the back seat. “I’m not driving around a poop-colored car.”

I twist to grin at him over the seat. “That’s what I said!”

He grins back at me and reaches out to tweak the tip of my nose, sending blue sparkles into the air. “Of course you did. Because you have good taste.”

Owen settles behind the wheel and starts the engine. “Brown’s not a bad color.”

“Mutiny, Owen Hartford?” I demand.

He lifts a black eyebrow at me in challenge. “Chocolate is brown. You like chocolate. Bacon is also brown.”

“Your logic will not sway me.” I flop back into my seat and buckle up. “I can’t believe you’re taking Ros’s side on this.”

“The horror,” he says dryly as he backs up and then turns around to drive out of the parking lot.

Tris reaches out to tickle the back of my neck. “We’ll do all the car shopping. Haut might get a say depending on where his opinion on brown lies.”

I reach back to wiggle my fingers against his. “Deal.”

Owen drives the short distance down the road and pulls into the large parking lot for the superstore, driving up and down the lanes until he spots Barron’s and Jesse’s vehicles. He pulls into an open spot a couple of spaces down from them.

It looks like they haven’t made it back out of the store, which means we won the stocking-up game.

“There they are.” Tris points toward the front of the store, where the others are just coming out.

They wheel three shopping carts, bags piled so high they threaten to spill over the sides. Looks like they went a little crazy, but like us, they don't know what we'll find.

Owen toots his horn before rolling down his window and waving to let them know we're here.

Haut waves back, grabs a bag from the cart Abony pushes, and jogs over to us.

He holds out the bag to Owen. "I got you beef jerky. It should help with your hunger."

Eyes wide with surprise, Owen takes the bag and peers inside. "Thank you."

Tris unbuckles his seatbelt to lean between our seats. "Hey, where are our snacks?"

"I don't trust you with food in the deputy car," Haut tells him before he looks at me. "There's a little something in the bag for you, too."

Warmth fills me. "Aww. That's sweet."

"Seriously?" Tris demands.

Haut ignores him. "I'm going to ride with Jesse so there are two to a car. We'll follow you."

Turning on his heel, Haut jogs back to the others to finish unloading the bags.

"I don't think we're ever going to get along," Tris mutters.

Owen pulls a vacuum-sealed bag of jerky out and offers it to Tris. "I'll share."

Tris takes it and pats him on the arm. "And this is why we will have a long and beautiful friendship."

Owen digs around in the bag some more before pulling out a chocolate bar. "This must be for you, Rowe."

Interested, I take it from him and read the label. Bacon chocolate. I'm both horrified and intrigued.

"Such a lovely, brown dessert," Owen teases.

“Dessert? Or breakfast?” I tear off the paper and take a bite. “Salty. But also sweet. Kind of gross, but also good.”

“I want someone to woo me with food,” Tris mutters as he rips open the bag of jerky, filling the car with the scent of artificial teriyaki.

“What were all those doggy biscuits I bought you?” I demand around my dubious treat. “I totally wooed you with food.”

Owen peers at Tris through the rearview mirror. “Doggy biscuits?”

“Don’t knock it until you try it.” Tris rips off a hunk of dehydrated meat and talks around his mouthful. “They’re great for the teeth and the hair. They don’t taste too bad, either.” He pulls another piece of meat out and holds it over the seat. “Trade”

I pass him the meaty chocolate and take the sweet strip of meat.

Gnawing on the tough jerky, I watch Haut collect the empty carts and walk them over to the cart return. “It looks like we’re about ready.”

Owen rolls his window up and sets the grocery bag between us. Pulling out his phone, he fiddles with it before handing it to me. “Okay, Navigator, your time has come.”

I stare down at the small device. “What about my map?”

“I put the coordinates into my GPS,” he explains. “It’s a lot easier to use for navigation, and it will warn us of any traffic issues.”

“Fine.” I pull my feet up onto the seat and scoot down. “But we’re bringing out the map once we’re on foot.”

He gives a noncommittal hum as he backs out of the parking spot, then waits for Barron and Jesse to line up behind us before we caravan back out to the road.

So far, our *Save the Witches* mission is going smoothly, but this is the easiest part. Actually finding them will be the real issue.

I hoped Delilah would reach out to me again as soon as we left the barrier around Hartford Cove. But, so far, it's been radio silence in my head. She couldn't quit talking for an entire month, but now that I need her to whisper in my ear, it's crickets.

Which is where my bucket comes in.

Once we're closer, I'll try to contact her by yelling into some water. I just hope that my memory of the summons and my skills with a ruler get us near enough to find her and the others before it's too late.

INTO THE WOODS



The sun is crossing into early evening when the GPS tells us to turn onto a dirt road that leads into the woods.

My gut tightens with trepidation as the trees close in around us. I don't need to see the location markers on my paper map to know we're near the cabin. It was the nearest place to where all the lines intersected. Of course, the road to the cabin would be the most direct route to our destination.

I scoot down lower in my seat until I can't see out the window.

Owen glances over at me. "Are you okay?"

"Yep." I wiggle the phone at him. "Just super excited to ditch the tech and go old school with my map."

"Do you even know how to navigate with a real map?" He glances into the rearview mirror. "Tris, you want to bet on how fast she's asking for the GPS to come back out?"

Tris doesn't answer.

"Hey, what's wrong with you two?" Owen demands. "You were all excited about this adventure. Don't tell me you've already lost interest now that we've come this far."

"No, it's not that." Tris's arms come around the seat, and he covers my ears, though I can still make out his words. "I recognize this place from the time when I was unconscious, and I was getting flashes of what was happening to Rowe."

Owen's hands tighten on the wheel. "Should I turn around and search for a different road into the woods?"

I reach up and pull Tris's hands down. "No, I'm fine. Keep going."

"Are you sure?" Worry fills Owen's voice. "I'm sure there's another way."

I flick my finger over the map on the phone screen, following the highway up farther, and shake my head. "This is the best road for us to get close before we have to go on foot."

His expression turns grim as he continues forward, his eyes flicking to the rearview mirror every so often.

After several minutes of silent driving, the trees melt away to reveal a small log cabin with an outhouse off to the side. Acid roils in my stomach at the sight of it, and memory floods back of the time I spent here, tied to the small table within, released only for brief visits to that outhouse, where Bryant had to help me on and off the wooden seat.

The small bites of jerky and chocolate I ate on the way here threaten to crawl up my throat. I swallow convulsively, determined not to allow Bryant to have any sway over me.

Owen's gaze sweeps the woods around the cabin before he slows to a stop. "I don't see any more roads. We have to get out here."

Bracing myself, I reach for the door handle. I can do this. Bryant isn't here, and I'm a free woman.

"Wait, Rowe." Tris climbs out of the back. He comes to my door and opens it, using his body to block the cabin from view. He reaches up to cup my cheeks, directing my attention to him. "Just keep your focus on me, okay? Nothing here can hurt you."

I draw in a deep breath and keep my eyes on him as I slide out. The expected smell of death never comes. Instead, the earthy scent of tree sap and dirt fills my nose. If I didn't know there was a torture cabin right behind Tris, I would think these woods were perfectly normal.

The other cars pull up behind us, and everyone climbs out.

I know the moment they realize something's wrong when their heads all swing toward the cabin.

Abony lifts a hand to cover her nose. "What's that smell?"

"Blood," Jesse says.

"Rowe," Barron says at the same time.

Haut stays silent as he strides over to join Owen at the back of the SUV. He carries several backpacks, and the two men load them up with what we can reasonably carry.

Tris and I walk over to them, and I focus on loading a bag with flashlights, rope, a shovel, and an emergency kit.

"Can—" My voice cracks, and I clear my throat. "Is there a way to pick out Bryant's scent? Maybe we can find a trail in the woods. He left several times. He said he was preparing to take me to the facility."

Abony looks at the cabin in horror before she pulls back her shoulders and strides toward it. Owen hesitates before he follows, with Barron and Jesse close behind.

Tris glares at Haut. "You're not going, too?"

"I remember what it smells like." His eyes flick to me, filled with apology and guilt. "I arrived here after Rowe was already gone. The place has been torn apart."

"It should have been burned to the ground," Tris growls.

"I agree." Haut adds a handful of protein bars and a couple bottles of water to my bag. "If it were up to me, I would have torn the place down and turned it to ash."

"That amount of smoke would draw too much attention." I reach out to touch his arm, and his muscles are like rocks beneath my hand. "It's not your fault you weren't the one who saved me."

"No, just my fault you were in the position to be taken." He catches my hand and squeezes it. "But the same won't happen today. We'll find these witches of yours and save them."

The warmth from his body flows up my arm and spreads through me, settling the tight feeling in my chest. Without a doubt, I know that if Haut had reached me in time, he would have torn Bryant apart or died trying.

The others come back out of the cabin, their faces pale but set with determination. Abony and Barron stop next to the van and strip off their clothes, tossing them inside before taking on their wolf forms. Barron's black wolf is sleek and powerful looking, while Abony's is lower to the ground with longer fur. They sniff and rub against each other before trotting over.

Barron rubs up against Jesse as he joins us and takes one of the heavier backpacks, shrugging it on. "There were a lot of scents to search through, but the giant puddle of blood made it easy to figure out which one we were after." He reaches out to squeeze my shoulder. "Good job stabbing that asshole. It gives us a better chance at finding where he's been."

