

# BATHE ME IN RED

MONSTERS AMONG US: HARTFORD COVE

BOOK TWO

# L. L. FROST



#### **BATHE ME IN RED**

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### SYNOPSIS

#### The story of the Wendall witch is written in blood.

Hartford Cove was supposed to be a safe haven. Instead, Rowe discovered a family legacy steeped in magic and wolf shifters. The hallucinations she grew up with weren't tricks of her broken mind. Her toaster is fully functional-thank you very much-and the real world is more wonderful and horrifying than she ever imagined.

Too bad, in Rowe's life, all good things come to an end. A single act of violence sends Tris and her fleeing, afraid for their lives. But one door closing allows another door to open, and while in hiding, long-held feelings ignite, giving Rowe a second chance at happiness.

Running can't last forever, though. The darkness Rowe tried to escape finally catches up, and she finds herself isolated and tortured, her mind pushed to the breaking point.

When help arrives, it comes from an unexpected source. The huntsmen are the boogeymen of the wolf shifters, but are they the villains she's been led to believe? Or is there more than one side to the story of their ancient feud?

It seems that Rowe can't escape her part in this twisted tale. Centuries ago, it began with death. Will the next lines of the story be written with Rowe's blood?

# THE WHAT-IF DEATH Spiral

S hivers wrack my body as I pull the thin hotel blanket higher around my shoulders. I haven't stopped crying since Tris forced me to pull over a few miles outside of Hartford Cove and took over.

He'd driven us to the nearest town twenty minutes down the highway and pulled into the first motel we came to.

Luckily, it was on the right side of shady, and the man behind the counter didn't question Tris's near-nudity or me sobbing in the passenger seat. He just took our money and gave us a key to a unit at the back facing the forest, where anyone passing by won't be able to see our car from the road.

Tris had deposited me in the room, closed all the blinds, then left again to find supplies.

I wanted to beg him to stay, the fear of him vanishing almost crippling me, but I managed to restrain myself. He needs clothes, and we need food and water. Then, we need to figure out where to go from here.

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to force the tears to stop, and the vision of Haut tearing into Owen paints itself across my eyelids. Only, this time, imagination takes it a step farther and his claws rip into my gentle mate, blood flowing like a river that will never stop.

How could things have turned so fast from bright and hopeful to destroyed? What-ifs play through my mind. If I had just left Tris sleeping on the couch, the misunderstanding would have never happened. If I had just worked harder on bonding with Haut, his wolf wouldn't have had reason to freak out. If Owen hadn't stepped in Haut's way to spare us his rage.

If, if, if...

So many small things could have stopped events from escalating and spared Owen his life.

Another sob rips out of me, tears leaking from between my tightly clenched eyes. How can so many tears exist? An ocean of them lives inside of me, but even an ocean will run dry at some point. I'm a small person. There shouldn't be tears left inside me.

The lock clicks, and my eyes fly open, fear shooting through me.

Has Tris been gone long enough to be back already? Or has Haut tracked us down? We should have gone farther. Driven until the gas ran out hours away from the one place I dared to think would be my home.

Terror sends me scrambling off the bed, into the narrow space between the mattress and the wall, and I struggle to hold my breath. But nothing can silence my racing heart. The way it pounds feels like it's trying to hammer straight out of my body. And why wouldn't it? It's already broken, so what does it matter if it shatters the rest of me with it?

"Rowe?" the worried voice fills the room, accompanied by the rustle of plastic bags.

Unsure if my mind is playing tricks on me, I peek under the bed skirting and see an unfamiliar pair of brown boots.

Whimpering, I crawl under the bed and wedge myself under the headboard, where the side of the nightstand offers further protection.

The sound of a door opening fills the room, and the bed shifts as the person crawls across it, springs sagging with their weight.

"Rowe, sweetie, I can hear your heartbeat." The shoes appear once more, followed by a pair of jean-clad legs, then a body. The bed skirt lifts, and Tris's worried brown eyes find me in the shadows. "You sound like a hummingbird under there."

I wipe at my puffy, burning eyes, and squint at him. "I don't like your new shoes."

He lays down on the floor facing me. "Should I return them?"

I rest my head on my hand as my heartbeat begins to slow. "Do *you* like them?"

"Not if you don't." He uses his toe to take one off and kick it away. "I can go barefoot."

"Don't do that," I protest, my voice thick from all the crying. "You could hurt yourself."

"I'll heal." He tries to get the other boot off the same way before reaching down to untie it, his eyes never leaving mine. "If they make you unhappy, they're out of here."

I watch him struggle. "You're being silly."

"Says the girl under the bed." He gets the other boot off and kicks it away before eyeing my hiding spot. "I'm not sure I'll be able to fit under there, too, even in my dog form."

"Wolfdog," I correct as tears leak from my eyes once more, running over my nose and down my face to puddle on my hand.

He shakes his head, his sandy-brown hair flopping across his eyes. "We don't say that word anymore."

My bottom lip trembles. "What word?"

"Exactly." Tris reaches above his head and pulls a bag into view. "Now, I got you orange chicken. Do you want to try chopsticks or settle for stabbing your grocery store Chinese with a fork like a barbarian?"

I try to grunt in response, but it burst out of me on a sob.

Tris's face crumples, and he pushes the food away. "Okay, orange chicken no longer exists, too."

I shake my head. "Don't exile orange chicken. It doesn't deserve it."

"Even grocery store orange chicken?" He makes a face. "I'm pretty sure there isn't any orange in the sauce. It doesn't even qualify, anyway."

I shake my head again.

Tris sticks his arm under the bed, wiggling his fingers toward me. "Can you come closer? I can't hold you when you're way back there."

Nodding, I crawl closer, then roll so my back lands against his front. His arm curls around me, tucking me closer, and his head settles on top of mine.

We lay like that for a while, until the tears stop trickling down my face, and my pulse slows to match his strong, steady heartbeat.

He smooths the hair off my damp cheeks. "You want to tell me why you're under the bed?"

"I wasn't sure it was you coming back," I whisper.

"Under the bed is the first place bad guys always check in the movies," he counters. "You should hide under the sink next time."

I tilt my head back, and the stubble on the underside of his chin scratches my forehead. "You didn't immediately look under the bed."

"That's because I'm not a bad guy." He shifts to kiss the top of my head, then pulls back. "You taste like dust. Did you know dust is primarily dead skin particles? You're coated in the skin flakes of all the people who rented this room before us."

A shudder runs through me. "You couldn't just let me enjoy my cave in peace, could you?"

"We can do better for a cave." His arms tighten around me, and he scoots backward, dragging me back into the dim lighting. "Come on, dust monster, we'll clean you off, then you need to eat." "I'm not hungry," I mumble as I let him haul me to my feet.

"I know you're not." Bending, he lifts me into his strong arms, and my cheek settles over his heart as he strides for the small bathroom at the back of the room. "But I went out and hunted for your dinner. The battle was fierce, and I almost lost. So, you'll take at least one bite, right?"

I curl a hand into his new T-shirt. "How fierce could the battle have been?"

"It's the lunch rush at a superstore." He turns on the light with his elbow. "You have no idea how crazy it can get."

"It's only lunchtime?" I peer back toward the front room. "Really?"

It feels like so much more time has passed, but bright light peeks around the curtain, confirming his words.

"Just barely." He bends to set me on the closed toilet, then turns the tap on the sink. "They were still filling the cases when I finished grabbing clothes and changing. Thirty minutes earlier and I would have had to wait."

I keep hold of his shirt as he grabs a washcloth and runs it under the water. "I should have gone with you."

"It's okay." He wrings out the washcloth before wiping it over my face. It turns gray, and he gives a rueful smile. "A shower might be needed."

My hold on him tightens. Less than a day ago, I would have asked to shower together, but that kind of casual intimacy feels wrong after what happened with Haut. If Tris and I had a normal amount of distance between us, Haut's wolf wouldn't have freaked out.

Eyes burning, tears well up once more.

"Oh, sweetie." Tris drops the washcloth and kneels in front of me, cupping my cheeks. His thumbs sweep away the new tears. "We'll figure this out, okay? We'll find someplace else that will be even better, just the two of us." I sniffle and change my grip on his shirt to his shoulders. "I don't want there to be distance."

His brows pinch together in confusion. "We're not that far away from Hartford Cove right now."

I shake my head and tug on his shirt. "This distance."

The corners of his mouth lift. "Even less distance there."

The tears flow faster, and I sob out, "But now I feel guilty for wanting no distance."

His smile vanishes, and he pulls me off the toilet and into his lap, his arms wrapping around me. "You have nothing to feel guilty for. None of what happened was your fault."

"But—"

"No." The sharp word cuts me off. "The only person to blame for what happened is Haut. None of it is on *you*."

"But if I—"

Tris pushes me back and squishes my face until my lips pucker like a fish. "Stop it right now. You can't let those kinds of thoughts consume you." His hold gentles, and he leans forward to kiss my cheek. "You're the best person in the world." He kisses my other cheek. "The bestest best in the bestie universe."

I try to smile. "No, you're the bestest best in the bestie universe."

He kisses the tip of my nose. "Who's a little dust bunny?"

My smile widens. "I'm a little dust bunny."

His molasses-colored eyes shimmer with amusement. "Are you going to eat the questionable orange chicken I braved the wilds to hunt down for you?"

"Who could say no to questionable orange chicken?" Another wave of sadness and regret threatens to choke me, but I push past it. "You did, after all, risk life and limb for it."

"All the life and limb risking." In an easy show of strength, he lifts me back onto the toilet and stands to grab the washcloth once more. "But first, we finish cleaning you off."

I lift my face for him. "Thank you. I don't know what I'd do without you."

His expression softens before he turns away to run the cloth under hot water once more. "I'll always be with you. No matter what."

As he turns back to me, I close my eyes, and he gently cradles my face with one hand as he wipes away the dust with the other.

I don't know what we'll do after this, but I trust Tris to figure it out with me.

### THE MODERN AGE

A wolf howl jars me from sleep, and I bolt upright, Tris's arm falling from my waist to flop onto my lap.

My heart pounds as I stare around the shadowed motel room, unsure if the sound is real or part of my dream. We'd been here for two nights already. The conversation about where to go next had been disrupted when I woke up the morning following our escape from Hartford Cove drenched in a cold sweat and shivering with withdrawals.

When we ran, we didn't have a chance to grab the rest of my medication to finish weaning me off of it. The complacency I felt about not experiencing the withdrawal symptoms that Dr. Lopez had warned me about rose up to slap me in the face with a vengeance. Going cold turkey turned out to be as bad of an idea as she had warned.

At least I'd been down to half a pill and wasn't coming off the full dosage.

Shivering, I drag a hand down my face, and it comes away drenched in sweat. My clammy skin sticks my pajamas to my body, making me feel like I'm covered in a wet towel. I don't know how Tris can stand to cuddle with me right now.

I glance down at Tris, whose form waffles between a wolfman and a human as my mind struggles to impose reality over his magical body.

Carefully, I slip from the bed and stumble to the bathroom, my legs shaking the entire way.

Not wanting to wake Tris, I close myself inside before turning on the light. The blinding brightness makes me flinch, and I quickly shut my eyes, which only serves to increase my dizziness.

When I crack my eyes open again, my pale face stares back at me, my skin sallow and dark circles under my eyes. My brown hair hangs limply over my shoulders and past my breasts, sweat darkening it around my roots to almost black. Even under the bright lights, I can't make out the usual red highlights beneath all the grease. I imagine I look like a drug addict coming off of a bender.

Do drug addicts have benders? Or is that strictly reserved for alcoholics?

I shake my head to dislodge the thought. It doesn't matter what I look like except that it's not healthy.

Looking away from the mirror, I stumble to the shower and turn on the taps. My hands tremble as I strip out of the clothes Tris bought for me from the superstore. He aimed for small, but not small enough, and they overwhelm my delicate frame, making it hard to escape them as my entire body shakes.

Finally, I drop them into a damp pile on the floor and step into the shower. Hot water strikes my body like needles, but the warmth doesn't penetrate my skin. Teeth chattering, I crank the hot water up, desperate to melt the chill from my bones.

"Rowe?" Tris's sleepy voice calls from inside the bathroom. "You okay, sweetie?"

"Yeah, just taking a shower." I play with the shower knobs some more, determined to get warm.

"At two in the morning?" Tris asks, sounding more awake now.

The hot water knob refuses to turn any further, and I straighten in frustration. "I couldn't sleep."

"Do you need me to join you?" The last time I attempted to shower alone, the shakes were so bad that I fell over, and Tris had to pick me up.

But I feel steadier now. "That's okay. You showered before bed."

"So did you." The shower curtain rustles, and Tris peeks inside, his golden eyes heavy with concern. "Are the jitters still bad?"

I shake my head in denial despite the way my teeth chatter. "The shower won't get warm. We might need to talk to the manager."

Tris frowns and sticks his hand under the water, then immediately snatches it back with a hiss. "Are you trying to boil yourself alive?"

I wrap my arms around my body. "I'm cold."

Tris closes the shower curtain and opens it on the other side to reach for the cold-water tap, twisting it back on and testing the water until he finds a level that doesn't alarm him.

I shiver under the spray, unable to tell the difference. It feels like ice has settled into my bones and is now freezing me from the inside out.

"Will you wash my hair?" I suddenly feel less stable but want to be clean. "It's gross again."

"Sure, anything for you." He leans past me, uncaring of the water that streams across his bare back, and grabs the two-inone shampoo and conditioner he bought at the superstore when the tiny bottles the room came with ran empty. He squeezes a large dollop into his open palm. "Turn around."

I shuffle in a circle until my back faces him.

His fingers dig into my scalp, massaging the soap into my hair. With his hands on me, the shivers finally ease, warmth curling through my body.

I sigh, my shoulders relaxing. Tris always makes everything better. I close my eyes, relishing the feel of his hands on me as he works his way down my long hair. When he finishes, he gently cups a palm over my forehead before he uses the shower wand to rinse the soap out. "Maybe we should talk to Dr. Lopez," he ventures.

My eyes snap open, all the good feelings vanishing in an instant. "No."

"I could go back alone," he continues, ignoring my objection. "I know where she lives. Haut won't even know I'm in Hartford Cove before I'm out again. I'm sure Dr. Lopez will come."

I shake my head violently. "If you go back, he'll kill you."

Tris returns the shower wand to its holder, and the water cuts off. Silently, he wraps me up in a towel before he lifts me from the shower and carries me back to the bed.

Once he gets me locked within his arms, he picks up the conversation once more. "We don't know that Owen died."

It's not the first time he's broached this subject, and anger shoots through me as I try to twist away from him.

He locks his arms tighter around me, easily holding me in place. "We don't know the healing capabilities of werewolves. We don't know that what we saw was a fatal blow to Owen."

"It was the same kind of blow he took in the woods when the werewolf attacked him." My hands ball into fists. "If my grandma hadn't saved him back then, he would have died, and my grandma's not around anymore."

"But we don't know that he's dead," Tris insists. "For all we know, that's just what a dominance fight looks like. That's a thing wolves do, right?"

"I don't know," I mumble. "No one ever told me anything."

Tris leans down to press his cheek against mine. "You deserved better than that."

"I don't want you to go back," I tell him. "I won't risk you, even to ease my withdrawals.

"Okay," he agrees, though I know he'll bring it up again.

I turn my head to look at him. "I thought I heard a wolf outside."

He cocks his head to the side, his ear toward the door. "I don't hear one now."

"What if Haut's tracked us down?" I fret. "We're too close to Hartford Cove. We should move to another city."

"Okay, we can go to the next city over," he agrees.

"How about the next state over?"

He shakes his head, his expression firm. "Not until the meds are out of your system. I don't like all this shaking and sweating. I also don't like you trying to boil yourself alive in the shower."

"Fine." I turn within his arms and snuggle my head under his chin, pressing my ear over his heart to listen to it beat steadily. "But once the meds are out of my system?"

Tris releases a heavy sigh. "We'll talk about what our next step is then."

It's not a matter of money that holds us back, but rather a matter of where we want to go.

Tris keeps pushing to stay close by, just in case. In case of what, he doesn't say, but I have a feeling he'll go to Dr. Lopez if things get worse, no matter how much I argue against it.