"I just hope there's a trail to follow." I shrug on my backpack and grab my bucket, attaching it to one of the straps. "It's been a month since he was out here."

"We'll find something." Owen leans in to grab a backpack and slip it on. "Abony and Barron are the best trackers we have."

Haut tosses a bag to Tris, then grabs the other heavy one. It has long poles attached to the side, and a roll of tarp tied to the top. It looks cumbersome, but he shoulders it with ease as he reaches up to grab the back door and pull it down.

The sun is closer to the horizon as we set off into the woods, but the light that filtered through the trees still offers a clear view of our surroundings. Barron and Abony pace back and forth in front of us, their noses to the ground.

Almost instantly, Abony lifts her head and lets out a bark before setting off into the trees.

We hurry after her, Owen taking the lead. His tall frame and long legs make it easy for him to maneuver the terrain. I follow, my short legs taking two steps for every one of his, but I keep up.

We jog along for a few minutes before Abony lets out another bark, this one sounding alarmed.

We break through the brush to find her hovering at the top of a large hole in the ground. She paws at the edges and whines.

When I start forward, Haut catches my arm and pulls me back. “It’s one of the graves.”

“Graves?” Owen demands.

“There are a dozen or more out here.” Haut pulls me against his side. “Other witches that Bryant buried. Ros’s people dug them up and took them away when they took Rowe.”

Anger twists Tris’s face. “He must have been visiting them regularly for his scent to be so strong here.”

“If the woods were already searched that thoroughly, then wouldn’t they have found the other witches, too?” Jesse turns to me, uncertainty in his eyes. “Are you sure they’re still alive?”

“They’re out here,” I say firmly. “At least one witch is still alive.”

Haut’s arm around me tightens. “This witch is powerful enough to summon Rowe out of our house. I smelled her magic. She’s real.”

Grateful that he backed me up, I lean against him. It’s nice that at least someone believes I didn’t make all this up.

“Let me see your map, Rowe.” Owen takes the paper map from me and unfolds it, then peers up at the sky. “We should search farther west, outside of the range of where Ros’s team searched.”

Barron and Abony put their noses back to the ground, and we head deeper into the forest.

Over the next two hours, we stumble on several more empty graves and even a few that Ros’s people missed. We mark those places on the map and continue on. Our mission isn’t to dig up the dead but to find the living.

After another false lead, we stop to rest.

Water bottles and protein bars come out, and we sit on fallen logs or on the ground. My feet ache, reminding me I'm not used to this much walking, and I worry that the light is fading. Jesse's bag has a tent strapped to it, but I really don't want to be out here in the woods once night falls. We're still far too close to the torture cabin for comfort.

"Maybe you should try yelling into your bucket now?" Owen suggests.

Jesse turns to stare at him like he's crazy, while Haut just takes it in stride. Nothing new in the adventures of Rowe.

Tris scoots over to press up against me. "Yeah, show us why we'll soon have a hoard of buckets in the house."

With everyone's eyes on me, self-consciousness floods through me, but I unclip the bucket and set it in the hollow of my crossed legs.

Tris passes me a full water bottle, and I pour it into the bucket. I'm not sure how full it needs to be to get a good range to make my call. Hopefully, it just needs to cover the bottom.

I hunch over it and close my eyes, focusing on my breathing the way Ros showed me, but the sounds of the wildlife around us make me twitchy, breaking my concentration.

I glance up at Jesse. "How do you make your apple pie?"

His brow furrows. "Why? You want to steal the prize at the next bake-off?"

I roll my eyes at him. "Just tell me in excruciating detail."

"Fine, but you're all my witnesses that she's a thief if she starts making my famous pie." He reaches down to rub the top of Barron's head between his ears as he begins talking, and boy is he detailed.

I drop my eyes back to the water, letting the boring story of apple peeling carry me away.

The water ripples, and I shove down the spark of excitement, keeping my breaths slow and even, my thoughts focused on Jesse's voice.

Rowe. Delilah's voice sweeps past me, light as a feather and gone before I can catch it.

I bend closer to the water. "We're here, Delilah. We just need a direction."

Jesse's voice falters for a moment before he continues his description.

The ripples in the water come again, harder this time.

"Come on, Delilah," I whisper. "Tell me where you are."

The ripples turn to tiny waves, and the bucket wobbles on my lap before tipping over, spilling water onto the ground.

Tris wraps an arm around me. "It's okay, we'll keep going..."

He trails off as the water on the ground pulls together into a dirty puddle that continues to ripple.

Everyone holds their breath, all eyes fixed on the puddle as it slowly flows uphill in a straight line.

I lift an arm to point the way it leads. "That way. We need to go that way."

METAL MUSHROOMS



The water moves slow and steady up the hill. We follow at a snail's pace, the light in the sky slowly slipping away.

My entire body feels itchy, like ants running over my skin, filling me with anxiety. I want to move fast now that we have a direction, but we can't race ahead and risk missing a change in the path the water flows.

A few times, it stops completely, making me want to scream with frustration. But it also worries me. I haven't heard a single whisper of Delilah, and that only adds to my anxiety. What if it took us too long to come find her? Is the slow progress of the water an indicator of her life slipping away? What if I told Ros his sister is alive only to have her die and force him to grieve all over again?

A large hand settles on my shoulder, and the feeling of ants vanishes.

Surprised, I peer up at Haut.

He rubs my tense muscles. "We'll find them. Everything will be okay."

He's the last person I should take reassurance from, and yet his words wrap around me like a hug. Haut's a man used to being in control. He's a *doer*. If he says we'll find them, then I believe we will.

Barron and Abony crisscross in front of us, carefully stepping over the trail of water. They keep their noses to the ground, trying to find a scent that doesn't belong in the woods.

The next time the water pauses, we stop, and Owen and Tris take out the lanterns. While the sun hasn't set yet, beneath the canopy of the trees, the deepening shadows make it increasingly difficult to see.

I reach into my pocket, fingers curling around my flashlight, but I resist the urge to pull it out. We need to conserve our resources as much as possible. Who knows how long we'll be out in the woods?

The minutes tick by, and we stay frozen so long that the wildlife returns, rustles and bird noises filling the air.

"Why isn't it moving?" Tris whispers into the silence. "It's never stayed still this long."

I crouch next to the quivering puddle of water. "Come on, Delilah. You can do it. Keep going."

The surface ripples, and a tendril pokes out of the side, lengthening into a tiny stream that continues the way we've been walking for a while now. Another ripple moves the water, the puddle narrowing into an oval. Then, all at once, the tension that held it together pops, and the water rushes outward, sinking into the ground.

"Quick, I need more water." I grab the bucket from my bag and sit on the ground.

Jesse crouches next to me and hands me a water bottle.

I take it and dump the contents into the bucket before bending over it. "Delilah, can you hear me?"

It feels like the entire forest holds its breath as I wait for a response that never comes.

"Do you need me to tell you about pie baking again?" Jesse offers.

I lick my lips and nod. "Yeah, let's try that."

I take several deep breaths, trying to calm my racing heart and focus inward.

Meditation needs to be my friend right now. I am Zen, and this bucket of water better start talking.

After several minutes, my pulse slows, Jesse's steady drone carrying me deeper within myself until I find a part of me that feels like blue sparkles. I poke it, urging it to *do* something, but the water in the bucket remains still.

A body settles behind me, familiar arms wrapping around my waist, and Tris's presence surrounds me. The blue sparkles brighten, the witchy part of me merging with the witchy part of him.

For the first time since learning I could do magic, it actually feels real. But it's not enough, not even with Tris backing me up.

I lost my connection to Delilah.

My eyes sting, and a hard lump fills my throat, trying to choke me. The tears overflow, dripping down my nose and into the still bucket, creating the ripples in the water that I so wanted to see. But they're not magic. They're ripples of failure.

I failed Delilah, and I failed Ros.

My hand shakes as I reach up to cover Jesse's mouth, halting the flow of words. "It's not working. I lost her."

"Then we keep searching without the trail," Haut says. "The water was going in a straight line, right?"

He looks at Owen, who checks the compass app on his phone. "We've been heading northeast the entire time, heading toward the coast."

"So, we just keep walking until we either find them or we hit the ocean," Haut says.

"Hear that?" Tris kisses my shoulder, stands, and holds out a hand. "We keep going."

Dumping out the bucket, take Tris's hand and let him pull me to my feet, then scrub the tears from my eyes. "You're right. Giving up isn't an option."

Jesse straightens, and we continue on, Owen taking the lead with his compass, Barron and Abony searching for a trail.

We walk for another thirty minutes before Abony lets out an excited bark. Barron races over to her. The two wolves snuffle the ground, then Barron lets out an excited bark of his own.

The rest of us rush over to see what they found.

A silver piece of metal sticks up from the ground, out of place out here in the middle of nowhere. It looks like a weird mushroom made of metal, with a rounded top overhanging a piece of pipe.

Abony shimmers, and a moment later she kneels naked on the ground. “It’s a vent. My uncle put these in when he built his underground bunker. There should be more around here, which means we’re close.”

Barron stretches out his neck and licks her face quickly before he put his nose back to the ground, snuffling around in a circle that spirals outward.