Personally, I want to drive as far across the country as we can get, then maybe hop on a boat to put the ocean between us for added safety.

His hand smooths over the back of my wet hair. "Try to get some sleep. I'll stay awake and listen for any more howls."

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I sleep restlessly, my dreams filled with wolves, but every time I jerk awake, Tris is there to soothe me back to sleep with quiet reassurances.

When morning finally comes, Tris leaves me long enough to go across the road and get breakfast for us. He was worried about taking the car out too many times and risking exposure, but I worry about him being vulnerable on the street.

I pace the entire time he's gone, nervously peeking out the dingy drapes to the woods behind the motel.

While taking a room at the back of the motel protects us from being spotted by anybody driving past, I hadn't considered the fact that wolves might not come from the road but from the woods. I'm not sure how far away from Hartford Cove we are, and I'm not sure how good Haut is at tracking.

We were in a car, so I don't think we left a scent trail behind, but I also don't know what wolf shifters are capable of. Or what this partially formed bond between Haut and me means.

Can he track me through the bond? But it never fully formed. I'd like to think tracking me through it is impossible, but there are no guarantees where magic is involved.

I can't settle until I see Tris round the edge of the building and head toward our door, a plastic bag in his hand. We decided he could keep the ugly brown boots, and he slowly adds to our wardrobe every time he ventures out.

Eventually, we'll need to find a laundromat because we found out yesterday that, despite the motel claiming to have a laundry room, it has an out-of-order sign on the door that looks like it's been there for years.

I'm rich enough though that we can just throw away our current clothes and keep replacing them. In fact, I can buy new clothes every day for the rest of my life and never run out of money, but that just feels so wasteful. Being rich is an odd feeling, and not at all what I'm used to.

Tris opens the door and slips inside the room, bringing with him the smell of warm pancakes and bacon.

He rustles the bag at me. "Who's a hungry caterpillar?"

I'm really not, but I walk to the combination desk and TV stand shoved against the wall. It only has one chair, and the TV leaves very little space for eating.

Tris slides a Styrofoam box out of the bag and places it in front of me, along with a plastic fork and little packets of syrup and butter.

His hand moves over the top of my head as he straightens. "How are you feeling today?"

"Shaky, but not as bad as earlier." I pop open the lid to see a stack of three fluffy pancakes and what must be two orders of bacon on the side.

Before living in Hartford Cove, I would have thought this was a decadent breakfast, but the diner Tris found doesn't live up to the breakfasts Haut made every morning. I really miss his cooking.

As soon as the thought crosses my mind, I ruthlessly shove it away. I refuse to miss *anything* about Haut.

"Did you get a map?" I ask as I break open the packets and smother my pancakes in butter and syrup.

"Even better." Tris digs in his bag again and pulls out a cell phone box. "We're going modern age, baby!"

That pulls a smile from me. "What wizardry is this?"

"It's called"—he paints a rainbow shape in the air with his hands—"technology." He settles on the bed and peels the wrapper off the box. "It's way better than the one you used to have. Way better than the one I used to have, too."

Since mine was originally my dad's, and Tris hasn't had one since he was cursed to be a wolfdog, anything would be an upgrade. I had only used mine to set alarms for my medication, and once Haut took over as my self-appointed nurse, I'd stopped charging my phone. He'd made life easy and taken care of me.

Pain knifes through my chest, and I press a hand over my heart as I struggle to breathe. Haut only took care of me for his own selfish reasons. I need to stop thinking of all the good things he did and focus on the bad. He kept me uninformed and blind in a town of wolf shifters. He withheld information about everything that mattered, including the whole mate thing. Owen had to tell me about it before Haut even admitted to what was happening between us.

Another knife of pain slashes through me. Owen wanted to tell me so much. If I had spent less time being angry at him in the beginning, blaming him for my mother's death, we could have had more time together. I could have kicked Haut out, or moved in with Owen, or—

Tris's hand on my arm drags me back to the present, and I look into his worried face. "Whatever you're thinking about, just stop." He touches my chin, then trails his fingers over my cheek. "Stop it right now, Rowe. Nothing that happened was your fault."

I hope, one of these times Tris says that, I'll actually believe it.

I turn back to my pancakes and blindly I stab my fork into the center of the stack, lifting the top pancake to my mouth to tear off a bite.

Instead of melting on my tongue, it sucks all the moisture from my mouth and turns to a hard, gummy lump that tries to choke me as I swallow. I used to love pancakes, but now they're nearly impossible to eat.

Setting my fork aside, I grab a piece of bacon before I turn to study Tris on the bed. "So, what fancy wonders does this new technology provide?"

He smiles at my effort. "Just have to get through all of this startup stuff, then we'll have the world at our fingertips."

"The whole world, huh?" I say dryly.

He holds up the packaging. "That's what the box says."

I nod seriously. "Well, if that's what the box says."

He straightens with a grin. "Ha!" he holds up the phone, the screen lit up with a welcome sign. "Hello, world, here we come!"

### THE LINE TO CROSS

I t turns out that the next city over is a twenty-minute drive down the highway.

When we take the exit ramp, Tris drives around the city to check out the surroundings. As he said, we're not taking the first motel we find this time. This city is bigger than the one we just left, which had been little more than a truck stop on the way to the end of the peninsula.

I huddle under a blanket in the passenger seat, the floor heater set to high. I don't really care where we stay, so long as the bed is soft, and they have unlimited hot water.

Tris settles on a five-story hotel that's a lot less questionable than our first motel, with more security. They offer underground parking, and all of the rooms are accessed from inside the building.

After we park, Tris pulls our new suitcase out and wheels it into the lobby, then right up to the front desk, where we discover that nicer also equals more annoying.

The front desk lady gives me a suspicious once over when I pass her my check card and identification. I should have let Tris check us in alone because she's giving me that look that says she's questioning if my license is a forgery and if I'm actually old enough to check into a hotel.

Maybe we should have stuck to one of the more questionable places closer to the highway. It's very frustrating to be twenty-five and constantly have to convince people that I am, in fact, an adult. She can't find anything wrong with my ID, though, and my bank card pays the deposit without a hiccup, so she passes us a little envelope with key cards inside and directs us to the hotel elevators.

As we head toward them, I peer into what looks like a banquet room, my nose twitching with interest. "They have continental breakfast, and it looks like it's more than just a bowl of overripe bananas and boxes of cereal."

Tris nods. "They have room service, too."

I stare up at him in wonder. "I've never had room service."

"Me, either." He wiggles with excitement. "Please say we can stay here for a couple days."

I hurry ahead of him to press the call button for the elevators, and the door behind me instantly opens. "That depends on what else they offer."

Tris nods in agreement, and we step onto the elevator, riding it up to the fifth floor. "I saw a movie theater. I haven't been to one of those in forever."

"I've never been to one." I tip my head back to look up at him. "Can we get the biggest bucket of popcorn?"

"What other option is there?" he demands.

I also saw a mall and quite a few restaurants. I'm sure the city has even more exciting things, too, things that I can't even imagine because I haven't spent a lot of time wandering around cities.

But I can, now. Tris and I can go exploring, and even maybe go to a bar that's not for bikers. Or even a club. I've read about clubs. I've seen clubs on TV. Clubs look exciting.

The elevator arrives on our floor, and we head toward our room. "Do you think they have clubs here?"

Tris glances down at me in surprise. "You want to go clubbing?"

I nod eagerly. "I've never done it."

He shrugs. "I'm not sure they have one here, but I can ask at the front desk. We might have to go to a bigger city for that, though."

"Then we should do that next." I bump my shoulder against his arm. "I want to experience all the things."

Tris reaches out to wrap his arm around me. "Whatever you want."

Smiling happily, I sling my arm around his waist as I search for our room number. We find it near the end of the hall, the door exactly like all the other doors we passed on the way.

Tris drops his arm from my shoulders to pull the envelope with our key cards from his back pocket. "Have you ever used one of these?" When I shake my head, Tris passes me one of the cards. "Would you like to do the honors?"

This is *also* an exciting experience. I slip the rectangle of plastic into the lock, wait for the light on the front to flash green, then pull the card out.

Okay, not super exciting, but still new.

Grasping the handle, I thrust the door open, the weight unexpectedly heavy against my arm. This door is way better than the flimsy one at the motel we just left. It actually feels like it could withstand somebody trying to break in.

We step into a small entryway with the bathroom immediately to the left. It sparkles and gleams with glass and chrome fixtures and emits a pleasant smell of cleanliness.

A small closet next to it holds empty hangers, a couple bathrobes, and an ironing board. Tris sets our suitcase in there before we venture farther into the room.

The carpet, while low pile, doesn't have any bare patches in the gray-on-gray diamond pattern. It offers a nice cushion beneath my sneakers. Going barefoot will feel nice.

A giant, king-size bed fills most of the main room, with six pillows that look soft enough to sink into piled at the headboard. A fluffy, off-white comforter covers the bed, with a medium-gray quilt over the top and a dark-gray throw-blanket at the foot of the bed.

Past it, two chairs sit next to a large window that looks out over the city. A little table sits between them, offering a place to hang out other than the bed, and a real desk rests against one wall, with a phone and a leather folder with the hotel's logo embossed on it.

A dresser at the foot of the bed holds a TV and what looks like a coffee machine with little pods of drink options next to it.

I gaze around the room, then look up at Tris. "This is amazing."

He nods, his eyes wide. "I didn't even ask for a suite. This is their standard room."

Leaving his side, I take a running jump up onto the bed, and it sinks beneath my weight. "Okay, the next place we go, we should ask for a suite, because I want to know what can be better than this."

Following me, Tris jumps onto the bed beside me. "Should we get a honeymoon suite?"

I turn my head to grin at him. "Can we get matching rings? You know, to sell the story."

He snorts but nods. "Yeah, let's go ring shopping."

My toes curl in my sneakers at the idea of Tris and me with matching rings. "I bet a honeymoon suite would have a jacuzzi."

"Oh, it *better* have a jacuzzi. Otherwise, no deal." Tris sits upright and slides off the bed, grabs the leather binder from the desk, and brings it back. "Let's see what amazing perks our fancy hotel offers."

Together, we look over the options.

"Do they have pay-per-view?" I glance at Tris. "The naughty kind?"

Tris's brows shoot up. "Are you asking if they have porn here?"

"I've never seen porn," I admit. "I was always afraid it would show up on my browsing history and then I'd have to have *that* conversation with my dad."

Tris peeks at me from the corner of his eye. "No, we're not doing that."

"Oh, come on." I nudge my shoulder against his. "Experiences!"

His cheeks turn pink. "You can watch one without me."

I gasp in shock. "That's the line you're not willing to cross?"

"Okay, first of all, things happen when you watch porn, Rowe." He raises his eyebrows significantly. "Growing things."

I snort. "Yeah, I think that's kind of the point of porn. And I've seen you buck-ass-naked more times than I can count, with a boner." When Tris groans, I can't help but poke fun at him some more. "In fact, I saw you with a boner this morning."

Groaning louder, he plants his face into the fluffy comforter. "That's different."

"How is it different?" I demand.

"Morning wood and wood from porn have different causes," he mutters, his voice muffled by the blanket.

I glare at the top of his sandy-brown head. "So, you're saying if I ever want to watch porn, I have to wait until you leave the room?"

He nods against the mattress. "Please, do."

"It's no fun watching it alone," I scoff.

His head lifts, and he eyes me. "How do you know? You've never watched it."

"Because everything is experienced better when you're with somebody, and you're my somebody," I say simply. "I want to experience these things with you."

"That's fighting dirty." He sighs and flips to the next page. "I'll think about it."

I perk up. "You will?"

"Yeah. Maybe when we're in the honeymoon suite," he grumbles.

"Whoa, porn in the honeymoon suite." I slap my hands over my cheeks with excitement. "Do you think they throw it in for free? To get newlyweds in the mood?"

Tris groans again and points at the binder in front of us. "Look, Rowe, food."

"I know you're trying to distract me," I inform him even as I look down at the menu. "Oh, we should totally get sliders. I've never had sliders before."

"They're just tiny hamburgers," Tris protests. "We've had hamburgers."

"But not *tiny* hamburgers." I skim down the list. "Look, they have tiny tacos, too. Let's order all the tiny options for lunch."

Tris presses his shoulder against mine. "I'm glad you're wanting food again."

"I was eating," I protest.

His eyes narrow on me. "Only because I was making you."

"The shakes really are getting better," I tell him. "And I only feel slightly disgusting today."

He turns his nose up. "Well, we're definitely going to wait until you're completely not disgusting before we watch porn."

"Why?" I wag my eyebrows at him. "Isn't the point of porn to get disgusting?"

He scowls at me. "Say that again, and no porn for Rowe."

I mime zipping my lips.

This is good. Experiencing all these new things helps distract me from the reason we're getting to experience them. I'm beyond grateful that I have Tris with me, willing to go along with all my harebrained ideas, no matter how uncomfortable they may make him.

We end up ordering sliders, miniature tacos, mini donuts, and two plates of fries, then settle down on our fluffy bed and find a non-pornographic movie to watch while we wait for our food to arrive.

We spend the rest of the day hanging out in the room, binging movies and ordering normal-sized dinners when our stomachs announce they're ready for more food.

Tris doesn't bring up returning to Hartford Cove again.

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That night, I dream of running through the woods.

Branches break beneath my mighty paws as I race toward my destination. Wildlife rustles around me, fleeing from signs of a predator, but I ignore the urge to hunt. I have different prey on my mind, and it's all I can think of as I race forward.

When I break out of the woods, a familiar motel comes into view, the paint on the siding peeling. The upper walkways lean outward, one hard push away from falling. A few cars fill the parking lot, but none that I recognize. I know my prey was here, though. My bones shift beneath my flesh, my skin prickling as my fur recedes into my body, and I stride toward one of the rooms at the back on two legs.

The cool night breeze brushes against my bare flesh, and my ears pick up the sound of swishing curtains from one of the rooms above as a resident peeks out at me, then quickly closes the curtains once more.

I continue forward without concern. People who rent rooms in this kind of motel aren't going to call the police because one naked man is striding through the parking lot. They don't want attention any more than I do. As I reached the door, a delicious scent fills my nose. It smells of home. Of wild winds, forest breezes, and sweets. My mate.

Grasping the doorknob, I twist hard, easily breaking the lock, and thrust open the door.

An empty, shadowed room greets me, the occupants already gone. Despite the late hour, room service hasn't come yet to wipe away her scent, and it lingers in the air.

*I stride to the bed and lift the pillow to my nose, breathing in the scent of my mate.* 

I missed her by only hours, and a mournful howl rips from my throat, bouncing around the dirty room before my bones crunch and morph, fur sprouting from my flesh once more.

I fall to the ground on all fours and race out of the room, heading back into the woods, my instincts carrying me farther inland.

## JUST CALL ME DADDY

J jerk awake, the sound from the TV confusing my mind for a moment as I stare blearily around our hotel room.

I dreamt of wolves again, but this time it had felt more real, more personal. Like I had seen directly into Haut's mind.

Is it my overactive paranoia getting to me? Or did Haut track us to the motel room? If what I saw is real, it means he'll be able to track us here as well. We need to put up some sort of protection around us. Something like the barrier around Hartford Cove.

But how can we do that when we're on the move? And I'm pretty sure making that stinky potion in a place like this will get us kicked out.

I roll out of bed and walk over to the window to peek through the blackout blinds. While my dreams had felt like night had barely set in, dawn brightens the horizon outside. Was there more to the dream that I don't remember? Or is my mind just messing with me?

Restlessness fills my body, and sweat coats my skin, though I no longer feel clammy. Now, I feel feverish, my cheeks hot and my head buzzing. I don't know if this is a good sign or a bad sign.

Is this my body still withdrawing from the meds, the bond inside me throwing out signals to find my mate, or did I just overindulge in room service and make myself sick?

I wish we had a doctor to talk to, but I don't trust a walk-in clinic. They might accuse me of being an addict and call the

psych ward that Bryant tried to shove me into. Deputy Ardin had said the people with the butterfly nets were looking for me. No, better to avoid doctors.

Gooseflesh rises on my arms, and I rub them. Since Tris and I fled Hartford Cove, we haven't had any more late-night visits from the witch who tried to summon me out of town. Had she given up after we renewed the barrier, thinking I was now out of reach?