Abony shimmers back into her wolf form to join him, while the rest of us split off into two groups, each with a lantern as we search for more hidden vents.

The lantern in Tris’s hand catches on something metal, and I point. “There!”

Haut, Tris, and I run over to it, discovering another vent just like the first.

“We have one over here, too!” Jesse shouts.

Barron barks loudly from deeper in the woods, halfway between where my group and Jesse’s group stand.

I take in everyone’s locations, a pattern forming in my mind. “It’s a square! Which means somewhere in the middle there has to be a door.”

Tris raises the lantern higher, swinging it slowly from one side to the other. “All I see is dirt and bushes.”

“No, it’s here.” I fall to the forest floor and start digging next to the pipe.

After a moment, Haut drops his backpack to the ground and strips before he shimmers into his gray wolf form. He nudges me aside to take over, his blunt claws ripping through dirt and roots faster than I ever could.

Barron and Abony race over to join him, the three wolves digging deeper and deeper into the ground, uncovering the pipe.

At first, it looks like it goes straight down, but as they uncover more, it becomes obvious that the pipe is at a slight angle.

I leave them and crawl along the ground in the direction the pipe slopes toward, pushing dirt aside as I go.

Owen joins me, his lantern shining the way.

“He wouldn’t bury it that deeply,” I mutter.

“Not if he came out here often.” Owen pulls the shovel free from his bag. “Rowe, move out of the way.”

I scramble backward, and he stabs the shovel into the ground, burying the spade deep. With a shake of his head, he pulls it out and paces forward before repeating the action, stabbing at the ground.

Understanding what he’s doing, I grab the smaller shovel from my bag and crawl in the opposite direction, stabbing at the ground. Bryant wouldn’t have made finding the door easy. He would have buried it far enough down that no one would casually stumble across it. But he wouldn’t have buried it so deep that he couldn’t easily access his stash of witches when he needed a fix.

My smaller shovel hits something hard, and my heart leaps. But when I dig deeper, I find a rock and continue on.

Barron leaves the others to race across the clearing to one of the other vents, and he digs over there. Jesse shrugs out of his backpack and strips to take on his furry form and joins him. The two wolves dig at a furious pace.

They don’t dig as deeply as they did on the other vent before Barron races across the clearing and sits down off to

my left. Jesse races back to where Haut and Abony still dig at their pipe, then races across the clearing, stopping when his path crosses Barrons.

I grin and crawl toward them, my shovel clutched in my hand. “Clever, clever men.”

I shoulder Jesse aside and stab the ground. The tip of my shovel hits something hard, but it doesn’t have the same ring as when I hit the rock.

When I dig at the ground, Jesse joins me, his massive paws sweeping dirt away in great scoops, revealing a piece of wood buried in the ground.

“We found something!” I back outward and stab at the ground until I find a spot where my shovel sinks all the way in once more.

I start digging again, and Owen joins me, his larger shovel, cutting through the earth easier. I crawl away from him, stabbing at the ground to find the outside of the piece of wood, and wolves join me, ripping at the ground. Tris stands over it all, holding the lantern high to reveal the large slab of wood as we dig it up.

When the entire piece of wood is uncovered, I could easily lay across it and not have any part of my body hang off, which makes it at least five feet wide.

Haut and Jesse change back to their human forms, and Tris sets the lantern on the ground to join them. The three men dig their fingers under the wood and heave upward, lifting it out of the way.

As the wood lifts, the light from the lantern reveals a deep cavernous hole beneath.

“Be careful!” I shout.

Jesse stumbles at the edge, nearly falling in, and drops his end of the board.

Tris and Haut fumble to balance it out and shuffle it off to the side, dropping it with a heavy thunk.

Owen grabs the lantern, swinging it over the dark cavern to illuminate gray stones that form a tunnel going down into the earth. A stagnant smell drifts up, like damp earth and water.

“I think it’s an old well.” Owen leans over to shine the light farther inside. “I don’t see a way down, but I think there’s something at the bottom.”

Getting down onto my stomach, I inch forward to the edge and peer into the well. The bottom looks murky and reflects the lantern’s light, but a darker shadow recessed into one side of the stone wall could be a door.

I push up onto my hands and knees. “Who has the ladder?”

“It’s in my bag,” Jesse turns and runs over to his abandoned gear and dresses quickly.

When he returns, he carries the large, rolled-up ladder, which is little more than flat metal steps strapped together by rope.

He kneels at the edge of the well and drives spikes into the ground past the edge of stone before pushing the large bundle over the edge.

It clatters and clunks as it unwinds, the sound echoing within the depths. When it stops, it doesn’t quite reach the bottom, but the lowest rung is close enough that dropping the rest of the way will be safe. Climbing back up will be difficult, though. Especially if the women trapped inside are too weak to climb.

That’s a bridge we’ll cross when we get there. Or a ladder we’ll climb. Is there a ladder analogy that works here? It doesn’t matter. We’ll figure it out.

I hurry over to the ladder, but Haut catches me by the scruff of the neck. “Oh no, you don’t, bad puppy. You’re not going down into the hole first.”

“But—”

His finger on my lips stops me. “I’ll go down. If it’s safe, you can follow.” He looks over my shoulder. “Make sure she stays put.”

“Will do.” Tris’s hands land on my shoulders, locking me in place.

Haut leaves just long enough to pull his pants back on, which is a good thing, because his naked form would likely give the poor, trapped witches a heart attack. With his necessary bits covered, he crouches next to the well and swings his leg over before sliding inside.

Owen hangs the lantern over the side so Haut can see where he’s going, and the metal footboards banging against the side of the well echoes as he descends, followed by a splash when he reaches the bottom.

“The water’s not too deep,” he calls up. “There’s a door above the waterline!”

That’s all I need to know. I wiggle out of Tris’s hold and scramble down the ladder, nearly falling twice when the damn thing swings beneath me.

When I reach the bottom, I twist to peer down and find Haut right beneath me, his arms out. “I’ve got you.”

Trusting that he’ll catch me, I let go of the ladder. Wind rushes past my ears, and for a heartbeat, my stomach jumps into my throat, my pulse spiking. Then Haut’s powerful hands catch my hips, directing me back against his body as he slows my fall.

He pauses with me held against his body, his voice next to my ear. “You were supposed to hang from the bottom, not drop from where you were.”

I turn my head, and his lips brush against my cheek. “You said you had me.”

“So I did.” He lowers me the rest of the way to the ground.

Water sinks into my shoes and up to the middle of my calves before my feet touch a slippery bottom.

I pull the flashlight from my pocket and turn it on, the bright light painting the stone walls. Turning, I shine it on the door. Like Haut said, the threshold is elevated above the waterline, and the door looks like something from a

submarine, with a wheeled handle in the center and metal bolts that drive into the walls on either side of the door.

In the center, engraved into the metal, is a shield with two upside-down triangles on the front and a pair of crossed swords behind it.

The Sunshine Project.

We found it.

A WELL FULL OF WITCHES



“*I*s it a door?” Tris yells from above.

I swing my flashlight upward, catching him right in the eyes. “It’s a door, and it has one of those wheel things on it, like a submarine!”

Owen shifts the lantern he holds. “Should we come down, too?”

“There’s not enough room,” Haut yells back. “We’ll check out the situation and then figure out our next move.”

I turn back to the door and pound a fist against it. “Delilah! It’s me, Rowe! We’re coming in to get you!”

No sound comes from the other side of the door. Only deafening silence.

“They probably can’t hear you.” Haut reaches for the wheel handle on the door. “Step back, just in case someone rushes out.”

I step back toward the ladder, my pulse racing.

Haut grunts as he twists the wheel, then turns it back the other direction. The bars attached to it grind as they pull free from the wall, and the door swings inward a foot.

Dim light drifts out, bringing with it a rancid breeze, and my hand flies up to cover my nose to block out the stench.

Haut casts me a worried look. “Maybe you should wait out here.”

I force my hand back to my side. “No, I’m coming in there with you. Delilah knows me. You’re just a stranger.”

“I smell death, Rowe,” he says gently.

“No shit. I don’t need a wolf shifter’s heightened senses to smell that.” I shoulder past him to shove the door wider. “Delilah? Other witches?”

The door swings all the way open, revealing a tunnel beyond with another door at the end. That must be why no one is answering. This hallway is some kind of safety zone for Bryant. Like the airlock when getting on a plane. Not that I’ve ever been on a plane. But I’ve seen them on TV.

I grip Haut’s arm as I step up onto the raised platform, water squelching inside my shoes. Haut joins me and takes the lead in two easy strides, reaching the next door ahead of me. This one has the symbol for the Sunshine Project engraved on its surface, the same as the first. Unlike the other door, though, this one has a rectangular window at the top, just out of reach.

Haut leans forward to peer through it, and his expression turns stony.

I tug on his arm. “What do you see?”

He shakes his head, his expression unchanging.

I grip his shirt and plant my foot against his leg, ready to climb him like a tree so I can reach the window and see for myself.

Before I get my other foot off the floor, he catches me and sets me back on the ground. “They’re alive. At least, most of them.”

He reaches for the wheel lock, twisting it left and right before pushing the door inward.

The horrible stench strengthens, and my stomach threatens to rebel. I yank my shirt up over my nose, taking shallow breaths through my mouth to mitigate its effects. But I can taste the rot, the cloying smell clinging to my tongue and creeping down my throat.

I swallow convulsively, my eyes watering. Through the tears, I make out the narrow room. It reminds me of Ros's underground dwelling, with curved walls and a ceiling painted like a sky. A whirring noise fills the space, and I spot heavy grates in the ceiling that guard the fans. Bunk beds line the walls on either side, three deep, with an open space at the back where the women huddle together, staring at us with fear.

At first, I don't see the dead that Haut spotted through the window, but then I noticed a handful of the bunks have curtains drawn over them, the sides taped down to contain whatever's inside. With no way to bury their dead, they did the best they could.

Haut and I step slowly into the room, and the women flinch back.

I search their faces for a sense of familiarity, trying to pick out who among them is Ros's sister.

They all wear the same thin, white nightgowns, with brown stains speckling the collars and the sleeves. Their hair hangs loose and tangled down their backs, and their bare feet are black with dust. While none of them appear related, they all have the same air of fear and defeat to them. They've all experienced the same trauma and been forced to live here for God knows how long.

"Delilah?" I ask, the word muffled by my shirt.

"Rowe?" a blond woman asks hesitantly, stepping forward from the group. "Are you Rowe?"

"Yes. I'm Rowe." Uncertain, I search her freckled face, but she looks nothing like Ros. "Are you Delilah?"

"No, my name is Harper." She pulls the woman beside her to her feet. "But Delilah said you would come for us."

"Where is she?" I demand.

Her eyes flick to one of the bunk beds with a closed curtain, and my heart sinks.

"No." I rush to the bunk, realizing as I near that, while the curtain is closed, it doesn't have the tape around the edges like

the others do.

I yank the curtain to the side to find a pale, sickly thin woman in her mid-forties. She has the same auburn hair as Ros, with threads of silver at her temples.

She lies with her eyes closed, her thick lashes painting shadows over the hollows beneath her eyes, and her cracked lips part on shallow breaths.

I tentatively reach out to touch her bony shoulder. “Delilah?”

“She went into a trance two days ago,” Harper says. “We haven’t been able to wake her from it.”

Two days with no water. And she already looks frail.

I spin to Haut. “We need to get her to Dr. Lopez.”

“We will.” He looks at the other women. “We’ll get all of you to a safe place, where you’ll have help. There’s a ladder outside. Is anyone strong enough to climb out on their own?”

A couple raise their hands while most shake their heads.

“We ran out of food three days ago,” Harper says. “And water yesterday. Before that, we were rationing. None of us are strong.”

“We have food and water.” Haut turns to me. “Rowe, go back out and tell them we need to fashion a sling. We’ll have to physically lift them out.”

With a last look at Delilah’s still face, I turn and race out of the tunnel and back into the well. I take gasping breaths of air to clean the stench of death from my lungs before I shout Haut’s instructions.

It takes a while to figure out how best to lift the women out. They fashion a seat by tying the ends of a tarp together and looping the cord around a thick tree trunk.

One by one, we get everyone out, with Delilah going last. She’s the only one unconscious, and Haut carries her out of her underground prison, gently settling her into the swing.

Then, he lifts me until I can reach the ladder, and I climb up to the top, where Owen and Tris grab me and haul me out the rest of the way.

The other witches huddle together, sharing blankets as they sip water and nibble on the energy bars we brought.

Haut comes up with Delilah, his hand on the tarp, making sure she doesn't jostle around too much and fall out.

Once Haut has Delilah out of the well, he lifts her frail body into his arms and sets off for the cars without waiting for the rest of us.

We gather the other witches and make slower progress back toward our waiting vehicles.

By now, night has fallen, which makes our trek slower, as does the frequent breaks we take along the way to let the witches rest. They're all weak, and the exertion of even this much exercise is too much for some. Jesse has to carry one woman on his back, while Tris supports another with his arm around her waist.

Harper sticks close to my side, as if she's afraid I'll vanish if she looks away, and every so often, she reaches out to touch me and whisper, "She said you would come."

Her attention makes me uncomfortable and guilty for how long I had ignored Delilah's summons. If I had come sooner, we might not have left any dead behind.

The logical side of my brain insists that none of this is my fault. That all the blame lies at Bryant's feet for kidnapping these women. But the less reasonable part of me says that my lack of training cost some of these women their lives.

When we make it to the clearing with the cabin, a few of the women try to go back into the woods. We quickly assure them that we're not going in there, and lead them to the cars.

Haut has the back of the SUV open, with Delilah wrapped in a blanket in the back.

He strides over to me as the others pass out warmer clothes and more water and food. "She needs to get to a doctor."

“We’re moving as fast as we can.” I glance over at the others. “This must be so terrifying for them.”

The women stare around in a daze, none of them asking questions or making demands. They just huddle together and gaze at the outside world with a sense of unfamiliarity, like it’s too big for the existence they know.

It takes several minutes to coax them into the vehicles, fitting everyone inside the van and the deputy’s SUV. Harper finally leaves my side to volunteer to ride in the back of the SUV with Delilah to make sure she doesn’t get jostled around.

Jesse shuts them inside with a shake of his head. “We better not get pulled over on the way back, or there will be no way to explain this.”

Barron nods in agreement. “No speeding, and use your signals. Don’t give the cops any reason to be suspicious.”

“What are we going to do with them?” Tris whispers. “None of us know how to deal with witches.”

Abony gives him a confused look. “But Rowe is a witch.”

Tris turns to stare right into her eyes and repeats, “None of us know how to deal with witches.”

“We need help,” I cut in before Abony can argue.

I love my friend but she really doesn’t understand what a deficit I’m at with this magic thing.

An idea comes to me, and I turn to Jesse. “I’m going to ride with you. We need to make a stop.”

Jesse peers over at Barron with concern. “I’m sorry, Rowe, but I go where my mate goes. If something happens, I need to be there.”

“Give me your keys.” Owen thrusts out his hand. “I’ll take Rowe where she needs to go.”

Before Jesse can pass them over, Haut snatches them out of his hand. “I go where Rowe goes.” When Owen opens his mouth to argue, Haut raises his hand to stop him. “It’s not because I don’t trust you. I just can’t...”

Sympathy sweeps over Owen's face, and he nods. "Okay, I'll go with the others."

Tris steps toward the sedan. "Let's get going."

Owen places his palm on Tris's chest to stop him. "Dr. Lopez will need your help."

Tris shakes his head. "I was a vet trainee, not a doctor."

"It's more training than anyone else has." Owen pushes him toward the SUV. "We need you with us."

Tris unhappily allows himself to be herded away.

And that's how I find myself alone with Haut in a much smaller car than when we started this crazy journey earlier today.

He starts the engine and turns to me. "Where to?"

"Remember that time I threatened to shoot you?" I ask.

His lips tighten with displeasure. "I remember."

I buckle up. "We need to go back there."

MOUTH FALLS



*H*aut turns off the road into the mall and peers through the windshield at the darkened building. “This place looks closed for the night.”

“That’s because it is.” I lean forward in my seat and point to the right. “Park in that garage. We’re going to the place where you attacked me.”

His hands tighten on the steering wheel. “I didn’t attack you, and it’s not fair to say that I did. Please stop pretending I’m the only one driven by instinct when it comes to our mate bond.”

I consider the request before nodding. “You’re right. I’ve mashed my mouth on yours just as often as you’ve done the same to me. It’s not only you.”

His grip on the steering wheel relaxes. “Thank you for admitting that.”

“But you kept pushing for more after I said no,” I add.

He lets out a long sigh. “That’s true.”

I look over at him. “You’re allowed to say no, too, if I do something you don’t like.”

He shakes his head with resignation. “That’s the difference between us. I never want to say no. Even when I question if I like you, I still want you. That’s what makes all this so hard.”

I turn in my seat to study his handsome profile. “On a scale of Monday through Sunday, how often do you actually like me?”

He glances at me from the corner of his eye. “Are these days where we’re directly interacting?”

I hunch my shoulders. “Forget it.”

“Sorry.” He pulls into the empty parking garage and shuts off the car before turning in his seat to face me. “I’m not very good with talking about emotions.”

“No shit,” I mutter. “I bet you were one of those kids who picked on the people you liked, weren’t you?”

“I never liked anyone enough to pick on them.” He reaches out to take my hand. “I’ve never liked anyone enough to get to know them, either, or had to win someone’s affection.”

I peer down at our intertwined fingers. “Yeah, everyone just fell at your feet, didn’t they? Zero effort on your part.”

“That’s right.” When I try to yank my hand back, he tightens his hold. “When I was younger, I thought it was because they liked me, but I eventually figured out it didn’t matter that it was *me*, it only mattered that they were sleeping with the Alpha.”

My eyes jerk up to his. “That...must have hurt to realize.”

“It did, so I pulled away from the pack and did my job of keeping people in line while caring for your grandmother. It was fine for a while. I had a lot to keep me busy, and even after she passed, life didn’t really change.” His thumb strokes over my knuckles. “Then you showed up, making claims and smelling like my mate.”

I purse my lips with displeasure. “And falling at your feet just like everyone else.”