I can't help but feel like a pendulum is swinging over my head, uncertain when it will drop but knowing that it will.

Releasing the curtain, I return to the bed and crawl back onto it, crossing oceans of mattress to find Tris on the other side.

When I nudge his shoulder, he rolls onto his side to present me with his back. I snuggle in behind to him, curling my legs up under his bent thighs to spoon him and pressing my nose to the center of his back. His warmth sinks into me, making the fire inside my body blaze hotter, but I take comfort from it after the constant chill of before. I'd rather be too hot than be frozen inside.

I rub my nose against his spine, inhaling the musky scent of his skin after sleep.

He mumbles and reaches down to pull my arm tighter around his waist.

Maybe we shouldn't stay here for the three days we had planned. Putting more distance between us and Hartford Cove seems like a better idea, just to be safe. Especially if what I dreamt wasn't my imagination and Haut is on his way.

"Tris?" I pat his stomach, and his muscles bunch beneath my touch. "Tris, I think we need to go."

He stirs and turns his head toward me. "Did you have another dream?"

"I dreamt about Haut," I whisper.

"I'm surprised this is the first time." Tris rolls within my arms, then pulls me up higher so my head rests on his chest in my favorite spot in the world, right over his steady heartbeat. "Do you want to talk about it?"

I curl my hand into a fist over his bare chest. "In my dream, he found our motel room."

Tris strokes a hand down my back. "Was he angry?"

I think about that for a moment before shaking my head. "No. More like sad and panicky."

Tris is quiet for a moment, his hand rubbing a comforting circle on my back. "Do you think you might be projecting?"

I peer up at him. "You mean like I want Haut to feel bad for what he did, so I'm manifesting that in my dreams?"

"Yeah, something like that," Tris murmurs.

I settle back against his chest, his heart thumping steadily beneath my ear. "It doesn't matter if he's sorry for what he did. He *did* it."

Tris takes a deep breath, and I tense, preparing for an argument. But then he lets it out in a long sigh. "Do you want to still have the continental breakfast before we leave? Or do you just want to go now and grab something on the way out of town?"

Surprised, I push up onto my hands to stare down at him. "You're not going to say I'm being silly?"

He reaches up to cup my cheek. "Nothing about what you feel is silly."

I lean my head against his warm palm. "You're not going to say we should go back to Hartford Cove and talk to Dr. Lopez?"

His thumb strokes over my cheekbone. "Your symptoms are easing up, so no, I'm not going to suggest we go back to Hartford Cove. You already performed your obligatory spell casting, and you don't need the wolf shifters."

The way he phrases that makes me hesitate for a moment, my eyes skimming over his face. "Do *you* need the wolf shifters?" He shrugs, his bare shoulders moving against the crisp, white sheets. "I don't think they have anything they can teach me that I don't already know." The corners of his lips tilt up. "I lived as a wolfdog for quite a few years and did just fine."

I smile. "Yeah, you did, because you had a very special Rowe to help you out."

"A *very* special Rowe," he agrees as his hand slips down to my neck. His fingers trace over my pulse, which flutters in that way it's been doing a lot since Tris gained control of his human form. "Very special."

My breath catches as the urge to lean closer to him surges through me, followed just as quickly by the guilt.

I shift backward, and his hand falls to the bed, his expression uncertain.

I crawl backward toward the edge of the bed. "I'm going to shower and get dressed. I don't want the continental breakfast to be gone before we get there."

His gaze flicks to the clock on the nightstand, which shows that it's barely past seven in the morning, but he doesn't comment on it.

"Okay, I'll get our stuff packed up," he offers, not that there's much to pack. We hadn't exactly moved into the room when we arrived yesterday. We only opened the suitcase long enough to grab pajamas.

I nod, though, and scurry to the bathroom, locking myself inside.

With even, deep breaths, I calm my racing pulse, then go about the business of getting ready while ignoring all the whispers in my head that demand my attention. I can't think of complicated things right now. All I can focus on is our next step and staying safe. "Okay, navigator." Tris thrusts the phone into my hand, the directions already pulled up on GPS. "You're in charge of getting us to our next big adventure."

We had finished our continental breakfast quickly, neither of us able to truly enjoy the offering of belgian waffles and cut strawberries, the hot oatmeal with unlimited amounts of brown sugar, or the chafing dish filled to the brim with bacon. No one else had been in the banquet room when we loaded our plates, which meant no one was there to stop us from taking all that bacon. Yet, neither of us had placed more than two slices on our plates.

It was a waste of free food, but Tris seemed as distracted as I felt. We both made short work of eating before we dropped off our room keys and headed out to our car.

"I still think I should drive," I grumble as I buckle into the passenger seat. "I'm not shaking anymore."

Tris shoves the key into the ignition, starts the car, and backs out of the parking lot. "We have a long drive ahead, and you didn't sleep very well last night."

I glance down at the phone in my hands. Yeah, we have about forty miles before we need to take an exit. We had decided to head for the next largest city based on the type of attractions listed, including the club I'm still determined to go to.

I *will* get my new experiences checked off, even with the Haunting of Haut weighing on my mind. It will take time for that ghost to fade, and I'm unwilling to sit idly while I wait for it to happen.

My new plan is to fill myself with so much activity that I don't have time to dream at night. My eyes are on the prize, and the prize is the future.

I stare out the window as the miles pass by, hoping that distance helps with the feeling deep down in my gut that my dream was real and Haut left Hartford Cove to pursue us.

Logic tells me it's not possible, that Haut values the town too much to leave it unguarded to chase after a mate who doesn't even want him. But I don't know what instincts drive his wolf.

For all I know, he never regained his human mind after he attacked Owen.

At least Hartford Cove has another year before they have to worry about renewing the barrier spell. That gives them time to hunt for a new witch they can put on their pedestal and worship.

Because the Wendall witches are done. Long live the Brannings.

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When we arrive at our destination, excitement shivers through me.

Instead of a hotel, Tris parks in front of a fancy-looking jewelry store.

I turn to stare at him with wide eyes. "Are we getting our rings?"

He gives me a wink. "Of course, we are. We can't check into our honeymoon suite without them."

Squealing, I shove open my door and climb out.

Tris catches up with me before I reach the front entrance and gallantly opens the door for me, then sweeps an arm inward. "After you, my sweet darling."

My cheeks hurt with the size of my smile as I skip inside. With all the panic caused by the Haut dream, I forgot about getting matching rings, but not Tris.

He joins me and we wander down the brightly lit glass counters until he stops in front of a case filled with diamond rings. "You want something sparkly?"

I study the rings for a moment and imagine accidentally scratching my eye out with the protruding diamonds. I shake my head. "Totally not me." Tris nods in agreement, and we scoot down the counter to the next display case, which holds diamond-encrusted bands. These, while less likely to maim me, still look like they can do damage.

I shake my head. "Still too sparkly."

By now, we've drawn the attention of a saleslady, and she comes over with a fake smile plastered to her face. "Are you two looking for something specific?"

Her teeth sparkle so white they look like they should be in a display case of their own, and I step closer to Tris for protection.

His arm slides around my shoulder as he addresses the woman. "We'd like a set of matching rings." When her gaze flicks toward the diamonds, Tris shakes his head. "We're thinking simple bands."

Her smile dims, by which I mean she hides her teeth back behind her lips, as she sees a big commission vanish. "Do you prefer gold or white gold?"

Tris looks down at me and we nod in unison. "White gold."

She pulls a set of keys from her pocket and unlocks the case in front of us. "Do you know what size ring you wear?"

I shake my head. "This is my first ring."

"Mine, too," Tris adds.

She sets a couple of trays on the counter in front of us and runs her fingers down the line of simple bands before plucking one free. "Give this one a try."

I take it and slip it over my ring finger, where it spins loosely.

I hand it back. "I need a smaller size."

She plucks another free. "Try this one."

The second option fits perfectly, and I stick out my hand for Tris to admire. "What do you think?" "Very pretty." He holds his hand out. "I'd like the same."

The sales lady's brows pinch together. "Wouldn't you like something more masculine? We have men's bands on the other side of the store."

Tris shakes his head. "Matching is matching, right?"

With a shrug, the lady pulls out a couple of bands that match mine only in a larger size, and Tris tries them on until he finds one that fits his larger fingers.

He holds his hand next to mine. "What do you think?"

I grin, my heart racing. "I love it."

"Great. We'll take them." Tris links his fingers through mine. "Can we wear them out of the store?"

"Yes, of course." She stores the trays away and pulls out a couple of ring boxes, setting them on the counter, before she looks expectantly at Tris. "Will that be cash or charge?"

Tris glances down at me. "Pay the woman, Sugar Mama."

I scowl up at him. "That is not our new thing."

"Sugar Daddy?" he asks.

I consider that before I nod and hand over my card. "I can be your daddy."

"Yeah, you can." He waggles his brows at me. "Next stop is our honeymoon. I hope you're ready for the adventure."

I squeeze his hand, my ring pinching in an unfamiliar way that I enjoy.

With Tris by my side, I'm ready for anything.

## FOCUS ON THE FUTURE

T ris lets out a low whistle as he drags our suitcase farther into the honeymoon suite. "Now, *this* is what I'm talking about."

I gaze around the room in wonder. What I thought was high-class in our last hotel room is nothing compared to our honeymoon suite. This just feels ridiculous in its luxury.

Dim, romantic lighting illuminates the white loveseat and matching chairs that create a small, living-room area, and the dining table, large enough to seat four, holds a complimentary basket of fruit and a chrome bucket with a bottle of chilled wine inside.

On the other side of the room, gauzy white curtains surround a four-poster, king-sized bed dripping in soft blankets and pillows. Sliding glass doors lead out to a private balcony where a jacuzzi overlooks the city and a stone fireplace that can be seen from either inside or outside.

There's even a freaking chandelier in the bathroom, which holds a bathtub big enough for four people. That seems to be a theme in this suite. Are couples on honeymoons supposed to throw orgies? The double-sized, walk-in shower with a waterfall shower-head and jets on the walls, looks like it can hold at least four people, too.

Everything is done in white and natural woods, offering a beachy escape in the middle of the city.

My head turns from side to side as I take in this space. "Can we just live here forever?" "We can certainly afford to." Tris sets our single suitcase in the walk-in closet. "The hotel might object, though."

I race past Tris to the balcony and unlock the door to slip outside. From the top floor of the hotel, the honeymoon suite offers a fantastic view of the city. "How far away is the club we're going to?"

"Rein in your enthusiasm," Tris teases from near the door.

"Adventure!" I shout toward the skyline.

Tris joins me and leans against the glass railing. "The good stuff won't even happen until later at night. We should go get some club clothes."

I glance down at my jeans and T-shirt, then take in his matching outfit. "We can't go in what we're wearing?"

"Oh, my sweet summer child." He shakes his head at me. "If we're going clubbing, we're going *clubbing* which means club clothes."

My brow pinches together. "Like what?"

He boops me on the nose. "Let your Godmother Tris be your guide."

I glance at the jacuzzi, then all the open space in front of our private balcony. While we're higher than the next nearest building, I still feel exposed. "Let's get swimsuits, too."

Tris presses his hand over his heart and gasps. "You don't want to go skinny dipping?"

A flush creeps up my neck. While Tris and I do shower together sometimes, it feels like an entirely different thing to go into the giant hot tub naked and just sit around.

I clear my throat. "No. We should definitely buy bathing suits."

"But..." He turns and leans out over the transparent railing. "Adventure!"

Below us comes the sound of a balcony door sliding open. Tris and I share wide-eyed looks, and laughter bubbles up inside me as his shoulders start to shake. I slap my hands over my mouth and run back inside the room, falling onto the bed to smother my giggles.

Tris pounces on top of me, his weight pressing me deeper into the down comforter, as he tickles my ribs. "Are you running from adventure when it steps out to answer your call?"

I writhe beneath him, trying to escape his fingers as I laugh harder. "Stop! I give! I give!"

"What if they wanted to join our skinny-dipping adventure?" He leans down to smother my ear in horsey kisses. "What if they have good recommendations for the porn channel?"

I slap at the top of his head. "Stop!"

He deepens his voice. "Oh, hello, upstairs neighbors. You're here on your honeymoon? Let me recommend all the porn while I sit naked in your private hot tub."

"No!" I kick my feet, my heart pounding and my lungs struggling to fill with air through the laughter. "I don't want naked strangers in our hot tub!"

Tris playfully chomps his way down my neck. "Adventure with naked strangers!"

"Too much adventure!" I tug on his hair. "Smaller adventure!"

"Hmm." He nuzzles into the curve of my shoulder, his tickling fingers turning gentle. "How much smaller? No more porn?"

"No, I still want to watch porn." My laughter calms. "You're not getting out of that one."

"It's really not as exciting as you think it is." He sucks my racing pulse into his mouth, and a growl rumbles through him before he releases me. "Watching strangers bang is gross. You'll regret it."

"I won't know until I see it for myself, though." Something hard nudges against my ass, and my hips tilt up instinctively. "You can say I told you so." "All the I told you sos." Tris pets my sides as he grinds against me. "I'm going to make fun of you for years."

"Yeah," I groan, my hands clenching the comforter. "All the mockery."

Tris's left hand slides up my arm, and his fingers push through mine, our matching rings clicking against each other as he gasps against my neck. "Rowe?"

"Yeah?" I breathe out.

"I—" He stills, then slowly pushes off me. "I should call the front desk and see if they can give us directions to the mall."

He vanishes from the bed before I fully grasp what happened, and I remain where I am, face down in the blanket as my body throbs and my mind reels.

If Tris hadn't pulled back just now, what would have happened?

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The lady at the front desk turns out to be super helpful, giving us directions to the nearest shopping mall. No more superstores for us. She also gives us directions to a good club that's within walking distance, so we won't have to drive there later.

Tris focuses on the road as he drives us to the mall, neither of us bringing up *The Incident*.

When he turns into a large parking garage, he has to drive around until we find an open spot. The place is packed, which makes me a little twitchy. It would be easy to get lost in a crowded place like this.

Tris must think the same because, after we park and enter the large shopping center, he reaches for my hand, grasping it and threading his fingers through mine.

I hold on tight, grateful for the contact as the noise threatens to overwhelm me. Everything's so bright and loud, with assaults on my senses coming from every direction. Conversations overlap each other in a loud drone, and a mixture of scents coming from the food court clash with the specialty shops that sell perfumes, lotions, and body washes.

I lean closer to Tris. "Should we get better body wash?"

He shakes his head. "I like the one we have right now."

"But you could smell like..." I squint at the sign in the window as we walk by. "A spruce tree."

His nose wrinkles. "I don't think I want to smell like a spruce tree."

"I don't think I want you to smell like a spruce tree, either," I agree.

We continue past, walking by a few stores that cater exclusively to skaters and outdoors people, then others that are gender specific.

I slow my step at a store that sells only bras and underwear, their pink and black offerings making me wonder if my plain cotton blend needs an upgrade.

But then I think of going in there with Tris and my face flushes so hot I feel like steam is coming out of the top of my head.

Finally, we find a larger department store that offers options for both of us.

Tris checks the map at the front, then leads me to an area that only has dresses. He tugs me through the racks until he spots something he deems *club appropriate* and pulls a blue dress from the rack.

He holds it out in front of me. "This will look good on you."

I stare down. "Where's the rest of it?"

He grins. "You want to go clubbing, this is what you wear."

"But..." I flatten the dress against my front. "It leaves my legs almost completely bare."

"Oh, sweetie, you have no idea what you've asked for." Shaking his head, he drops the dress into my hand and scoots me toward the dressing room. "These places get so hot you'll be happy you're practically naked."

His hand vanishes from my back as we arrive at the changing room, and I twist to peer over my shoulder. "Aren't you coming in with me?"

Tris glances over at a saleswoman who eyes us suspiciously. "I'm pretty sure they frown on that here."

"Fine." I reluctantly leave him and go into the dressing room.

Quickly, I strip and try on the dress.

Tris is getting better at picking out the right size for me, and I study myself in the mirror. He has an eye for fashion, I'll give him that. I don't feel as exposed as I thought I would.

The dress falls several inches below my ass and has a delightful sway to it when I shift back and forth. The spaghetti straps leave most of my shoulders and collarbones bare in the front and swoop low over my back. I expected the front to gape over my breasts, as most clothes do—women's clothes aren't really designed for people with tiny boobs—but the higher cut in the front keeps the material flush to the top of my chest.

I bend and twist, just to make sure I don't flash anything. I even bend completely over and peer between my legs at the mirror to make sure my ass is still covered. After it passes all of my inspections, I pull it off and place it back on the hanger before getting dressed.

When I leave the changing room, I find Tris perched on a padded cushion right outside.

He pouts as soon as he spots me. "You didn't come out to show me?"

"You didn't say I was supposed to." I tuck the dress under my arm. "You can see it when I put it on later." "Fine," he grumbles as he leads me back to the main walkway and we head for the men's section. "But this means I'm not showing you my outfit, either."

"You have to show me your outfit," I protest.

"No, no, no." He shakes his finger under my nose. "If we're going to be surprising, we have to be surprising."

Now, it's my turn to pout, though I kind of like the idea of us not seeing what we'll look like until later. It almost feels like a date. Something else I've never done.

The thought reminds me of how I had hoped to ask Owen and Haut on dates to get to know them both better, but I firmly shove the memory away.

None of that. Only future thoughts from now on, and I can't wait to go on a pseudo date with Tris.

## ALIGN THE CHAKRA

W ith shopping bags in hand, we head back out into the wild of the mall.

"Do you want to grab a snack before we return to the hotel?" Tris asks.

"I don't know." I give the question the serious consideration it deserves.

The food court offers an entire world of cuisine, but what if there's something better at the hotel?

My shoulders slump with the burden of deciding. "Why didn't we check out the room service menu before we left?"

Tris gives me a mournful look. "An extreme oversight on our part."

"Yes. Extreme," I agree.

Tris points down the hall to a food stand in the middle of the wide walkway. "Maybe we load up on soft pretzels before we go back? Just in case? We can always return tomorrow if the menu options suck at the hotel. There's a room fridge and a microwave in our suite for anything we want to bring back."

I nod sagely. "Pretzels sound like a wise choice."

As we head toward the stand, a store off to the left catches my eye. Crystals fill the display window and the entrance into the store is darker than the ones on either side of it, lending it an air of mystery. Hadn't I just been thinking about finding a mentor? This feels like too much coincidence to ignore. I grab Tris's arm. "Wait. Let's go in there first."

Tris glances down at me then at the store I stare at and purses his lips. "Looks a little new agey."

"Looks a little witchcrafty," I whisper back.

Tris snorts. "Unlikely, but we can check it out anyway. We have time."

Linking my free arm through his, I pull him through the crowd toward the store.

As we near, the faint sound of wind chimes drifts from the open door, carried on a breeze of incense. The musky, spicy scent competes with the other warring smells of the mall.

Tris wrinkles his nose. "Eww, patchouli. I never could stand that stuff."

"Oh, come on," I laugh. "It's not as bad as the muck we were slathered in a few nights ago."

My laughter dies as I remember what came after that. The celebration of success in renewing the town barrier washed away in a burst of unforgivable violence when Haut lost control of his wolf.

Tris hugs my arm tighter against his body. "Do you think they can realign our chakras?"

I glance up at him. "What are chakras?"

"I have no idea. I just saw it on TV once," he admits. "But if the person in the store has any level of knowledge, they should be able to explain what exactly that means and if we should have it done."

While I know he's trying to distract me, I'm grateful for his efforts and play along. "Well, if they don't know what chakras are, then we're leaving right away."

We step into the store, then pause in the entryway, allowing our eyes to adjust from the bright lights of the outer mall. Flutes and wind chimes fill the air, accompanied by quiet chanting. Now, this is what I expected when I set out to learn witchcraft, and it makes my pulse quicken with excitement. I know I've performed spells and seen the results of them, but there's just something so witchy about all of the entrapment that I didn't get to experience.

The counter with the cash register stands empty, so Tris and I wander over to a shelf of crystals and read the tags that identify each one's purpose. Rose quartz for healing. Amethyst for energy. Aquamarine to ward off negativity.

I pick up the pale blue stone. "Do you think this actually works?"

Tris shrugs. "It can't hurt. And it's pretty."

I nod and look for any other stones on the shelf that might be useful before we move along to a bookcase filled with books. Unlike the handwritten journals from my grandma's house, these all came from a commercial publisher complete with ISBNs and barcodes on the back.

I shake my head and push Tris along. I don't trust any spell books available to the masses. If witchcraft were that easy, there would be more witches out there.

The back corner holds a wall of jewelry made from chunky stones and silver. A few look like they might be carved from bone. While they do look witchy, or at least bohemian, there are no helpful signs here that explain what any of them do.

The adjacent wall offers a number of scarfs, flowy skirts, and blouses that remind me of what peasants wear in historical shows.

I finger one made of what looks like layers of scarves and raise my eyebrows at Tris, who shakes his head no.

Leaving the clothing section, we move down the wall, heading back toward the front. The display of incense tickles my nose, but the various burners are pretty. There are also a few larger pieces that look like they could be used to burn some other kinds of herbs.

When I reach for a tall, clay, gourd-shaped piece, though, Tris slaps my hand before he drags me away. We also find mirrors that look purposefully antique and various sculptures of the moon and sun.

I lift my little, blue stone. "This might be the only thing we get from here."

"At least it's pretty," Tris offers with a sympathetic pat on my shoulder.

We head for the cash register, and the collection of daggers on the wall behind it catch my eye.

I nudge Tris. "What do you think those are used for?"

He waggles his eyebrows at me. "Human sacrifices."

"They're meant for calling the quarters," a breathy voice informs us from behind.

I barely hold back my squeal of surprise as I spin around to find a woman in a long skirt and blouse that look like they could have been pulled from the rack at the back of the store. A scarf covers her hair, and a thick layer of eyeliner accentuates her dark eyes.

She drifts past us in a cloud of incense. "Daggers are also used when a witch needs help focusing her powers. For those who prefer something a little less deadly, there are also the wands." She steps behind the counter and trails her fingers over a number of wooden sticks on the wall next to the daggers. "Do you have an interest in the craft, young one?"

Tris and I exchange a glance because, honestly, all that heavy makeup isn't disguising the fact that she looks younger than both of us.

With a shrug, we join her at the counter, and I set my aquamarine stone on the wooden surface. "Does this really ward off negative energy?"

Her head dips. "It has already been purified and blessed."

Blessed, huh? I wonder what that involved beyond slapping a price tag on the bottom.

Tris nudges me with his elbow, and I sigh. "Do you help people align their chakras?"

Her pencil thin eyebrows sweep together. "We have a number of books on meditation to balance your internal energies, if that's what you're after? Yoga will also help, depending on what you're worried about."

I glance up at Tris. "You need to do yoga."

*"You* need to do yoga." He slaps a hand against his hard stomach. "I'm the fit one between the two of us."

I narrow my eyes at him. "Because you cheat."

"I'd hardly call it cheating." He leans down, his breath on my ear sending a shiver through me as he whispers, "It's not my fault wolf shifters are naturally fit."

While he's right, it's still cheating.

"Should I chase you around more?" he continues, a low growl in his voice. "I like pouncing on you."

Butterflies fill my stomach, which I firmly ignore. Tris and I have played chase hundreds of times. It's not at all sexy.

I shove my BFF back and focus on the woman behind the counter, who watches us with amused interest. "I think our chakras are fine. What about something that blocks another witch from finding me over long distances using personal items they stole from my room?"

Tris's eyes widen, and he shakes his head at me.

I ignore him, my eyes fixed on the woman as her lashes flutter with a sign of recognition.

Her gaze moves over me in an assessing sweep. "That's a very specific request."

"It's a very specific feeling." I give her an equally assessing stare. "Kind of like there's a rope around my guts."

"Ah. So, you're not a faker." Her lips curve, and her voice loses that breathy quality. "I might actually have something for you." She grabs the aquamarine stone and chucks it into a basket behind her. "Forget about that. It's produced in a factory, and the blessing is half assed at best, so the effects are negligible." She crouches behind the counter, and the sound of a cabinet opening fills the store.

When she rises once more, she sets a wooden chest on the counter. "Do you know how to invoke the four corners?"

I bite my lip for a moment. "I've done a chalk triangle with white candles to break a curse."

"Invoking the four corners is easier than that." She reaches under the counter and pulls out a pamphlet, placing it in front of me. "Who's your mentor? It sounds like they're skipping the basics."

"We were kind of in a crunch, so..." I shrug, not wanting to get into the nitty gritty of Haut's method of teaching.

She frowns. "That can be dangerous. You should seek out a new mentor."

"I plan to," I assure her. "But, first, I'd like to keep a persistent witch out of my guts and off my tail."

She gives a knowing nod. "I'm assuming you don't have the right candles?"

"Assume I have nothing but what you see in front of you," I tell her.

"Tough breakup, huh? My first mentor was a piece of trash, too. Totally tried to power jump me." She reaches beneath the counter and comes back with a box of what looks like birthday candles, only instead of a rainbow, the box only holds green, brown, white, and blue. "You don't need pillars for short spells. Just make sure you use a compass app on your phone so you have them in the right place."

I glance at Tris, who dutifully pulls out our cell phone to download an app.

"If you're interested, we have a meeting here every Friday after the store closes," she offers as she flips back the lid of the box. "I could introduce you to a few practitioners. You might click with someone who can take over your training and give you a good foundation to build on." She gives me a smile. "No assholes. I promise." "That would be..." I glance at Tris, who nods. "Yeah, that would be amazing."

"Cool. Just come to the back door around ten at night on Friday. It will be the one with three ninety-six on the wall above it." She reaches into her box and pulls out a piece of iron that bends back and forth on itself in a complicated, twisting maze. The center holds a clay disk, and a long leather thong threads through one of the bends in the iron. She taps the clay disk. "Four drops of blood onto the clay as you request protection for each of the elemental corners. That will draw the other witch's focus to the disk, and the iron maze will send them on a wild goose hunt. When the blood vanishes from the clay, you'll need to renew the spell, so keep a close eye on that."

I pull the heavy piece of jewelry closer. "And this really works?"

She nods. "But you need to get your personal items back from whoever is messing with you. A lot of bad shit can be done with that, depending on what they have."

"Thank you." My hand curls around the heavy necklace. "How much do we owe you?"

"Pamphlet is free. The candles are three dollars." She studies me for a moment. "I'll give you the Maze of Misdirection for free."

My chin lifts in surprise. "You don't have to do that. We can pay for it."

She waves a hand in dismissal. "Such things would weaken the spell, and I'm guessing you need this to be as powerful as possible." Her lips curve. "But if you're interested in an exchange...?"

I wave a hand down my front. "All that I have."

Her gaze shifts to Tris. "Real, cruelty-free wolf fur is hard to come by."

Tris's hands lift to his head. "No way!" Then, he drops his hands back to his side. "I mean, I have no idea what you're talking about." She rolls her eyes. "Oh, come on. I could spot you a mile away. But I wasn't sure if your friend knew, since she's not like you."

"What do you want wolf fur for?" I demand.

Tris gives me a look of utter betrayal. "You just want an excuse to shave my head."

"Wolf fur is used in a lot of protection spells for families, since wolves are so family oriented and they protect their young and their homes," she explains. "It's just a suggestion, though. It's not a requirement. But, next time you're giving him a good brush down, maybe don't throw away the fur that comes out naturally? Just put it in a little baggie and bring it to one of the meetings."

"Sure." That seems easy enough, and it's better than throwing it out if it's really that useful and hard to come by. "Is there a pet store in the mall?"

She grins. "Yeah, down past the food court."

"Thanks. I really appreciate all this." I hand her a five for the candles and tuck them, along with the pamphlet and necklace, into my shopping bag.

"I'll be seeing you!" she calls as we head for the door.

"I can't believe you're seriously going to put my precious fur into a baggie and give it to that girl like some kind of drug deal," Tris hisses as soon as we're out of earshot.

"I mean..." I shrug. "It's a cheap trade."

"Is nothing precious to you anymore?" he demands.

"I throw it in the garbage," I huff out. "At least this way it's going to be used to protect some homes. It's a nice idea."

"I guess," he grumbles. "But you better buy me all the pretzels. And I want a candied apple, too, if they have one of those places here."

"Yes, yes." I pet his arm. "We'll get you all the treats."

Back at the hotel, Tris munches happily on his candied apple while I read over the pamphlet to see how hard it will be to invoke the four corners.

Based on what the pamphlet says, each colored candle represents an element, and they need to be positioned at north, east, south, and west. That seems easy enough.

"Do you think she meant one drop of blood for each quarter to equal four total?" I ask Tris. "Or four drops of blood for each quarter?"

"No clue," Tris mumbles around a mouthful of dessert, his eyes glued to the room service menu as he plans out our post clubbing meal. "Better too much than too little."

"I guess so." I grab my bag of supplies and pull out the plastic plate I bought at a Dollar Store, setting it on the table along with a lighter and finger-stick meant for people with diabetes. "Maybe more blood will mean it takes longer to wear off."

Tris nods in agreement. "Four times the protection, four times the charm."

"Okay, I think I'm ready." I pull out the Maze of Misdirection and set the heavy piece of iron in the center of the plastic plate, then use glue dots to fasten the candles in the right places by using the compass app on our cell phone.

Starting with East for Air, I light the white candle, then use the finger-stick to prick my finger and drip four drops of blood onto the clay disk in the center of the necklace as I read from the pamphlet, invoking 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.

By the time I get to the end, I've had to prick my finger a second time, and it aches as I squeeze drops of blood out. They absorb quickly, the light brown now a muddy color. Tris leans across the table, eyes fixed on the necklace. "Did it wor—"

He cuts off as a brisk breeze whips through the room, snuffing out the tiny flames.

We stare at each other, wide-eyed, before our heads turn in unison toward the sliding glass doors to make sure they're shut.

They are, and Tris thrusts his fist into the air. "The great and powerful Branning witch wins again!"

I grin down at the plastic plate as pride fills me. Maybe I'll be good at this witchcraft thing, after all.

#### PULSE OF THE MUSIC

**66** don't see why I have to wear your shirt," I grumble, rolling up the sleeves for the second time as we walk toward the club.

Tris's hand on my waist urges me to his other side as a trio of men walk past. "It's cold. I don't want you to catch a chill."

Since we're still in the middle of summer and, even at night, it's seventy degrees out, that comment earns him a suspicious glare. "You're the one who picked out the dress."

He nods firmly. "And I have zero regrets about the dress."

"Uh-huh," I say, unconvinced.

Nevertheless, I drop the subject. If Tris wants me to wear the shirt until we get to the club, it's not *that* big of an issue. At least I know it's not because he thinks I look *bad* in it. When I stepped out of the bathroom in my clubbing outfit earlier, the gleam in Tris's eyes had been all appreciation, making me feel flushed all over.

He doesn't look bad himself in a pair of black slacks and a tight, black T-shirt, the pink of his collar the only pop of color. His name tag jangles as we walk, and his hand stays on my waist.

I'm grateful he didn't insist I buy high heels. I don't have any practice with shoes like that, and the club is a bit farther away than the lady at the front desk led us to believe.

As we come up on the building, I worry that we'll have to stand around outside, but we came early enough in the evening that there's no line, and the man at the door lets us through with barely a glance.

A short, dimly lit hallway leads deeper into the club, the sound of music growing louder as we near, the deep bass urging my heart to keep pace with the beat.

At the end of the hall, we pause as we come up to another man, this one sitting behind a short podium. The club beyond remains hidden by a black curtain, but strobes of purple light sweep under it, tickling at our shoes.

Tris hands over a twenty-dollar bill for our entry fee, and the man stamps his hand without a second glance, then eyes me. "I'm gonna need to see your ID, kid."

I bristle at that. The stupid, oversized shirt is *not* helping me look like an adult.

When I glare up at Tris, he just laughs and pulls my ID from his pants pocket. Without pockets of my own, he took charge of all our important stuff like money and IDs.

The man takes my license and scrutinizes it closely, even putting it under a light on his podium to check for all the right markings. Finally, he grunts and hands it back to Tris before stamping the back of my hand as well.

"Have fun." He waves us toward the curtain and turns to the people who come in behind us.