“Yes, just like everyone else,” he agrees without amusement. “And I thought that was just how life would be, but at least you were someone *meant* for me, so maybe it wouldn’t be so bad. But then you quickly made it clear you were fine being in my bed, but I would never be your number one, even though you were my mate. You had other mates, and people you already had emotional connections to.”

My heart aches for the vulnerability in his eyes. “Owen and Tris.”

“Yes, Owen and Tris.” His fingers trace against my palm, making my heart flutter. “You’d go to bed with me, but I wasn’t the one you wanted for companionship, and that made me uneasy in a way I’ve never felt before.”

“You made me uneasy, too,” I whisper. “You still do.”

His fingers move to my wrist. “Friday.”

My lips part in confusion. “Huh?”

“On a scale of how often I like you, it’s Friday.” He leans closer. “Is that bad?”

Remembering my earlier question I flush. “That’s more than I thought.”

His touch trails up to my elbow. “What about you?”

“Wednesday.” My eyes drop to his mouth. “Sometimes Thursday.”

He leans across the parking brake. “Sometimes when I rile you up, I’m at a Saturday.”

I lick my lips. “I knew you picked on the ones you liked.”

His hand moves to my waist. “Sometimes when I rile you up, I’m at a Tuesday.”

“So unpredictable,” I hiss.

His breath caresses my lips. “I’m not the only unpredictable one here.”

My pulse quickens at his nearness, the warmth of his body filling the air between us. It would take no effort at all the melt against him. In fact, holding myself back is the hard part. “Didn’t we say we’re taking things slow?”

“What are you thinking, bad puppy?” His hand moves down to my hip. “I’m just unbuckling your seat belt.”

A click sounds, and he leans back as the tension across my chest eases, and the seat belt retracts.

He reaches for the door handle. “Ready?”

Blood fills my cheeks and my heart pounds, but two can play this game. “I’ve been ready since you parked.”

“I know, I can hear your heartbeat.” He opens his door, letting in a rush of cold air to cool my flush. “But we can’t risk getting arrested over public indecency, so we’d best get moving.”

Okay, clearly two *can’t* play this game. I don’t even think we’re on the same board. I’m in the beginner’s class while Haut moves around me like a master.

But at least we now know we’re on the same page with how we feel about each other. That’s somehow reassuring in its rockiness.

Rocky reassurance.

Solid base to build from.

Haut leans back into the car. “Are you coming?”

“Not anytime soon.” I shove open my door, climb out, and skip around to his side. “Let’s go get us some witches.”

We walk out of the garage and cross the street to the sidewalk, following it to the back of the mall, which has even fewer lights than the garage did. My shoes are still wet, and my feet squish inside my sneakers with every step. A weird funk rises from me, too, like stagnant pond water.

Maybe we should have changed before coming here. Or I should have changed, since Haut had wisely not put on his shoes before going into the well, and he had rolled his pants up, so the stagnant water didn’t get on him at all.

Which isn’t fair. He has no right to be smelling like fresh forest air while I can practically see the words *Swamp Witch* painted in stinky fumes over my entire body.

Haut eyes the empty area around us and curls a protective arm around my shoulders. “How do you know they’ll be here?”

I sniff him discreetly, just to verify how nice he smells, before peering up at him. “It’s Friday, right?”

He rubs my arm against the cold. "It is."

"Then they'll be here." I scan the long, flat expanse of the back of the mall. Identical metal doors pepper the bricks at random spots. "Which door was it that we almost did the dirty next to?"

"The last time I was here, I wasn't in my right mind." Haut looks down at me and raises a brow. "Don't you remember?"

I roll my eyes at him. "I'm never in my right mind."

His arm tightens around me. "That's not true. Those drugs that were messing with your head are out of your system. You're not crazy. You're just a unique thinker."

I snort. "That just sounds like a different way to say crazy."

He stops and turns me toward him, nudging my chin up to meet his eyes. "You know your grandmother raised me after my father died, right?"

I nod.

"Your grandmother was a very closed-off person. She didn't have any confidants," he says. "But she talked to me, and one of her biggest worries was about young witches who were never trained. In hindsight, I realize she was worrying about you, but at the time, I thought she hoped to take on a young apprentice. Young being the keyword there."

I frown. "Why young? And how young?"

"Early puberty, because after that, most witches are driven insane by their magic or they lose the mental flexibility to use it." He brushes back my hair. "There's a *reason* people say children are magical."

I swat at him in annoyance. "I may be short, but I'm not a child."

"No, you're a beautiful and terrifying woman who made it past the craziness and retained the ability to believe in magic. No one else would have found those witches. Only you would listen to the voices in your head and latch on like a puppy with a new bone until you found them." He leans down to press his

forehead against mine. “There’s no one else like you, Rowe. So don’t say your mind isn’t right. It’s exactly right for who you are.”

Emotion wells up inside me. That has to be the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me. “You think I’m terrifying?”

He gently bonks his head against mine. “At least a Wednesday all the time.”

I lift an arm to point to my left. “That’s the door we need.”

Haut turns to study the flat steel surface. “How do you know?”

“Because that has to be Mel’s car.” I point to the employee parking area, where a black sedan sits. A decal of a black cat holds residence next to a bumper sticker that says *My Other Car Is A Broomstick*, and a crystal hangs from the rearview mirror. “She doesn’t strike me as someone who would hike from her car to work.”

Haut grips my cheeks and smashes his lips against my forehead. “Such a good mind.”

I warm at the compliment. “We’re still not kissing, remember?”

“This isn’t kissing.” His lips move against my skin as he speaks. “My face just fell on your face.”

“Well, get your face off my face before I fall, too,” I whisper.

“I’m at a Saturday level right now,” he whispers back. “What about you?”

“Sliding into Friday,” I admit.

“Mmm,” he rumbles. “I like the sound of sliding into—”

The door opening cuts him off, and we jerk apart just in time.

Mel steps outside and freezes to find us standing there with guilty expressions on our faces.

“Rowe?” She glances from me to Haut and back. “Did you come for a meeting? Everyone else already went home for the night.”

That explains why only Mel’s car is still here.

“Not exactly.” When I catch her eyes shifting back to Haut, I point at him. “This is Haut.”

She gives him a sweeping glance. “Why, yes, he is.”

“Not that kind of hot. But I made the same mistake,” I rush to assure her.

Her amused gaze returns to me. “Is he another one of your men?”

“No,” I say.

“Yes,” Haut says at the same time.

Her pencil-thin eyebrows shoot up.

“It’s complicated, and not what we’re here for.” I gesture to the shop. “Do you have a moment?”

“Sure.” She opens the door wide. “Come on in.”

As we step into the shadowed shop, the lingering incense tickles my nose, and behind me, Haut sneezes. In the dark, the flowy skirts and blouses sold here look like ghosts, and I huddle closer to Haut, who wraps his arm back around me.

Mel walks over to lean against the center table filled with enormous crystals. “What can I do for you guys?”

“We just dug up a well full of witches, and we need your help,” I tell her.

“Oh, my. Knowing you, I doubt that’s a metaphor.” She turns toward the back room. “Let me just make us some tea and then you can tell me all about it.”

OOEY GOOEY



Mel listens to our story in silence, her white-knuckled hand hold on her mug the only sign of her reaction.

We had moved to the small break room behind the checkout station at the shop. We now sit around a table that claims to seat four, but the only way that would happen is if everyone were my size. Which Haut is not, and he crowds against me, practically sitting in my lap.

I think he's forgetting he's not currently a lapdog, which is kind of adorable, but also distracting.

When I fall silent, Mel lifts her lukewarm tea to her lips. "Well, fuck."

I nod in agreement. "Big, bad fuck."

Her nose crinkles, and she sets her mug on the counter. "Fucking hell. And I've just been throwing those stupid fliers while doing nothing about them. I could have..." She shakes her head angrily. "I don't know. It was just rumors..."

"You said there are people to report this kind of stuff to?" I pick at my nails before Haut's hand covers mine to stop me. "Someone who can come to help?"

"Yeah, definitely." Mel grabs her cell phone. "It will take a few hours to coordinate a team."

"We don't have a few hours." I turn my hand under Haut's and squeeze his fingers. "We need to get home to help with them."

Mel nods in understanding. “Give me your address, and I’ll bring them to you. I’ve been wanting to see this town of yours, anyway.”

Uncertain, I look at Haut. Hartford Cove isn’t just my secret to reveal. No matter how much I think hiding is an imperfect solution bound to fail, it’s the path the wolf shifters who live there chose.

Haut searches my face. “I’m no longer the Alpha. It’s not my decision to make.”

“You should co-Alpha with Owen,” I tell him. “You’d make a good team.”

His hand twitches in mine. “That’s not something we’re discussing right now.”

“Tris and I need witches,” I add.

“Again,” he says, “it’s not my decision.”

I huff with exasperation. “Then call Owen.”

Haut’s eyes narrow on me. “I don’t have a phone. *You* call him.”

I hesitate for a moment before admitting, “I don’t know where my phone is. I’ve been using Ros’s.”

“Well, where is Ros’s phone?” he asks.

“With Ros.” I leave the *duh* silent, but he still hears it.

“Um...” Mel raises her hand. “You can borrow mine.”

I turn to smile at her. “Do you have Owen’s number?”