Tris's hand returns to the small of my back and he holds one side of the curtain open as we venture into the club.

My eyes widen as I take in the purple and pink lights and the glittering, glass chandelier overhead. The path we follow splits in three directions. Straight ahead takes us to a round dance floor, while left and right lead around the outer edge.

Deeply-padded, white booths circle the dance floor, while a long, curved bar against the wall offers the chance for drinks no matter which side you choose.

An illuminated booth at the back holds the DJ, with a large screen behind him playing a pulsing light show. Above him, a glass wall on the second story reveals additional dance space that overlooks the ground floor.

Tris moves behind me, drawing the shirt off my shoulders. "Are you ready for this?"

My stomach tightens as I take in all the people on the dance floor, but I nod with determination. This is all for the new experiences. It doesn't matter that I'm a horrible dancer. I don't care what strangers think of me, and Tris already knows my skill level.

Tris shrugs on the dress shirt and rolls up the sleeves before he grasps my hands and pulls me to the outer fringe of the mass of people.

I appreciate that we're not in the thick of it as Tris raises my arms over my head, then grips my hips, moving me to the beat of the song.

He leans down, his lips close to my ear to be heard. "Just move however you want! There's no meaning to it except to feel good!"

I catch on quickly, the music sinking into my bones and making my pulse beat faster.

This is way better than a stupid ceremonial dance. It feels more like when Tris and I would play in our apartment by ourselves, dancing to oldies without a care in the world.

Only, instead of oldies, this music has a pulsing, primal feel that gets my hips swaying and my arms moving. The short skirt of the dress playfully sweeps over the tops of my thighs and sweeps back and forth over my ass, almost like a third partner.

Tris grins as I relax more and more, his body moving in time to mine. His hands stay on me, light but also firm, reassuring me that he won't let go so that I can.

My eyes close, blocking out the people around me as I let the music take control.

I don't know how long we dance, but it feels like hours. Sweat coats my skin, and I'm thankful for the skimpy dress as my heart beats harder.

When Tris asks if I want to take a break, though, I shake my head, unwilling to give up this feeling. My whole body pulses and tingles like the night I performed the barrier spell, everything heavy but light at the same time.

Slowly, we move deeper onto the dance floor, the people around us pressing Tris and me closer together. Removing the distance between us feels natural, space not needing to exist where Tris is concerned. My arms find his neck, and I rise onto my toes, my body swaying against him.

His hands on my waist pull me even closer, his head dropping to the curve of my neck. I can't hear his groan, but I can feel it vibrating through me, a song all its own, calling me to a different kind of dance.

My stomach tightens as his hard cock rubs against me, but I don't pull away. Instead, I hold him tighter.

As Tris's mouth opens over my racing pulse, my hand moves to the back of his head, fingers pushing through his sandy-brown hair to encourage him. Not that he needs encouragement as he sucks my pulse into his mouth.

A rush of pleasure shoots straight to my hips, and warmth pools between my thighs. My nipples tighten, and I rub my breasts against his hard chest, trying to ease the ache and only making it worse.

Tris growls, the vibration traveling through me, and he releases my skin to lick up to a sensitive spot behind my ear. I tilt my head to make it easier, and he nibbles my earlobe as a reward. One hand on my waist drifts lower to squeeze my ass through my dress, then sweeps down, coming back up under my skirt.

I gasp as his bare palm cups my ass, his fingers pushing beneath the edge of my underwear. He massages my flesh, his fingertips brushing the crease of my ass before he follows it down, cupping between my legs and just brushing against my inner heat. I moan, my hips tilting back in invitation, wanting to feel the press of his fingers between my legs, needing to be filled by him.

His lips drift over my cheek, narrowing in on my mouth, and my lips part on another gasp. Tris and I have never kissed for real. Not on the lips. Not with purpose. Excitement and something deeper moves through me, like this is always where we were meant to be, connected on every level.

He pauses, his eyelashes lifting, and his golden-brown eyes hold mine with the same anticipation of finally crossing that line we've held for so long.

A hard shove against my back knocks me to the side, throwing me out of Tris's arms.

I stumble, catching my balance against another dancer, momentum carrying us farther away as the writhing crowd moves to surround us.

Yelling an apology, I spin back to find my BFF being groped by some blond bitch. And I mean that literally, as wolf ears shimmer in and out of my vision.

What the fuck is a wolf shifter doing in this club, and why is she pawing at Tris's chest like he's a prime cut of meat she wants to taste?

Tris pushes her hands away, but she just comes back more aggressively, tugging playfully on his collar as she tries to draw him down for a kiss.

Anger drowns the pulse-racing desire from a moment before, and I shove my way through the people between us, march right up to her, and shove her just as hard as she shoved me.

She stumbles back on her spiky heels, though not far enough for my satisfaction.

She straightens to her full height, which would have been impressive even without the six-inch heels helping her out. She smooths a hand down her skin-tight dress, which shows off all of her curves, as her eyes rake over me. She obviously finds me lacking as her hungry gaze returns to Tris and she takes a purposeful step forward.

What is with female wolves? Can't they see when someone is already taken?

Drawing back my boot, I kick her right between her oversexed legs to knock some sense into her.

Howling, she crumples to the ground, clutching herself. Heads turn toward us, a few wolf ears among them, and the pack she came with push their way toward us.

"Oh, shit!" I reach for Tris's hand and yank him toward the door. "We gotta get out of here!"

Tris runs with me, and we burst out onto the sidewalk. The club got more popular as it got later, and now a line forms along the side of the building.

"There!" Tris points to a taxi dropping off a group of girls in club clothes, and now he pulls me forward as he runs for it.

Grabbing the door before it can close, he shoves me inside, then follows, slamming the door and yelling the name of our hotel to the startled driver.

The man slaps the box on his dashboard to set the total back to zero and pulls away from the curb just as the pack of bitches bursts out of the club.

"Oh my God, you little beast." Tris laughs and grabs my face, turning me to look at him. "I can't believe you did that."

I grip the front of his shirt where the bitch groped him. "She was practically molesting you. I don't even want to know what she was saying."

He leans in closer. "No, you don't. You'd probably go back and kick her again, my little warrior."

"Damn straight I would." My pulse quickens as my eyes drop to his lips. "She shouldn't have been touching you."

His nose bumps against mine. "No, only you get to touch me."

Throat suddenly dry, I nod. "Yeah. Only me."

He reaches down to take my left hand in his. "Tris and Rowe forever."

I nod, my nose rubbing against his. "Tris and Rowe forever."

# CHICKA CHICKA BANG BANG

T ris holds the door to our suite open for me, his body halffilling the entrance so that I brush against him as I pass into the room.

My pulse races so fast it makes me dizzy, and the quiet latching of the door makes me shiver with anticipation.

I kick off my shoes, then glance over my shoulder. "I'm going to shower real fast. I smell like the club."

He leans against the door, his eyes tracking me as I walk into the bathroom and shut myself inside.

My heart pounds as I strip off the dress and let it fall to the ground, then step out of my underwear. After a moment of hesitation, I take off the iron necklace and set it on the countertop so the water doesn't wash the clay disk clean.

Walking into the enormous shower, I turn on the faucet. Cold water hits my bare skin before quickly heating, and I grab the soap, rubbing it into a washcloth. I need to calm down before I explode.

The bathroom door opens, and I spin, soapy washcloth clutched to my breasts.

Tris strides into the bathroom, his eyes raking over my body through the glass wall. Without slowing down, he reaches for the hem of his shirt and pulls it over his head, exposing his hard muscles.

My mouth goes dry as he steps into the shower with his pants still on. "Tris?"

He pops the button on his fly as he continues forward with a predatory grace that sends my pulse racing once more.

Instinctively, I back away from him until my back hits the wall.

He stops in front of me, one hand landing on the tiles next to my head as he leans down. "You smelled so good at the club." He bends to press his face against my wet skin. "All the way back, trapped in the cab with you, all I could smell, all I could taste, was how much you wanted me." He lowers his zipper. "Tell me you want me as much as I want you."

I glance down to see his cock jutting from the front of his slacks, long and thick at the base, then tapering at the tip.

Unable to deny it any longer, I shiver with desire. "I want you."

"Good." He lets his pants fall to the tiled floor and kicks them off to the side before he clasps my waist and pulls me forward.

He kisses me with abandon. The dance we've been performing for the last week, circling each other and drawing closer before pulling away, has fueled our passion. There's no more hesitation. He kisses me like he wants to eat me, and it makes my legs tremble. This is a side of Tris I've never seen before, a part of Tris I've never tasted before, as his tongue sweeps into my mouth possessively, marking all the unexplored parts of me.

The washcloth falls from my hands as I reach for him, my arms curling around his back to press my front flush to his. His hard cock nudges at my stomach, hotter than the water that flows around us.

When Tris's lips finally release mine, I sag against him, gasping for breath.

He reaches past me, turning off the water. "I want you in a bed."

Before I can say anything, he scoops me up into his arms and carries me out of the bathroom and to the large, king-sized bed. There, he sets me down before he crawls over me, pushing my legs apart to settle his heavy weight between them. He leans down, his lips closing over my hard nipple. My body arches off the bed, thrusting my breasts up for his attention as pleasure shoots through me. His teeth catch my hard bud, tugging gently before his lips open over my breast and he sucks the flesh into his mouth.

I moan, tangling my hands in his wet hair. He cups my other breast, pinching and squeezing until I'm an achy, needy mess beneath him. My hips lift as I rub myself against his hard stomach, needing him inside me before I come on my own.

With a last tug on my breast, he sits back on his heels, his gaze moving over my naked body sprawled out before him. "God, you're beautiful." He lifts my leg, his teeth sinking gently into the delicate skin behind my knee. "You drive me crazy."

My toes curl with pleasure as he licks and nibbles on my inner thigh before turning his head and giving my other leg the same attention. He leaves little red marks all over my skin, like he can't fight the urge to mark me so that everyone knows I'm his.

His hands move under my knees, lifting me so that his heavy cock drags back and forth over my clit, heightening my desire.

I fist the blanket beneath me, my hips rocking helplessly on their own.

He pulls back to rub the tip of his cock over my clit, adding pre-cum to the slickness of my desire. My back arches as pleasure rocks through me, stealing my breath.

His cock slips down my folds to my entrance, the head nudging at my center. Slowly, he presses forward, his tapered tip easing the way for his thick shaft to stretch me wider. I cry out, my entire body trembling on the verge of release.

"Tris." I reach up for him, my finger hooking in his collar to pull him back down on top of me. His cock sinks the rest of the way into me, and he moans against my shoulder. "You feel so good, Rowe. I love you." He licks and sucks on my neck. "I love you so much. Together forever."

"Together forever," I gasp as he begins to thrust inside me.

Moaning, I wrap my arms and legs around him, holding on tight.

His lips trail over my cheek and find my mouth once more, swallowing down my cries of pleasure.

His pace quickens, his thrusts rocking me beneath him, driving me toward release.

Moaning, I reach down and grab his ass, digging my nails in as my hips lift to meet the surge of his body within me. His lips move back to my neck, his mouth opening over my shoulder, and he bites down.

A scream rips out of me, and I stiffen as pleasure surges through me. He grinds into me, then pulls out and thrusts back into my pulsing channel. My hold on his ass tightens, trying to hold him inside as I ride out my release.

Then he groans and his body freezes over mine, his hips pressed against me and his cock buried deep. His cock swells within my body, stretching me impossibly tight, and another wave of pleasure crashes over me as his knot locks our bodies together.

Shuddering, I rock helplessly beneath him as hot cum floods my channel. It feels like he's still growing inside me, painfully tight, and I come again.

"I'm sorry." Tris kisses the corner of my eye, licking away the tears that fall helplessly from the onslaught of pleasure. "I can't stop. I'm sorry."

Moaning, I turn my face into his neck, breathing heavily, filling my lungs with his scent as consciousness threatens to leave me, pushed away by another wave of pleasure as my body struggles to accept Tris's mating knot. My last thought, before we pass out, is that I should have known Tris and I were mates. After all, it's Tris and Rowe forever.

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I don't know how long I pass out for, but when I open my eyes, the world is still dark outside.

Groaning, I roll over and let out a startled squeak when I find Tris's eyes open and fixed on me.

"Hey," he says softly.

Embarrassment warms my cheeks. "Hey."

"Are you okay?" His worried gaze searches my face. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

I stretch my legs and flex my toes, relishing the ache in my hips that reminds me Tris and I crossed the line last night and there's no going back. Not that I want to. "You didn't hurt me."

His brow lifts.

"Okay, but it was a good hurt." I reach out and take his hand. "It was a knotty hurt."

"Are you being punny mere hours after we discovered we're mates?" he demands in horror.

I giggle. "Knot really?"

Growling, he pounces on top of me, his hard cock dragging over my bare thigh.

My pulse quickens, but I laugh out, "Knot again!"

"Oh, you're really funny." He bites my neck, careful not to hurt me. After a moment, he leans up on his elbows to look down at me with a serious expression. "You're really okay?"

"Really," I tell him.

His brows pinch together. "Really, really?"

"Really, really." I reach up to grab his collar and tug him down until our noses press together. "Me passing out means it felt overwhelmingly good."

He relaxes and rubs his nose against mine. "So good you want to do it again?"

"Knot right away," I tease.

"Is this what life is going to be like from now on?" he huffs out, then glares. "And don't you even think of saying another pun."

Before I can answer—which most definitely would have involved another pun, because how could it knot?—my stomach lets out a loud demand for food.

Tris glances down at the growling beast. "Well, okay then."

"Bacon," I whisper. "And pancakes."

His gaze lifts to meet mine. "I can't decide if you're placing a food order or trying to turn me on."

"Both?" I nod decisively. "We'll go with both."

"Okay, fine." He rolls off of me, then gives me a shove toward the edge of the bed. "Go rinse off while I order room service. We can eat in the hot tub."

"But we didn't buy bathing suits," I remind him as I head for the bathroom.

"That's okay," he calls after me. "I'd just take it off you anyway."

I stumble on my next step, and Tris laughs.

Ignoring him, I stride with as much grace as possible to the bathroom, which isn't easy considering the ache between my legs.

Quickly, I wash off the remnants of our night together, then pull on one of the hotel bathrobes. The voluminous material feels soft against my skin and almost touches the floor, the unisex size way too large for my petite frame. As I comb my wet hair out, I study myself in the mirror. I look like I've lost weight, and the shadows beneath my eyes aren't completely gone, but I look better than I did even two days ago. The fever and shakes are gone from my withdrawal of the meds. In a few more days, I should be back to normal. Or, as normal as I can get with my life.

I push my long hair over my shoulders and a large, red mark draws my attention. Tugging the collar to the side, I stare in horrified delight at the large hickey on my neck. I've never had a hickey before, and I can't wait to show it to Tris.

From out in the other room, I hear a knock on the door, followed by Tris's low murmur.

Not wanting to step out while the food delivery person is in the room, I linger at the sink.

The black cord of the necklace catches my eye. In my haste to undress earlier, I'd just tossed it onto the counter, and it slid behind the tissue box. I grab it and loop it over my head once more.

Can't be too safe, now can we?

A loud crash from the other room jerks me around, and my heart slams into my ribs. "Tris?" Worried, I hurry to the door and pull it open. "Tris, are you okay?"

"Run, Rowe!" Tris shouts, followed by the shatter of glass.

Oh, God, did Haut find us? I have to stop him from killing Tris.

I race into the bedroom, where a food service cart lies on its side, the contents splattered over the carpet.

A brisk breeze pulls my attention to the glass doors to the patio. At first, I think Tris opened them to get the hot tub ready before I see the jagged spikes of glass still clinging to the frame and more glass on the floor.

Then, the two men grappling on the balcony make me forget everything else. That's not Haut trying to kill Tris, and a chill runs down my spine as I recognize the older man. He looks like he's lost weight since the last time we saw him, the night Tris and I ran away from home to escape him putting me in the crazy house.

Bryant had somehow tracked us down.

Glass crushes beneath my bare feet as I rush forward to help Tris.

He sees me coming, his attention moving away from Bryant for only a split second. But it's all the man needs as he bends and rams his shoulder into Tris's stomach, then grabs his legs and lifts him.

Tris's eyes widen in panic as his feet leave the ground, and he grapples to grab onto something, *anything*.

"No!" I scream as I leap through the broken door, my hands out to pull him back to safety.

Too slow, Bryant lets him go, and Tris topples over the railing, plummeting toward the ground.

## MAGIC IN MY BLOOD

A s Tris vanishes from view, a scream rips out of my throat, and I lunge for the railing.

Bryant turns, catching me around the waist, and drags me back through the broken slider and into the suite.

"No! Let me go! Tris!" I pound against Bryant's chest and thrash in his arms, desperate to escape, to go back to the balcony. Tris can't be dead. It was supposed to be Tris and Rowe forever. A hole opens in my heart that only he can fill. "Tris!"

I try to knee Bryant in the balls, but he shoves me to the side. Then his large fist knocks me over the temple.

My head snaps to the side, pain flaring through me, and my screams cut off.

"That's better," he grunts as he reaches inside his jacket. "You've been a real pain in the ass to track down, Rowe. What would your father say about all this?" He pulls a thick piece of plastic from inside his jacket and waves it around the room. "You haven't even been gone two months, and you're shacked up with some nobody."

Dazed, I try to fight him off as he grabs my wrists and zipties them together.

"I would have treated you nice, but you had to be a brat and run away." He grabs my chin, staring intently into my eyes for a moment before he releases me. "Your father was a good, decent man back in the day. I wanted to honor his memory, even if he stepped off the path after he met your mother. I would have taken care of you."

"Liar," I spit. "You were going to lock me up."

He shakes his head sadly. "You're not right in the head, Rowe. Your dad really did a number on you, keeping you hidden away for so long. But you would have been with other people like yourself. They would have helped you."

"I'm not crazy!" I tug at my binds, the plastic cutting into my skin.

"No, you're not, but you were on your way to it." Bryant shoves me across the room to our suitcase and grabs a pair of pants. "That's what happens to witches of your power level when they're left untrained."

Stunned, I stare down at him as he kneels in front of me. "What?"

He holds the pants out. "Go on, or I'll take you out of here as you are. It doesn't matter either way to me."

I hesitantly lift my right foot, and he slides the pants onto me. "The human mind will rationalize anything. When a young witch comes into her power, and strange things start happening around her, the brain will try to make sense of it with the knowledge it already has. You weren't aware magic was real. Your father didn't want you anywhere near the paranormal, so he tried to help you with medication, but that's a band-aid on a bleeding stump." I slide my other leg into the pants, and Bryant yanks them up, his eyes fixed on my face. "Your mind was going to break. It was only a matter of time."

I shake my head, sending new lances of pain through my skull. "My dad would have done anything to help me."

"Anything but tell you the truth about your origin," Bryant sneers. "He stepped off the path, Rowe. He purposefully blinded himself."

"I'm not blind." I tug on my wrists. "I know what I am, and I'm training now. Please, let me go. I need to help Tris." "He's just a distraction." Bryant grabs my arm and marches me toward the door. "Forget him. He's gone."

"No!" I dig in my heels, and pain shoots up my legs as glass from the broken slider digs into my feet. "Let me go! Help! I'm being kidnapped!"

Shaking his head, Bryant lifts his fist again, and this time, the blow knocks me out.

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Pain throbs in my head and sends spikes up from my feet as I come back to consciousness with a feeling of motion.

Groaning, I lift my head and blink open my eyes to find myself in a car. Trash from fast food bags fills the space around my feet and clutters the dashboard, the smell of stale grease making my stomach roll. Paper crinkles under my ass as I try to move only to discover my hands have been zip-tied to the door handle.

"Good, you're awake." More paper rustles before a straw prods at my lips. "It's water. Drink some."

My dry throat demands I drink, and my lips close around the straw. Bitter liquid fills my mouth, and I choke, spitting it out.

"Don't worry, I just dissolved a couple of aspirin into it for the pain." The straw prods at me again. "Drink. It will help your head."

"Not getting punched would help my head." I turn away, staring out the window to the unfamiliar, shadowed street passing by. "Where are you taking me?"

"I have a safe house not too far away. We'll stop there for the day." He shoves the cup between my legs to hold it secure. "If you decide the pain is too much, just let me know."

I glance over at him. "We're not going back to my dad's place?"

Bryant's eyes cut to me before he stares back out the windshield. "Had to leave there soon after you ran. It's been compromised."

I shift again, the position uncomfortable with my body half-turned toward the door, and I give up on looking at him. "Compromised how?"

"The paranormal world is a scary place." He reaches over to pat my knee. "Your dad had a reason to fear it would hurt you. But he went about it the wrong way. You can't escape your blood. Magic is in your bones, and there are those who hunt the paranormal."

I shiver and move my knee out from under his touch. "Like the huntsmen?"

He sucks in a sharp breath. "Where did you hear that name?"

"My father was a huntsman, right?" I press my temple to the cold window to try to ease the throbbing. "Silver bullets and all that."

Excitement fills his voice. "You have his tool kit? Is that why I couldn't find it in the house?"

I shake my head. "Guns scare me, so I ditched it."

"Where? Maybe we can—"

I turn to glare at him. "I threw it into the ocean."

His hands on the steering wheel tighten until his knuckles turn red. "That was stupid. Never throw away a weapon."

"I don't know how to use a gun." With his eyes on the road, I try to twist my hands to loosen my bind, but the zip tie has no give to it. "It could have been turned against me. Why silver?"

"It holds magic well." Bryant rolls his shoulders and loosens his hold on the steering wheel. "Gold is better, but gold doesn't hold up to being made into bullets. It's too soft." He glances at me, his eyes dropping to my neck. "Iron works well, too, but it poses more issues when being turned into a bullet." Instinctively, I try to reach for the necklace, but the binding on my wrists stops me. "Why bullets, then, if they're so problematic?"

Bryant smirks and returns his attention to the road. "The creatures out there that need to be taken down... You want to be as far away from them as possible. Only fools use close-range weapons."

I remember Haut as he lost control of himself, his wolf taking over, and I shudder. Yeah, I wouldn't have wanted to go hand-to-hand with him, or knife-to-claw.

"That's a good amulet," he murmurs. "Did you make it yourself? When was the last time you renewed the spell?"

I counter his question with one of my own. "How did you find me?"

His lip curls up at the corners. "Good, old-fashioned technology. I had a tracker on your car."

*Ha! I* wasn't being overly paranoid when I considered that as a possibility!

"I'd almost caught up to you when you vanished. I didn't think you'd be clever enough, or fast enough, to ward your car." He shakes his head and gives me a proud smile. "I hung around town, hoping I'd catch wind of you again. Lucky me, your ward wore off before you got too far down the coast."

My brow furrows, sending a fresh wave of pain through my head. "You weren't using another witch to track me?"

He shakes his head. "I'm off the grid right now. Don't need that kind of attention on me."

"Why are you so obsessed with finding me?" I demand. "You could have just let me go? Why put so much effort into tracking me down?"

He reaches for my knee once more. "You're special, Rowe."

"I'm tired of people telling me that!" I jerk my leg away, and the lid of the to-go cup pops off, water sloshing over my lap. "I'm nobody!" His head turns toward me. "Who's been telling you you're special? That guy back at the hotel?"

"Tris," I grit out. "His name was Tris."

Bryant's eyebrows sweep together for a moment. "Wasn't that dog of yours named Tris?"

Realizing I've made a mistake, I huddle back against the door to put as much space between us as possible.

"Dammit!" Bryant pounds the steering wheel. "Why didn't I see that he was a wolf shifter? He didn't act like a normal dog, but he passed the test!"

"He was cursed," I whisper, the hole in my heart widening until it feels like I have no heart left at all. "He wasn't a wolf shifter."

Bryant remains silent for a long moment before he sighs. "Well, it doesn't matter anymore, I suppose. He's been dealt with."

"What happens after we reach your safe house?" I ask, starting to feel numb. At least that's better than the pain.

"Don't worry about that," Bryant murmurs. "I'm still going to take good care of you."

We drive in silence for a while, and I must fall asleep because Bryant's swearing jars me back awake.

Head fuzzy, I glance out the window to see the sky beginning to lighten with the sunrise.

I turn to look at Bryant. "What's wrong?"

He scrubs a hand down his face. "We're still ten minutes away from my safe house."

I lift one eyebrow. "So?"

Cursing, he jerks the car over to the side of the road and puts it into park.

Uneasiness sweeps through me. "Why did you pull over?"

"We're still ten minutes away from my safe house," he repeats, his eyes moving to the horizon. "Too far away." Fear quickens my pulse. "Ten minutes is super close. We can make it there in no time."

Shaking his head, he unbuckles his seat belt and turns toward me. "Don't worry, I won't take much."

I press back against the door. "Take much of what?"

He shifts onto his knees on his seat, leaning across the center console.

"What are you going to do?" I yank hard on my wrists, the plastic cutting into me. "Stay away!"

"It's okay," he croons, and I catch the sharp glint of fangs in his mouth. "I just need a little of your very special blood."

I scream as he lunges forward, grabbing my shoulders to shove me harder against the door, and his fangs sink into my neck.

## STATIC FILLED BRAIN

W hite noise fills my head as the car comes to a stop and Bryant climbs out.

Survival brain tells me this is my chance to find a weapon, to fight for my freedom. That, once he gets me into the cabin he parked in front of, it will be that much harder to escape.

But I can't escape the static long enough to organize my thoughts and form a plan. The side of my neck throbs, but the pain feels distant, experienced through a filter. I can almost pretend it didn't even happen, that Bryant hadn't—

The static grows louder, blocking the memory from forming. If I can't remember it, it didn't happen. I can pretend I'm still in the bathroom in our honeymoon suite. Tris is still—

My mind protests, so I go back farther, to Grandma's house. The sun has set, and I'm preparing to go up to the roof to perform the barrier spell. Everything is exciting and hopeful. Haut and Owen will be home soon, Tris is ready to dance with me, and I'm surrounded by friends. Everything is how it should be.

The passenger side door opens, pulling my body to the side as the zip tie that locks me to the handle cuts into my skin.

Bryant leans in, and I instinctively flinch back, fear shoving aside my fantasy of a better point in time.

He pauses to glance at me. "Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt you."

The pain in my neck flares, sending twin stabs of agony through me. It feels like Bryant's fangs sinking into my throat all over again, then blood rushing out of my body as he sucked hard like he tapped a keg of his favorite beer and couldn't get enough of it.

He pulls a knife from his pocket, flicking the blade out, and I can't help but flinch again.

Sighing, he reaches past me and cuts the zip tie that binds me to the door, while leaving the one around my wrists securely in place. "I'm sorry I shocked you, Rowe. If your dad hadn't kept you so sheltered..."

Static floods back in, and I hum quietly, adding another level of noise separation. Bryant keeps speaking, but I don't hear his words.

When it becomes obvious that I won't respond, his lips thin, and he grabs my arm, pulling me from the car.

I stumble, pain stabbing up my legs from the cuts on the bottom of my feet, and I fall to my knees.

Bending, Bryant picks me up like a child, kicking the car door shut before he strides to the cabin.

I don't remember how we got here, only that we're no longer in the city. The thick trunks of the trees surround us, their branches creating a canopy over the cabin's roof. This place has been here a long time. No one will find me here. No one will come to save me from whatever Bryant has planned. But the knowledge isn't enough to knock me out of my feeling of disconnect as he carries me into the cabin.

Inside consists of a single square room, with a woodburning stove in one corner, a wall of cabinets, a dining table, and a bed.

He walks to the dining table and gently lowers me into one of the chairs before he moves to a cabinet and opens it. He returns to me with a towel in his hands, and blots at my wet leggings. The spiked water I'd been holding in my lap had spilled all over the place when he attacked me. "Goodness, you made a mess," he mutters. "We should have grabbed you more clothes. I'll have to get you some."

Since I had no say in what he grabbed, I ignore him.

With a last swipe, he stands and tosses the towel on the table. "Are you hungry? You should eat something."

He bustles back to the cabinets and returns with a box of rice cereal, a bowl, and a box of almond milk. He doesn't look at me as he fixes me a bowl, then goes back to the cabinet for a spoon.

He plunks it into the bowl and pushes it toward me. "Here. It's high in iron. It will help."

I glance from the bowl to him and lift my bound hands.

Instead of releasing my binds, he drags one of the other chairs closer and sits, then lifts a spoonful of cereal toward my mouth.

My stomach rolls, and I turn my head away.

"Don't pout." He grips my chin and turns my head back toward him, pressing the spoon to my mouth. "You need to keep up your strength."

Hesitantly, I lean forward and close my lips around the spoon. My stomach instantly revolts, but I force myself to swallow.

"Good girl." He scoops up another spoonful.

I eat that one dutifully, and the one after, trying hard not to think about why he wants me healthy and kept up to date on my iron.

When the bowl is empty, he sets the spoon back down. "Do you need the bathroom?"

I glance around the cabin once more, but don't see a door for a bathroom.

"There's an outhouse in the back," he explains.

I shudder and shake my head.

"Okay, just let me know when you need to go." He stands, takes the bowl with him, and drops it into a bucket near the door.

When he comes back, I shrink away from the fresh zip tie in his hands.

With nowhere to run, though, I don't fight him when he pulls my hands down to the table leg and binds me to it. "I need to go out for a bit, but I'll be within earshot if you need anything."

He straightens and reaches for my face, ignoring my flinch to tilt my head to the side. He studies my neck for a long moment during which my pulse picks up speed and fear shivers through me.

Finally, he releases my jaw. "It will heal in a couple of days. You shouldn't scar."

I watch him walk to the door, grab the bucket, and step out into the early morning sunlight.

The door closes behind him, followed by the loud snick of the lock. I glance around once more, realizing there are no windows in the cabin. Even if I can figure out how to mastermind my way out of the zip ties, I'll still be a prisoner.

Humming to myself, I scoot back in my chair, then lean forward and rest my head on the tabletop as the static takes over my mind once more.

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Eventually, I have to give in to the need for the outhouse. It's dark when Bryant carries me outside, and I can't find the energy to protest when he helps me pull my pants down and then cleans me up when I finish, before taking me back into the house and tying me to the table once more.

After that, I don't know how many days pass. Without windows, I have no way to track such things. Bryant continues to feed me cereal, or sometimes cold tomato soup, but he doesn't remember to give me water, and I don't ask.

The hard wooden chair and tabletop become my life.

Bryant comes and goes from the cabin between playing nursemaid, though after that first time, it's always dark when he opens the door.

I slip in and out of sleep, my dreams tempting me to never open my eyes again.

When I sleep, I dream of Haut at the stove in Grandma's house, making me bacon as Owen sits at the table across from me. Tris prances around the room, sometimes in his wolfdog form and sometimes human, but always with the happy jingle of his name tag on his collar.

Every time I open my eyes and remember that such happiness will never exist again, it makes me want to cry, but all my tears are gone. I cried so much over Owen's death that I have none left for Tris, and certainly none for myself.

#### Rowe.

The voice whispers past me, and I groan, clenching my eyes shut tighter.

Rowe, come to me.

My feet slide against the floor, sending agony shooting through me. I'm pretty sure the cuts on the bottom of my feet are infected.

Sorry, witch, no walking for me, I think at the voice.

"Rowe, it's time to eat."

It takes a moment to realize Bryant is speaking to me, and not the witch who's returned to add torment on top of torment. Did I imagine that other voice? Has she become part of my dreams now, too?

Wanting to return to the kitchen in Grandma's house, I shake my head. "Not hungry."

A heavy hand strokes the back of my head. "I know this is hard, but we'll be leaving soon."

That makes my eyes open when nothing else could have. On our way here, he said we'd only be here a day, but I'm pretty sure more than that has passed already.

"Where are we going?" I ask, my voice cracking from disuse.

Bryant smiles and pets me some more, like a dog who performed a good trick. "It's good to hear your voice again, Rowe. I was getting worried."

I lick my dry lips. "Where are we going?"

"Someplace safe." He continues to stroke my head. "You'll be with others of your kind."

"Other witches?" I ask.

He nods encouragingly. "That's right."

"Why?" I croak out.

"I promised your dad I'd take care of you," he explains. "But I can't keep you with me. It's not safe."

"You drank my blood." The words come out flat. "That's not taking care of me."