“This is the number I have.” She opens her phone and shows me the number in her saved contacts. “Is this Owen’s?”

I shake my head. “I called you on Ros’s phone.”

“For the love of—” Haut stands and hauls me to my feet. “Gather your people. We’ll call you once we confirm with the Alpha. If he doesn’t approve of you coming to us, we’ll have to bring them to you.”

“That works, but I hope we can come to you, and not just because of all the hot man-meat running naked around town.”

Mel stands as well and grabs her jacket off the back of her chair. “The trauma you’ve described... It’s not good to keep moving them around. It could feel like you’re ripping them out of the first safe place they’ve been in a long time.”

“Don’t worry, Rowe has the Alpha wrapped around her itty-bitty pinkie,” Haut assures her.

“We just have to get his *yes* before Mrs. Smith gets wind of our invasion.” I scrunch up my face at Mel. “She looks like this when she gets a whiff of change.”

“I’ve seen that expression on my mom’s face more than once.” Mel sighs as shuts off the break room lights and leads us to the back door. “I’m probably going to see it when I get to her house and wake her up.”

“Is your mom one of the people in authority?” I ask in surprise.

Mel’s crimson lips twist with displeasure. “Yeah, you could say that.”

“Ahh.” I point up at Haut. “This is my person in charge who’s hard to deal with.”

She glances at Haut. “He’s not one of the guys you’ve paraded in front of the camera before.”

I grip his abs possessively. “He’s my first or third mate.”

She holds the exterior door open, letting in the chilly night air. “You don’t know for sure?”

“It’s complicated.” I link my arm around Haut’s, hugging it against my body, and raise my hand, counting off. “I met Owen when we were kids, so he’s either first, second, or third, depending on if our mate bond formed before puberty. Tris is my second or third, depending on if our bond formed when he was cursed the first or fourth time. So it goes, Owen, Tris, Haut, Ros. Or Owen, Tris, Haut, Ros. Or Tris, Haut, Owen, Ros. Or Haut, Own, Tris, Ros.”

She blinks a couple times, then turns to Haut. “Did you follow that?”

He gives a wolfish smile. “Only thing I need to know is that, in all those scenarios, Ros is always last.”

I scowl at him. “Don’t you dare be mean to Ros.”

“He has fangs,” Haut rumbles.

“So do you, dog breath,” I hiss. “And *he* manscapes.”

“I don’t need to manscape,” he says.

I pat his chest. “Just keep telling yourself that.”

“Okay, when we get home, you can show me what hair I need to trim,” he says.

“You’re just looking for an excuse to get naked in front of me,” I accuse.

“I hardly need an excuse.” He hooks a thumb into his waistband. “Clothes are uncomfortable. I’d far prefer to be naked all the time.”

“I’m so going to enjoy this visit to your town,” Mel breathes.

At the sound of her voice, I jump a little, having forgotten she was still here. I turn to her and shake my head. “Haut told everyone to keep their pants on around me, so it’s not a nudist colony or anything.”

“Can Haut take the rule back?” Mel bats her eyelashes at him. “Witches are very comfortable with nudity. We have that whole sky-clad thing, you know?”

He glances down at me with a raised brow. “What do you think?”

“I mean...you’re basically a piece of artwork, which should be admired, but might lead to theft...” I tap my lip. “But then there’s Mrs. Smith, and she’s going to be a little harder on the eyes unless...” My eyes jerk up to his. “Everyone is incredibly fit from running around as a wolf. Does old lady Smith have a rocking body?”

An evil glint enters his eyes. “That’s for me to know and your imagination to fixate on.”

“Oh my God, now I’m going to be thinking of Mrs. Smith naked for the entire drive home.” I smack his large bicep. “Bad wolf!”

He chuckles and turns back to Mel. “Just hang around downtown when Rowe isn’t there. You’ll catch plenty of people throwing their clothes off.”

She rubs her palms together. “This is going to be good.” A look of guilt crosses her face. “Well, not all good, seeing as why we’re planning this trip to begin with. But it can’t *all* be bad, either.”

Still speaking to Mel, Haut nudges me toward the parking garage. “We’ll call you once we get home and speak to the Alpha.”

“I’ll keep my phone on me.” She holds it up to show it’s still in her hand from earlier. “Call no matter the time.”

“Thank you, Mel!” I call back as Haut hustles me toward our car.

When we get inside and back on the road, Haut glances over at me. “Try to get some sleep. We have a bit of a drive before we’ll be back home.”

I shake my head. “No way. I’m way too hyped up.”

“Then just be quiet so I can concentrate on driving.” He reaches out and turns on the radio.

I shift to get comfortable for the last leg of our journey, soft jazz music filling my ears.



Gentle shaking on my shoulder pulls me from sleep, and I reach out to slap the person who dared wake me. I was having such a delightful dream about chocolate milkshakes and french fries.

A hand catches mine, followed by a chuckle. “If you want to keep sleeping, you can, but I need to go inside. Will you be okay alone in the car?”

I crack open an eyelid to glare at Haut. “You’re supposed to carry me inside and gently tuck me into bed, giving me a soft kiss on the forehead before murmuring how sweet I am and that you love me.”

“If that’s what you want, then that’s what I’ll do.” He pushes open his door and climbs out, then strides around to my side and pulls open my door.

Since I’m leaning against it, I half fall out before the seatbelt catches me. He remedies that by reaching across my body to release my seatbelt, and I tumble into his waiting arms.

“Real smooth,” I say against his chest.

“Shh, you’re still adorably asleep.” He glances down at me. “Drop your mouth open and snore a little.”

I smack his firm pec. “I don’t snore!”

“And every so often, do this.” He makes a little snuffle noise, followed by a snort.

“Stop that!” I slap a hand over his mouth. “I am a sweet and delicate princess.”

My palm garbles his response, which is for the best for both of us.

I grip his shoulders and glance around. More vehicles than the ones we brought are in the driveway, and I recognize Dr. Lopez’s car among them. But the front of the house only has a light shining from the direction of the kitchen.

“Shouldn’t there be...more activity?” I ask uncertainly. “We weren’t that far behind them. And you were speeding.”

“How do you know I was speeding?” Haut demands. “You were asleep the whole time.”

“No arguing about how right I am. I’m being serious.” I kick my legs and push on him until he sets me down on the porch. “Why aren’t there more lights on?”

“They’re probably trying not to draw attention.” Haut moves ahead of me to the front door. “We’re technically

breaking a lot of rules by bringing them here.”

“What, random wolf shifters are okay, but wounded witches are a big no-no?” I shake my head. “We need to re-evaluate these rules.”

“Tell the Alpha that, not me.” He opens the door and breathes in deeply. “They’re here, but their smell is faint. They must be down in the sanctuary.”

“Oh, that makes sense.” I step into the foyer after him and glance around. “Witches go where the magic is, I guess.”

He gives me a perplexed look. “No, because the sanctuary has the most available space, and it’s hidden from the rest of the town.”

“Right. That’s totally what I said.” I point at my head, then at his. “It’s like we’re sharing a wavelength or something.”

“Sure we are.” He reaches past me to close the door before we head for the hall next to the kitchen.

The door to the elevator stands open, but the closed grate reveals that the lift is on a different floor.

“This is stupid!” I shake the grate. “I demand a new elevator!”

“Or a staircase.” Owen’s voice drifts up from below. “I’m coming up. We need more blankets. We didn’t buy enough.”

“I have a couple in my closet,” Haut says.

“I’ll go get them.” Turning on my heel, I sprint to his room.

“Hey!” he yells after me. “I didn’t say you could go in there!”

“Your house is my house!” I throw open his bedroom door and race for the closet, determined to get there before he stops me.

I throw open the door and spot the spare blankets on the top shelf. Jumping, I snag a corner and yank.

The soft blankets tumble on top of my head before slipping to the floor, and a folded piece of poster board spirals down on top of them.

Curious, I bend to pick it up.

“Don’t touch that!” Haut commands.

In my hand, the sign falls open, raining pink glitter everywhere.

Haut snatches the sign away, but I already saw the glittery letters that spell out *The Rowe House* with all of our names beneath it. It looks beat up from being stomped all over, but the words are still legible.

I made the sign when Tris and I first decided to stay in Hartford Cove, before everything fell apart and we ran away. Until I saw it again, I had completely forgotten that crushed dream.

“You kept the sign?” I whisper.

“It looked like something you worked hard on.” He gently sets it back on the top shelf of his closet like it’s a treasure to be guarded. “Don’t read too much into it.”

I hear his warning, but it goes in one ear and out the other, the meaning smothered by a flood of squishy emotions for Haut.

Damn this man for being an asshole with such an ooey gooey center.

How am I supposed to resist falling for that?

ALPHA, PLEASE



Before I can give in to the feelings that I'm feeling so hard, Owen arrives to help.

"Owen!" I shove past Haut to wrap my arms around the more slender man. "Just the Alpha we need to talk to!"

"Why does the way you said that make me instantly suspicious?" Despite his words, he pulls me close in a suffocating hug that lifts me onto my toes and fills me with even more feelings.

I'm going to have an overload of feelings if I'm not careful.

He sets me back on my feet, his blue eyes studying me before shifting to Haut. "What do we need to talk about?"

"Rowe wants to open the borders," Haut rumbles.