"I'm sorry about that." He sits next to me and picks up the familiar box of cereal. "I never would have done that if it wasn't an emergency."

I struggle to force myself upright. "Why was it an emergency?"

"You've heard of vampires, right?" He waits for my nod. "Very little of what you know is correct, but we do need blood to sustain ourselves. Usually, it's only at the dark of the moon, and not enough to seriously hurt the person we feed from. The rest of the time, we consume food just like a human."

"It wasn't the dark of the moon," I protest.

"Something the stories got right is our aversion to sunlight. But that can be circumvented with the right kind of blood." He smiles at me. "The blood of a witch allows us to withstand the sunlight for a brief time. What you gave me prevented unfathomable pain." My fuzzy mind doesn't want to process that, but I force the gears to creak into motion. "But then... Why are you taking me to be with other witches? Isn't it better for you to keep me?"

"Oh, sweetie, I wish I could." He shakes his head with the same level of regret a father would show to his daughter while refusing to buy her a pony. "But don't worry, I'll come back to visit you often. I'm not abandoning you the way your dad did."

By visit often, does he mean so he can drink my blood? Is he taking me to some kind of witch farm where he and other vampires get to come visit to get their fix of special witch blood so they can walk in the daylight? Was that his plan before I ran away? Get me labeled as insane so he'd have the authority to stash me someplace to use as his personal happy meal?

Oh my god, when I thought he was making a move on me back at my dad's apartment, had he really been trying to drink my blood? Had he thought I already knew about vampires?

The thought threatens to scramble my brain again, and I push out the question. "Was my dad a vampire, too?"

"Of course." Bryant gathers a spoonful of rice cereal and lifts it to my mouth. "I have no idea how he kept it hidden after your mom passed away. I thought for sure he had been feeding on you."

"He worked at night," I mumble around my mouthful.

I always thought his paranoia about keeping the blinds down was about someone calling child services if they realized I was there. Once I was legally an adult, he started to relax his restrictions. I chalked up his weird sleep pattern to him always leaving at night to work, forcing him to sleep during the day.

Wow, I was blind. He lied to me so much in his desperation to keep me away from the paranormal world, and my lack of knowledge has gotten me into so much trouble.

"Thank you for explaining all of this to me." I lean forward for another bite of cereal and swallow. "I appreciate you going to such lengths to fulfill your promise to my dad."

"You're a very special girl, Rowe." Bryant's eyes gleam as they drop to my neck. I'll do everything in my power to make sure you stay safe."

Safe so he can eat me at his leisure.

I've wallowed enough within my mind. I need to escape before he moves me to my next prison.

### A FEW LOOSE SCREWS

H ead on the table, I watch as Bryant moves around the cabin, packing up the few supplies he'd brought in during the time we've been at the cabin. It looks like he's preparing for us to go somewhere, and it makes me nervous that my time is running out.

I lick dry lips. "Are we going to the witches now?"

Bryant glances over at me and smiles. "In a few hours. Now that the sun is set, I just need to get a few more things together, then we can be on our way."

"Will you take me to the bathroom before you go?" I ask, my voice barely a whisper.

He turns back to the bag he's packing. "I took you already."

"That was near dawn," I protest. "It's been hours since then."

He sighs and straightens. "You're right. You did have soup for lunch today."

Turning, he strides over and cuts the zip tie that binds me to the table. My head slides across the tabletop as he pulls my chair back, but I make no move to stand.

"Come on." He grabs my arms. "If you want to go, put some effort into it."

As he pulls me to my feet, I cry out in pain, my legs folding beneath me.

"Look at you." He *tsks* with disapproval as he lifts me into his arms. "Your father really didn't prepare you for the real world. You're like a newborn fawn stumbling around."

Yeah, a newborn fawn with infected cuts on the bottoms of my feet that send agonizing stabs of pain up my legs every time I put weight on them.

Bryant really has no concept of what it takes to care for a human, or he just doesn't care that much, despite all his statements to the contrary. Maybe he's assuming that wherever he's taking me next has people who can just patch me up, good as new, and keeping me injured makes sure I can't run.

My head flops against his chest as he carries me outside, the cool night air tickling the greasy strands of my hair.

"Thank you, Bryant. I don't mean to trouble you so much," I whisper as he strides around the side of the cabin and to the back where the outhouse sits out of view from the front. "All you've ever done is try to help me, but I keep making things hard for you."

He shifts me in his arms. "You're young. It's not your fault you were led astray by one of those wolfmen. Your father's really to blame, not you. If he'd prepared you better..."

I tamp down the anger that rises every time he talks about Tris or my dad. "But you're here now."

"Yes, I am." He stops in front of the narrow outhouse. "And I'll continue to be here from now on, so you never have to worry about anything ever again."

This guy has more screws loose in his head than I do. Does he really believe everything that he's saying? He has to, right? Why else would he be so obsessed with finding me when there are other witches out there?

I bear through the indignity of him helping me into the outhouse and onto the toilet seat attached to a board inside. The seat shifts under my weight, loose from lack of repair, and the place stinks with a horrible mixture of body waste and chemicals. I don't even want to think about the sounds of insects that come from all around me, some of them sounding like they're beneath the hole I sit on. A lantern hangs from the pointed peak of the ceiling, the dim bulb casting eerie shadows.

Bryant closes the door to give me privacy, and I straighten, skimming the narrow space for anything I can use as a weapon, but find nothing. The roll of toilet paper doesn't even have a holder. It sits on the bench next to me, and the light is too high up to grab.

The toilet seat shifts beneath me as I look around, and I twist, shoving the bottom of my bathrobe aside to see the back. One of the screws partially sticks out of the wood, allowing the seat to move around.

Desperate, I turn farther around to grasp it, the move made difficult by the zip tie that binds my wrists together. I work the screw back and forth, twisting and pulling, until it comes free in my hands.

A knock sounds on the door. "Are you okay in there, Rowe? Do you need some help?"

I curl my hands into fists, the screw tucked against my palm. "I'm done."

The door opens, and Bryant helps me back out, his touch perfunctory. "I bet you can't wait to have real clothes again. And a bath. The place we're going will feel like a resort to you."

After this experience, a gas station would feel like a resort, but I keep those thoughts tucked away and just smile as I let my head flop onto his chest. He carries me back to the cabin and pulls a new zip tie from his pocket to attach me to the table once more.

I slump forward into my usual position, my head on the table, and close my eyes, pretending to fall asleep.

Bryant's footsteps continue to move around the cabin for a bit before the door opens and closes, followed by the sound of the lock engaging.

He only locks me inside the cabin when he plans to be away for a while, which means I have time before he returns. Carefully, I work the screw between my fingers and lift my wrists to pull the second zip tie tight. Then, I painfully saw the screw back and forth over the plastic, pausing every so often to yank hard. Sweat trickles down my face as I work, my fingers cramping and the threads of the screw cutting into my fingers.

Finally, the plastic gives, and the screw tumbles to the floor as I straighten.

For a while, Tris had been into true crime shows and showed me how to escape zip ties and duct tape, but being strapped to the table made it impossible to gain the right momentum, which was probably part of Bryant's plan. Lifting my wrists to my mouth, I pull on the zip tie until the lock sits at the top of my wrists, then raise my arms above my head and bring them down hard against my stomach while pushing outward.

Pain slices through my wrists, but the tie pops off, just like in the video.

For a moment, I sit frozen in shock, staring at my freed hands as I gasp for breath.

Then I remember I don't have time to just sit around. I shove back my chair and try to stand before my feet remind me that's not an option and I fall to the floor in a throbbing mass of pain.

Gritting my teeth, I fumble for the screw I dropped and crawl to the door. The end of the screw won't fit in the lock, though, so I abandoned it instantly and crawl over to the bed.

I need a weapon, something bigger than the screw, before Bryant returns, or I'll have no chance of escaping.

In all the time that we've been at the cabin, Bryant hasn't used the bed, nor has he offered for me to use it. When I slide my hands under the cover, I discover why.

While it may be made up as a bed, it's just a blanket and a pillow on top of a piece of wood. Like a prop to make a casual passerby think this is a real hunting cabin and not a prison. The metal frame doesn't offer any loose pieces that I can pry off, and I can't get any of the bolts to turn with my bare hands to take it apart. Under the bed is empty, too, with not so much as a dust bunny lurking in the shadows.

Straightening the covers, I crawl to the other side of the room and pull open the first of the cabinets.

Inside, I find cans of tomato soup, boxes of rice cereal, and more almond milk. Not even the plastic bowl and spoon Bryant uses to feed me. He had taken the dirty bucket out with him after lunch and hadn't brought it back, which destroys any plans I may have had to cut his heart out with a spoon.

When I try to open the rest of the cabinets, I find them locked, and no amount of prying can get them to open. Abandoning them, I crawl to the wood-burning stove and pull the door open, only to find it scraped clean on the inside, with only a handful of ashes at the bottom.

Bryant has done a good job of creating his prison.

With no other options, I return to the food cabinet and grab a can of soup from the back of the shelf, then reposition the rest to mask the missing one before I return to my place at the table. I tuck the screw and the broken zip ties into the pocket of my robe and hunch back over, pressing my cheek to the table once more.

My hands tremble around the can of soup I hold out of sight. As far as weapons go, it sucks, but it's better than nothing.

While I wait for Bryant to return, I count the seconds in my head, but I keep losing track, and I ultimately give up. It doesn't matter how many minutes or hours pass before he comes back, just that I'm awake when he does. This may be my only chance at escape, and I won't miss it by falling asleep.

Each beat of my heart sounds loud, pounding away the time slipping by. When the lock finally turns, it sounds like a gunshot to my ears, and I flinch before I slam my eyes shut.

Will Bryant be able to hear my racing pulse? Will he notice anything off about the cabin? Will he be able to sense

that things are not as he left them?

His footsteps come closer. "Rowe, it's time to go."

I remain still, pretending to be asleep.

His hand settles on my shoulder. "Rowe, wake up."

I mumble and turn my head away, like I'm too weak to fully come back to consciousness.

"And here you said you weren't going to be trouble." His hand trails down from my shoulder to my spine before vanishing, and the chair beneath me slides back.

My cheek scrapes against the tabletop, and I keep my hands at the table leg, clutching the can of soup tighter. My eyes slit open, seeing the cabin through the veil of my lashes as Bryant pulls out his pocketknife and bends to untie me.

Mustering all of my strength, and driven by adrenaline, I swing my hands up as I burst out of my chair, clocking him under the chin with my can of soup.

The knife flies from his hand, skittering across the floor as he stumbles backward.

Screaming, I shove him the rest of the way, and he falls, the back of his head slamming into the side of the bed.

I land on the floor next to him and scramble toward the unlocked door before I realize I need the keys to the car if I have any hope of escaping.

Breath coming out in gasps, I turn back to him. He doesn't move, but his chest rises and falls. Heart pounding hard, I crawl closer to him and reach a trembling hand toward the pocket of his jacket.

His hand snaps up, wrapping around my wrist, and I scream.

His eyes open, glowing red as his lips pull back to reveal long fangs. "You've been a very naughty girl, Rowe."

Instinctively, I bring the can of soup I still hold back around to hit him again, but he catches my other hand. Panic takes over, and I kick out, getting him in the side of the face. Growling, he sits up and tosses me to the side.

I sail through the air and come down hard on the chair, which collapses beneath my weight, the legs buckling. I fall to the floor and scramble for one of the legs, wrapping my hand around it just as Bryant catches my ankle and yanks me back toward him.

"You've been very bad, Rowe," he hisses. "Bad girls get punished."

Howling with rage, I turn and raise the chair leg, bracing it against the floor as I slam my free foot as hard as I can into Bryant's knee.

His eyes widen in surprise as he falls over me, gravity taking control. His arms stretch out to catch himself, but the table leg drives into his chest.

His body jerks, suspended over me, but his eyes stay wide and aware, his teeth snapping at me.

"Just die already!" I scream up at him.

His hands move, reaching for my shoulders, and his body slides lower on the chair leg, his teeth getting closer.

I shove a hand against his chest, desperate to keep him off me.

His fingers curl around my shoulders, and he uses my body to drag himself farther down the stake.

Oh, God. So much for my vampire slayer attempt. Stakes in the chest are a myth, and Bryant's going to eat me.

I just hope I go to the same place Owen and Tris did.

# TRIGGER HAPPY LEADER BOSS

**M** y arms tremble with the effort of holding Bryant off of me, and the stick shakes in my hand. If not for the floor bracing the other side, there's no way it would still be upright with the weight of his body impaled on it.

Desperate, I get my knees up between us to shove against his stomach, but the move is futile. Bryant's hold on my shoulders feels like steel. It's only a matter of time before his snapping fangs rip into me.

"Give up," he hisses, tugging on my shoulders. "If you're good right now, I might not kill you."

"Just die already, fang face," I groan as he inches closer. "I have thighs of steel. I can do this until the sun comes up."

"Too bad for you no light will make it past my impenetrable fortress—"

The door bursts open, flooding the cabin with artificial light as masked men in black military gear pound into the room. Are they SWAT? Did somebody send SWAT to look for me?

"Ha! Take that!" I laugh in Bryant's face. "This place is as penetrable as your chest! Who's the bitch now?"

"You're a wretched little thing." Bryant snaps his fangs at me. "I'll drain every last drop of blood from that minuscule body."

Ignoring that decidedly rude threat, I shout, "Hurry up and get him off of me! He's got knives in his mouth!"

A large figure rushes forward and presses a gun against the top of the vampire's head. "Bryant Callaway, you have been designated as a rogue. Yield or lose your afterlife."

Bryant's hands tighten painfully on my shoulders. "She is my prey. I marked her for my hunt."

"The fuck you did, you dirty old man!" I yell, shoving at him harder with a fresh rush of adrenaline. "You call wiping my ass hunting? Go suck a can of tomato soup, you perv!"

The military guy ignores both of us. "Sheath your fangs, rogue, or I will be forced to take final measures."

Bryant's eyes narrow on me. "You would have been better off in my care."

It's the only warning I have before Bryant yanks violently on my shoulders. My arm folds, my knees losing purchase as my body leaves the floor, rising toward his snapping fangs.

The gun goes off at the same time I scream, but I can't hear anything past the ringing in my ears as blood and bits of brain splatter my face and half of Bryant's head vanishes.

Two other men move in on either side, lifting Bryant's body off me. My arm rises with him, my death grip on the stake still attaching me to him, and I force myself to release the thick piece of wood.

My body shakes with the aftermath of adrenaline rushing through me. I thought I was going to die, and for some unknown reason, I didn't.

Then the military man's gun shifts to point at my head.

"What the Hell?" I shout. "You can't be serious!"

He ignores me the same way he did before. "Sir, we have a witness. Permission to exterminate?"

"You're a real asshole, aren't you?" I shout up at him.

Heavy booted footsteps come closer.

I tilt my head back to glare upside down at the new figure who approaches. "It's not like I've seen your faces, supersecret agents. Yeah, vampires were a revelation, but I'm not new to the paranormal world, so you can all just fuck off with your half-assed rescue mission."

The new figure pauses over me, his feet spread at shoulder's width as he gazes down at me through the mesh in his mask where his eyes should be.

"That's quite the power stance you have there," I inform him. "Did you practice it in front of a mirror?"

His head tilts to the side, and he studies me a moment longer before he announces, "She's a witch. Stand down."

I reach up and shove the gun out of my face. "Yeah, Trigger Happy, stand down."

The man lowers his gun but doesn't holster it.

"Search the rest of the cabin," the one in charge commands. "Pull up every floorboard and take the dogs around the clearing and into the woods. If this is his killing ground, we can't leave any bodies behind. Their families deserve to know what happened to them."

My stomach twists and bile rises in my throat. I'd almost become one of the bodies they're searching for. Joke's on them, though. I don't have family that would miss me.

Groaning, I sit up, then roll to my knees. The tie on my bathrobe had come undone during the struggle, and the material hangs around me, dragging on the floor, but I ignore it. Dignity has no place in this cabin.

Body protesting, I crawl over to where they set Bryant's body near the wood-burning stove and rifle through the pockets of his jacket.

The leader follows me, his voice curious. "What are you doing?"