I step back and smack his chest. "Don't say it like that."

"Why do you keep hitting me so much?" he demands.

I frown at him. "Because you're hittable."

"Or you're just as childish with your displays of affection as I am." He grins. "Am I smelling a Sunday creeping up on you?"

I rear back. "Never."

"Who are you wanting to open the borders for?" Owen interrupts.

"To witches," Haut informs him.

“To *Mel*,” I stress. “We like Mel.”

“And possibly some kind of paranormal police,” Haut elaborates.

Owen’s brows furrow together. “The town council won’t like that.”

“Then we’ll ask for forgiveness.” I grab Owen’s hands and hold them against my chest. “Those women downstairs need more help than we can give, and they deserve justice. Mel said she can arrange transportation, but...”

Owen shakes his head. “Most of them are already shell-shocked. They actually calmed down when we put them back underground. Moving them again so soon isn’t a good idea.”

“So do we have the Alpha’s approval to bring in outside help?” I ask.

He looks at Haut. “Do you think this is a good idea?”

“I wouldn’t have approved it in your position.” He raises a hand to stall my indignation. “But it’s the right thing to do. Hartford Cove is changing. This is the second big step.”

My brows pinch together in confusion. “What was the first big step?”

“Your arrival,” he deadpans.

“Humph.” I turn back to Owen and give him puppy eyes. “Please, Alpha?”

“Okay,” he relents. “Mel can bring her people to help.”

“Thank you.” I release his hands. “How are the witches settling in downstairs?”

“We could really use some cots.” He grabs one of the two pillows off Haut’s bed. “We’re folding up the blankets we bought to use as makeshift pallets, but that won’t be much protection against the concrete floor.”

“There are space heaters in the attic,” Haut says. “I’ll bring them down.”

“We can take the mattress from my grandma’s room,” I offer. “It will sleep at least three people.”

“It wouldn’t fit in the elevator,” Owen says.

“There’s the beach door.” Haut glances at me. “But then where will you sleep?”

“Ah, I see what you’re angling for.” I wag a finger at him. “But you’re forgetting about Ros’s bed.”

“We actually already grabbed Ros’s bed,” Owen admits. “And the twin from Tris’s room for Delilah. Dr. Lopez has her hooked up to fluids and is monitoring her now.”

“Then it makes more sense to take my bed and yours, Owen,” Haut points out. “There should be enough beds that way, so no one is on the floor. You and Tris can share the big bed with Rowe.”

“What about you?” I ask, then kick myself for stepping into his obvious trap.

He casts me an amused glance. “I can still turn into a wolf, so I’m fine with the floor.”

I stare at him in surprise before clearing my throat. “Well, there’s always the foot of the bed.”

He leans down next to my ear. “If you want me to warm your feet, you can just ask.”

My toes curl in my shoes, reminding me that my socks are still wet from being in the well. “Moving the two beds is a good idea. Just let me go change my socks and I can help.”

Owen tucks the pillow under his arm and leans down to kiss me on the cheek. “Go take a shower, Rowe, and change into something warm. You worked hard today. Let us get this sorted.”

“You all worked just as hard,” I protest.

“No, we didn’t.” Haut cups the back of my neck and directs me out of his room and toward the stairs. “We just followed your directions. You expended a lot of energy doing all that magic.”

And here I thought my exhaustion resulted from being awake for over twenty-four hours and traipsing through the woods.

“Get a phone and call Mel,” I tell Haut as he continues to push me toward the stairs. “Her card should either be in the kitchen or the formal living room.”

“I got it.” He lifts me onto the first step. “Now, go shower, you stinky puppy.”

“How *dare* you?” I slap at him, but he ducks and backs toward the kitchen, a smug smile on his face until he vanishes from view.

Grumbling, I stumble up the rest of the stairs.

Now that the idea of being clean has been put into my head, the swamp stench now makes me queasy and the squish in my shoes is downright slimy.

Stepping into my old bedroom comes with a shock. While I knew they took the bed downstairs, seeing the place where it stood the last time I was in this room brings me up short. The area rug left behind, while well cared for, shows a distinct outline where years of sunlight faded what wasn't covered by the bed frame.

For some reason, the missing bed makes me realize how childish the room looks with the bunny and flower wallpaper and the squat white furniture. Grandma's room isn't the only one that needs a makeover.

With the bed gone, I have a direct line to the bathroom from the door but I still walk around. It feels superstitious to pass over that darker part of the area rug.

When I walk into the bathroom, the door on the opposite side stands open. I close it before I turn on the shower to turn it on so the water can start heating.

Sitting on the edge of the tub, I reach to pull off my shoes, and my hands freeze on the ruined unicorn sneakers. Slowly, I press on one of the unicorns, and tears sting my eyes when they fail to light up.

Ros gave me these. I should have treated them with more care. I know he won't be angry that I destroyed them in a quest to save his sister, but it still hurts. Of course, he has to come back in order to find out about their current state.

The stinging in my eyes worsens. When will he come back? Why did he leave to begin with? He promised to stay for a couple of weeks, at least. What if he never returns?

Tears trickle down my cheeks, and I wipe them away before I hurry to undress and get into the shower. The rush of hot water will help block out the sound of my crying. In a house full of super-hearing wolf shifters, I don't need my depression pulling anyone away from what really matters.

Which is the poor witches we saved. *They* matter, not a pair of light-up unicorn sneakers.

I keep repeating that to myself as I slather my hair with conditioner to loosen the knots. I should have brought a comb into the shower with me, but it's never too late.

With the water still running, I push back the curtain, then shriek when I find Owen perched on the counter.

I yank the curtain back closed. "What the hell, Owen?"

"Sorry," he calls out. "We came to grab the bed and heard you crying."

"At times like this, can't you just pretend to be human?" I demand.

"No." The curtain rustles, and he pokes his head in. "What did you need to grab? I'll get it for you."

"Get out! Only naked people allowed!" I point the shower head at him, and he quickly ducks back out. "And toss me my comb!"

After a moment, the shower curtain rustles again, but instead of handing me the comb, a naked Owen steps in with me.

I stare at him. "What are you doing?"

“You said only naked people were allowed.” He holds up the comb in his hand. “Let me help you.”

Grumbling, I turn my back to him, making sure my body stays under the warm spray.

His fingers brush my lower back as he picks up the ends of my hair and starts brushing. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.” I hug my stomach. “It’s stupid.”

He sweeps my hair to the side to kiss my shoulder. “It’s not stupid if it made you cry.”

I shake my head. “Stop being sweet.”

He kisses my shoulder again before he returns to picking the tangles from my hair. With how much I have, it takes a while, and the silence feels heavy, weighing me down.

“My sneakers are ruined,” I mumble.

Owen stays quiet, the comb working its way higher.

“Ros got them for me, because I didn’t have shoes when he brought me home with him.” I sniffle and wipe my cheeks. “I couldn’t walk for the first few weeks, and he gave them to me on our first outing.”

The comb scrapes against the back of my head.

I blow out a hard breath. “I know there are more important things to worry about. They’re just sneakers.”

Owen’s arms come around me in a comforting hug. “Just because there’s something more important doesn’t mean the sneakers aren’t *also* important.”

I sniffle and wipe my cheeks again. “Really?”

He hugs me tighter. “Really.”

Turning in his arms, I hug him back. “You’re good people, Owen Hartford.”

“So are you, Rowe Branning.” He kisses the top of my head, then sputters when he gets a mouth full of conditioner.

I giggle against his bare shoulder.

“Okay, you, enough hogging the hot water.” He walks me backward until the spray beats down on top of my head.

He sets the comb aside and digs his fingers into my hair, massaging my head and shoulders as he rinses me off. His sweet ministrations loosen my muscles, and combined with the hot water, I turn into a limp noodle that he has to support.

With one arm curled around my waist, he turns off the water and helps me out of the shower, where he wraps me in a large towel before scooping me up into his arms.

My head falls to his shoulder, and I don't protest when he carries me across the hall to the master bedroom. There, he tucks me under the blanket.

I rouse myself enough to mumble, “I need to go down to the sanctuary.”

“No, you don't.” He tucks the comforter under my chin. “There are more than enough people down there already. You need to rest.”

My heavy eyelids close, but I fight back sleep. “Did Haut call Mel?”

“Yes. Now hush.” Owen's lips cover mine, quieting me with a soft kiss.

Before he pulls away, I'm asleep.

MEETING OF WITCHES



Early the next morning, we get the call that Mel is on her way with her people.

Owen and Haut drive out to meet them under the theory that no one will question the two most recent Alphas.

While they're gone, I help Tris and Jesse take food down to the Sanctuary. Dr. Lopez cautioned against doing anything too greasy or hard to digest right away, so Jesse made a giant pot of oatmeal while I put together a plate of buttered toast, and Tris filled a tray with nuts and berries, as well as water reinforced with electrolytes.

When we step off the elevator, I'm shocked by the change to the large space. The tables had been moved, and the beds make the unwelcoming space even more unwelcoming with the contrast of sterile against soft blankets and pillows.

How did grandma ever do magic down here?

Despite the early hour, the women are already up and huddled around the smallest of the beds, which holds Delilah's still body. They had changed into warmer clothing, and many had tamed their hair, but I'm sure they'd love a trip upstairs to use the showers. We'll have to set up a rotation so everyone can have hot water.

"We have food," I call out in a soft voice that still makes a few of them flinch.

"We'll set up the other side of the room for meals," Jesse adds. "There aren't chairs right now, but Barron will get some to bring over."

They stare at us with wide, frightened eyes, and don't take a step toward the plastic curtain that separates the two halves of the room.

I catch the eyes of the blond spokeswoman. "Harper, will you please help set the table? We have bowls, plates, and silverware."

She glances at the others before stepping forward to take the bag draped over my arm.

I give her an encouraging smile. "And after breakfast, how about some showers? We only have two bathrooms with showers in this house, but the water tank is big, so at least four people should be able to get cleaned before we have to give the tank time to refill."

"That—" Her voice cracks, and she clears her throat before trying again. "That sounds wonderful. Thank you."

"Abony knows how to cut hair, too, if anyone would like that. She'll be back in the evening." I walk with her toward the plastic curtain, and a few of the others move to join us. "And if there's something you need, just let us know. This is a small town, so we're a little limited, but we can send someone to one of the bigger cities for anything we don't have here."

"Where are we?" she asks, then ducks her head. "If you don't mind me asking."

"Hartford Cove, though you won't find it on a map. There's a magical barrier around the town to stop people from stumbling onto us. Most of the people here are wolf shifters, like those you've already met." I tip my head toward Jesse. "So you don't need to worry about hiding what you are."

"What about vampires?" she whispers.

My gut tightens at the fear in her voice. "Not at the moment, but one of my mates is a vampire, and I hope he will be returning soon."

She flinches back from me. "A vampire mate?"

I try not to let her reaction hurt as I set my plate of toast on one of the displaced metal tables. "That's right. He's Delilah's

younger brother, Ambrose. He and his people saved me from Bryant. They'd been hunting him for a while. They're the good guys."

Unconvinced, she takes the bowls from the bag and hands them to one of the other women, doing the same with the plates. Quietly, they work to set the table while Jesse and Tris place their food offerings in the center.

Harper turns to me. "May I see where we are being held?"

"This isn't a prison," I say firmly. "The elevator is stupid, but it's not the only way out of here. I'll show you the other way out, too. But are you sure you don't want to eat first?"

"I already ate more than I'm used to last night." She steps back to my side. "I would like to see where we are now."

"Okay." I glance at Jesse, who silently communicates that he'll stay with the rest of the witches.

Tris hurries over to join me. "We didn't really meet last night. My name is Tris. I'm currently a witch."

She looks at him in confusion at his wording. "I'm Harper."

I reach out for his hand, and blue sparks shimmer into life. "Tris is another of my mates. He used to be cursed and was a wolfdog for a while, but we cured that."

"Another mate..." Her eyes bounce around the room before settling on the far back corner, where someone tried to throw a tarp over the cage, but it had been pulled to the side. "And who will go in that?"

"Oh, that's for Owen," I rush to reassure her. "But it's not a kink thing. He's a werewolf who's working on learning to control his curse."

"A werewolf..." she says uncertainly.

"And also Rowe's mate," Tris says helpfully.

"Goodness. I've never heard of a witch having so many mates." Her eyes drop to our linked hands. "Though, we don't call it mates."

“What do you call it?” I ask eagerly.

“We don’t actually know any other witches,” Tris adds.

“Well, aside from Mel,” I remind him.

Tris nods. “Mel’s cool, but we haven’t gotten to spend much time with her.”

“And there was your ex,” I add.

He scowls. “Blocked from my memory.”

I turn back to Harper. “His ex is the one who cursed him.”

She glances between us. “You’re both very...energetic.”

“Sorry.” I hunch my shoulders. “Are we too much? This is just how we are. I can send Tris back to the breakfast table.”

“No, it’s fine,” she says, though she doesn’t sound convincing. “And our word is *spark*.”

“I like that.” Tris tugs me against his side, sending blue sparks up everywhere we touch. “I’m your one and only spark.”

“Yes, you are.” I flick the name tag on his collar. “My very special spark.”

“Damn straight.” He leans down to gently bite the tip of my nose. “My sparkly spark.”

I giggle before remembering we’re supposed to be doing a tour and turn back to Harper. “Come on. I’ll show you the secret entrance first.”

Tris releases my hand to grab the lantern from the elevator to illuminate the way, and we show Harper the narrow hall that leads to the door out to the beach. Then we walk up to the house from there, so we can show her how close it is to the house.

She lingers for a bit in the garden, murmuring in dismay at all the weeds, before coming back inside.

The tour is quick, focusing mainly on the bathrooms.

When we show her where the elevator comes up near the screened-in porch, she stares down the dark hole in dismay.

“It’s not the best solution,” I say apologetically. “The only other place to put so many people is the attic, and it doesn’t have electricity. But if you all would like to stay in Hartford Cove, we’ll find a place for you, even if it means building new houses.”

She stares at me with wide eyes. “Why would you do that?”

“Everyone deserves a home where they feel safe.” I pick at my nails. “Of course, anyone who wants to leave is welcome to do so. We can take you anywhere, or if you prefer, we can get you a car. And you’re all welcome to use the house phone to call your friends and families. You can also stay for a while and then decide to leave. It’s completely up to you.”

“I’ll need to talk to the others.” She looks a little overwhelmed. “Can I go back downstairs now?”

“Yes, of course.” I lean against the grate. “Jesse, bring up the elevator!”

“Spiral staircase,” Tris whispers. “We could cover it in fairy lights, and we’d never had this issue again.”

“Fairy lights would be magical.” My toes curl against the hardwood floor. “And the sanctuary needs a makeover. It’s creepy.”

“It is,” Harper whispers.

“I’m so sorry.” I point back down the hall. “Do you want to see the attic? Or if you’re willing to split up, we can bring the beds back upstairs, and you can pick roommates...”

She shakes her head. “No, we want to be together.”

That’s what they said last night, too. Or so Owen said. “Okay, but if you change your mind, just say the word.”

The elevator rattles, and the cables move, hauling the metal box back up to the ground floor.

Just as Jesse’s face comes into view, a knock sounds from the front, followed by Mel’s voice, “Hello! I’m here to see the hottie wolf shifters!”

A grin splits Jesse's face, and he swings the gate open. "I think I'm being summoned."

That earns him a smack. "I'm telling Barron you said that!"

He ruffles my hair. "Nothing wrong with being admired."

I turn to Harper. "We called in some witchy assistance. Would you like to meet them before we introduce them to everyone else?"

She hesitates, and I worry about the pallor of her face, but then Harper pulls back her shoulders and nods. "Yes, please."

"Don't worry, they're all witches," Tris assures her.

"We're in the kitchen, Mel!" I call out.

Mel bounces into view, wearing dark wash jeans and a tight t-shirt that says *Save a Broom, Ride a Witch*. She wears her dark hair pulled up in two buns on top of her head, tied in place with purple streamers. She looks nothing like the woman with heavy makeup, floaty blouses, and ankle-length skirts I've come to know, and her transformation is mesmerizing.

"Wolf boy!" She points at Tris. "You've changed!"

"Hey, witchy girl." Tris grabs my hand and holds it up. "Look! Sparkly!"

"Congratulations!" She leers at Jesse. "And who is this mighty beefcake? Tell me he's wolfy and single."

"Melody Bellthellamew Bramble! Behave yourself, or you'll go back to the shop!" a sharp voice says.

Mel snaps to attention. "Yes, ma'am."

We join Mel in the kitchen, mouthing, *Bellthellamew?*

She rolls her eyes.

Poor girl. That can't have been easy to grow up with.

I peer toward the entryway, where Haut and Owen are bringing in a group of women. The trio at the front are older, like mom old, and wear the flowy clothing I've come to expect from Mel. The one at the center has the same dark hair as Mel,

while the one on the right is blond, and the third has nearly white hair. Like the sun, moon, and night.

The fourth woman looks closer to Tris's age, but she wears a long skirt and blouse that mirror her elders. She wears her long, brown hair in a fishtail braid. Despite her demure clothes and hairstyle, though, black lines run up her neck and wiggle their way across her cheeks in some kind of weird makeup or tattoo. If it's makeup, someone should tell her it's not flattering.

Unless it's some kind of witch thing? If that's the case, I'll be passing on that class, because *ew*.

Mel turns sharply on one pointy witch boot. "Rowe, may I present the West coast Trinity of Bramble, Hawthorne, and Crow." She lifts a hand to her mouth and coughs, "My moms."

I gape at her. "I have questions."

"Later," she whispers. "And with them is Apprentice—"

"June?" Tris says in a tight voice.

The young woman's eyes widen in shock. "Tristen?"

Mel frowns at Tris. "You know Juniper?"

"You could say that." His hand tightens on mine. "She's my ex."

To Be Continued...



Rowe's adventure continues in:

[Enemy at the Door](#)



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ENEMY AT THE DOOR

The witches have come to Hartford Cove to offer help, but with them comes an enemy from the past. When confronted by the woman who cursed Tris to become a wolfdog, tensions rise as Rowe realizes she invited evil into her home. Can they trust these new arrivals? Or is the corruption they brought a sign of a deeper problem?

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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, join her [newsletter](#), visit her website, or follow her on social media!

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