"Looking for the car keys." I find his jacket pockets empty and slide my hands into the pockets of his pants. "How else do you expect me to get out of here? We're miles away from the city."

"I can't let you—"

"The hell you can't." I find the keys, and my fingers close around them so tightly that they bite into my palm. Twisting, I glare up at the man. "That psychopath took everything from me. The least he can do is give me his car so I can get the hell away from here."

The gunman, who had followed his superior, nods down at me. "Sir, her feet."

My toes curl painfully, and I finally pull my robe closed. "Don't be looking at my feet. They're none of your business."

"I doubt she can walk anywhere," Trigger Happy continues as if I didn't say anything.

The leader nods and kneels next to me. "Where's your coven? We can make sure you get back to them safely."

"Yeah, right." I snort. "Bryant said he'd keep me safe, too, so no thanks." I shake the keys at him. "I got this."

"Do you have people we can call to come get you?" he tries again.

"People?" I turn back to glare at Bryant's motionless body. "He killed—"

My throat closes around the words, and I shake my head, swallowing down the scream that wants to rise from the depths of my body.

I grit my teeth and choke them down. "Don't worry about me. I can take care of myself."

Turning from him, I crawl toward the door, my eyes on the dark sky beyond. Fresh air slips past my face, whispering of freedom.

It's just within reach when the scrape of boots comes from behind me, and large hands lift me into the air.

I swing out, clocking one of the masked figures in the side of the head with my key-filled fist. "Don't you fucking touch me! Let me go!"

Instead of releasing me, he swings me toward the leader, who approaches with a syringe in his hand.

I kick out, agony flaring through my leg when my foot connects with his shoulder.

He brushes aside my attempts to defend myself as he comes closer, raising the syringe. "This is just temporary." Another man comes over and grabs my head, turning it to the side to expose my throat. "It will only knock you out for a couple of hours, I promise. We'll take you somewhere safe and patch you up. You aren't our prisoner. Once you're healthy, we can help you find a new coven, if that's what you want."

"What I want is for assholes like you to stop deciding what's best—" My words cut off on a cry of pain as the needle pricks my skin.

Fire floods my veins, and I scream out my fury, the sound bubbling up from my guts and ripping out my insides to give voice to all the pain I've kept bottled up.

Distantly, I hear the anguished howl of a wolf.

A gentle hand strokes over my hair. "It will all be better soon."

I struggle against the man who restrains me, howling out my anger as my body grows heavy, and I lose consciousness.

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"We've given her antibiotics, but she's going to be in more pain once the numbness wears off," a quiet voice murmurs as I rise from the darkness. "I had to cut open some of her wounds to pull out pieces of glass and drain the infection. The poultice will help, but she won't be able to walk for at least a week."

"I'd bet my next month's rations that this is the girl Bryant kidnapped from that hotel a few days ago," says a voice distressingly similar to Trigger Happy.

"We shouldn't have left her with him so long," says the leader. "She could have suffered permanent damage."

"No," an unfamiliar voice snaps. "You jumped the gun rushing in when you did. He was about to lead us to the facility. You sacrificed dozens of witches just to save this one."

"Waiting was no longer an option, Sir," Leader counters in a stiff tone. "She'd already impaled him. There's no way he was going to let her live after that."

"Impaled," the new guy scoffs. "She obviously knows nothing about vampires. We could have waited for him to grab a new one. He was our only lead. You threw away months of work. You were told to bring him in alive at all costs."

"She's coming around," the first voice warns.

The others fall silent.

Since the cat's already out of the bag, I open my eyes to glare blearily around the room. A person in white stands near an IV bag, the tubes leading to the narrow bed I lay in.

I turn my head in the other direction and see three men in black staring down at me.

I identify Trigger Happy by the silver gun holstered at his hip and Leader by his frame. The unknown Boss Man is bulkier than the other two and slightly shorter, like he's been weighed down by years of being in control.

My gaze shifts to Trigger Happy. "When you said rations, were you talking about beef jerky? Because I could really use some solid food after the time I've had."

Leader's head cocks to the side, the same way it did at the cabin. "You're more coherent than you should be after what you've been through."

"Super coherent," I agree, my focus shifting to Boss Man. "So coherent that I know you could have saved me days ago, but you left me there to be tortured."

"In war, sacrifices must be made," the man says, not at all apologetic.

"Is that what you're going to tell the families of all the people you let Bryant kill?" I glance at Leader. "How many bodies did you dig up? I bet there were a lot. Bryant was batshit crazy. I should know, one crazy to another." His head tilts the other way, his gaze heavy on me.

I turn back to Boss Man. "Just how many people were you willing to sacrifice in the hope he was going to lead you to your facility?" When he stays silent, I ask another, more pressing question. "Were you tracking him when he arrived at the hotel I was staying at? You had to have been, right? Because you've been following him for months. You could have stopped him before he even made it to my room, but you let him kidnap me for your mission."

"You're delirious and don't know what you're saying," Boss Man says.

"Oh, no, my noodles are all in alignment," I assure him. "Toaster is in full, functioning order."

He looks at Leader. "You call this coherent? Your judgment is slipping."

"You could have stopped Bryant from killing Tris." Calmness slips over me. "As the man calling the shots here, that makes you responsible for his death."

He turns toward the doctor. "Put her back under."

Before the doctor can move, I lunge to the side and grab the gun from Trigger Happy's belt, sliding it free in a move so smooth I shock even myself. It feels heavy and wavers in my hand as I point it at Boss Man.

Trigger Happy lunges toward me, but he's too slow as I pull the trigger.

# SCARIER THAN A SOUP CAN

T he gun clicks in my hand, and I have enough time to pull the trigger again before Trigger Happy tackles me.

Yelling, I elbowed him in the side of the head as we slide off the opposite side of the bed. Pain rips up my arm and the smell of pennies fills the air before we crash to the floor.

Shouts rise from the others as Trigger Happy and I grapple for the gun. I reach back, grab the top of his mask along with as much hair as I can, and yank with all of my strength.

He rears back with a shout of pain, the mask coming off in my hand. "Stop struggling, you crazy bitch!"

That just makes me struggle harder, twisting and wiggling. I end up on my back, with him straddling my waist, so I take the open invitation to slam the gun into his crotch.

He howls with pain, his lips pulling back to expose long fangs.

"Oh, hell no." Rearing up, I slam the gun into his sharp teeth. "Not today, Dracula!"

He screams and tumbles off me, clutching his mouth, and I kick him in the crotch again, happy that my feet are numb enough that I don't feel a thing.

Lifting the gun, I search the side. I know there's a safety, I just have no idea where to find it. I've never held one of these things before, but there's no time like the present to learn.

While I'm distracted, the doctor crawls around the table, drawing the wailing Trigger Happy away. When Leader sneaks around the side of the bed from the other side, I scuttle away from him until my back hits a wall.

I hold up a finger. "Just give me a second. I think I've almost got this."

He doesn't give me a second, but he doesn't hurry, either, as he continues forward and kneels in front of me.

Slowly, he reaches out to cover the top of the gun, but he doesn't try to take it from me. Instead, he tilts it to the other side and points at a little lever that looks more like a design detail.

"This is the safety." He clicks it up. "Always make sure it's off when you aim to kill somebody."

"Thanks." I give the little switch a couple of toggles up and down. "Off, on, off, on. Off." I nod. "Got it. Do I get a redo?"

He shakes his head and clicks the safety back on before he plucks the large gun from my hands. "Not this time."

I wrap my empty hands around my neck. "Are you guys going to put me in a blood farm?"

"No." He stuffs the gun into the back of his pants before reaching out to me, his motions slow. I flinch then hold still as he takes my arm and turns it over. "Let's get you patched up again, okay?"

Confused, I peer down at the bleeding wound on my inner elbow then glance up at the IV stand.

I pull my arm out of his grasp, tucking it close to my body. "Being nice to me doesn't absolve you of guilt."

"No, it doesn't." He reaches up and pulls off the black mask he wears.

For the first time, I see his face. His eyes, a lovely mixture of blue and green, stare at me with sympathy. His high cheekbones and strong jawline look like they were pulled from a renaissance statue and then sprinkled with a liberal dusting of five o'clock shadow to bring his beauty within mortal confines. The mask had flattened his auburn curls, but I can imagine how bouncy and luxurious they would be without it, and I scowl at him. "Being attractive doesn't absolve you of guilt, either. Nor will it distract me."

"No, of course not." A smile comes and goes on his sculpted lips. "My father isn't exactly reasonable when it comes to Bryant, and I followed his lead, much to my shame."

My resolve begins to waver, and I stiffen my spine. "Just because you're ashamed doesn't—"

He holds up a hand. "I'm not asking for forgiveness. You experienced a trauma that no one should ever go through."

My eyes narrow on him. "What do you know about it?"

"My sister was his first victim." While shock distracts me, he lifts me off the floor and back onto the hospital bed. "She was a witch like you, and Bryant lured her away with promises he had no intention of keeping. My father thinks that she's in this blood facility where he stashed witches to continue to feed on them. But I gave up hope long ago that I would ever be reunited with her while she lived."

I glance at the spot where I last saw his boss. "Your dad's the guy I tried to shoot?"

"The very one." His lips thin. "Makes team meetings super fun."

"He's probably really pissed at you for shooting Bryant, then, huh?" I ask.

"Oh, yeah." He nods. "I might even get demoted for it."

"I don't feel bad for you," I inform him.

He opens a drawer in the medical cart next to the bed and pulls out an alcohol swab and band-aid. "Nor should you."

I hold out my arm. "How'd you know he was about to kill me, anyway?"

"We tracked Bryant from your hotel. It was the first time he'd ever been that sloppy." He rips open the antiseptic wipe. "We followed him back to the cabin, and we drilled a hole through the side during one of his trips out. We've been monitoring you for the last three days."

"Was it only that long?" A disbelieving laugh escapes me. "It felt so much longer."

"The plan was to follow him to the next location when he moved you." He shakes his head. "No one expected the soup can."

I lift my chin. "No one ever does."

"You're good with a blunt object." He smiles. "After that, though, things escalated quickly, and we had to move fast. No time to wait for instructions from the boss."

I bite my lip. "Is your sister why you wanted to make sure you found all the bodies at the cabin?"

"I hope that, if we find her body, my father will finally accept that there is no facility, that it's just something Bryant tells witches. He lured them away from their covens with promises of a shared community of practitioners that could expand their knowledge faster than the current system of apprenticeships." He pulls the little wipe from its sleeve. "It's a great idea, but if such a place actually existed, we'd have found it by now."

My eyebrows pinch together. Bryant had sounded so sure of his plan to stash me away someplace where he could come back to visit. But that could have just been his mad ramblings as he geared up to kill me. Maybe all of the times he left the cabin to prepare, he'd just been digging my grave somewhere out in the woods.

Is that why he never concerned himself with my infected injuries or making sure I had more than tomato soup and rice cereal to eat? Because, in the back of his mind, he knew that it didn't matter if I lived? For all I know, all those times he left the cabin, he was searching for his next mark.

Leader touches my cheek. "I'm so sorry you had to suffer."

I knock his hand away. "I don't care what I went through. I care that Bryant killed—"

My throat closes, locking in the words. I don't know what to call Tris. My best friend? My confidant? My soulmate? My lover? He was all of those, but so much more.

As I touch the ring on my hand, Leader's eyes follow the gesture and understanding fills his eyes. "Oh."

I glare up at him. "If you had just stopped Bryant before he came into the hotel..."

"I'm so sorry." His eyes lift to mine once more. "I know that doesn't mean anything, that it can't turn back time and change what happened, but I truly am sorry for your suffering."

I nod jerkily and swallow down the tide of sadness that threatens to rise. I need to focus on something else. "Can I have Bryant's car?"

He reaches for my arm and cradles it in his large hand. "I can't let you have it. You're in no condition to be driving right now." I wince at the sting of alcohol as he gently wipes away the blood. "But I can take you anywhere you want to go. I'll even give you back the gun if it will make you feel more in control."

"Are you going to teach me how to shoot it correctly first?" I demand. "Or are you just going to give an untrained person a loaded weapon?"

The corners of his lips twitch. "Training you would mean delaying your departure."

My shoulders hunch. "It's not like I have anywhere else to go."

He stills, the alcohol wipe pressed against my skin. "Nowhere?"

I nudge the swab off my wound. "Is this where you reveal that you're secretly a villain and I just announced that I'm the ideal victim?"

He sets the used wipe on top of the cart and opens the bandage, pressing it over my wound. "I don't think I'm a villain, but do villains ever think that?" I give that some consideration. "I like to think some do."

His auburn brows lift. "Oh? Do tell."

I pull my arm out of his grasp to prod the wound, the pain reminding me that I'm still alive. "If I were going to be a villain, I wouldn't half-ass it. I'd embrace being evil. Take over the world and crown myself as the queen. Barring that, I'd destroy it. All or nothing, and for no reason other than that I have selfish, evil plans that only benefit myself."

His eyes twinkle with amusement. "You'd be a horrible villain."

I squint up at him. "You don't think I could take over the world?"

His gaze moves from the top of my greasy hair, down my soiled bathrobe, and stops at my bandaged feet. "I think, if you put your mind to it, you'd be able to take over the world. I just don't buy the selfish angle. You strike me as more of a hero."

I wave that away. "Far too much work caring about other people. I'm going to start living life for me."

"And who is me?" he says. "If you don't mind me asking."

I hesitate for a moment before I stick out my hand. "Rowe."

"Just Rowe?" he asks as he clasps my hand.

"Just Rowe," I confirm. "And I wasn't asking you for a handshake; I was asking for my gun."

"Oh, my bad." His hand tightens around mine for a heartbeat before he releases me and reaches behind his back, withdrawing the gun once more. He pointedly checks the safety before pressing the grip into my open hand. "It's far too big for you, by the way."

"I like the size," I tell him. "It works well as a club, too."

"So I saw, Rowe With No Last Name Who Has Nowhere To Go." He settles his hip on the side of the bed. "How would you like to come home with me?"

I stare at the gun in my hand. "Is that a proposition?"

"Is that you considering shooting me?" At my shrug, he laughs. "It's not a proposition. I live in a compound, and I happen to have a spare bedroom. The doctor is within walking distance, so he can keep an eye on those feet of yours."

My head lifts. "Let me guess, you live in this compound with Trigger Happy and Boss Man?"

His head dips. "Yes, I live with Leon and my father, Elias, along with a number of other people."

I study his face, searching for any sign of crazy. "And Leader's name?"

His head tilts to the side, much the way it had in the cabin, only now I can see him studying me right back, a look of curiosity on his face. "Ros."

"Rose?" My brows pinch together. "Like the flower?"

He nods. "But without the E on the end, because I'm special like that."

"Just Ros?" I question.

"Ambros Shultz," he amends.

My gaze drops to his lips, searching for a hint of fang. "Is Ambros Shultz a vampire?"

He smiles, displaying perfectly flat teeth. "Yes, Ambros Shultz is a vampire. Ambros Shultz also has a supply of his own blood and does not need to hurt humans or witches to continue to exist."

"What's with the tactical gear?" I gesture at his outfit. "Is this a military compound full of vampires?"

"There are vampires, witches, and a few humans who know about our kind. It's a small compound with only a hundred civilians." He runs a hand down his vest. "I'm part of the team who protects the compound, and when needed, we hunt down rogues who are a danger to society."

"Rogue vampires like Bryant," I say.

He nods. "Paranormal rogues of any breed."

I consider that. "I get to keep the gun?"

"Only if I get to train you in how to use it." He sticks out his hand. "This is me asking for a handshake."

I transfer the gun to my left hand and grip his with my right. "If you fuck me over, Ambros Shultz, I'll use more than a can of soup to take you down."

He grins. "And I will give you the training to do so."

### ALL PART OF THE PLAN

A fter Ros convinces the doctor to return and check on my feet to make sure I didn't break open my wounds, he carries me out of the small room, which I discover is a clinic in what appears to be an office building.

We get onto a freight elevator, and he nods toward the panel on the wall. "Can you press the button for B3?"

I lean over and press the button. "You know, you could press the button yourself if you would just piggyback me instead of carrying me like a princess."

He smiles down at me, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "Are you saying you're not a princess?"

I snort derisively. "Please. I'm a villain, remember?"

"I thought that was still under debate." He bounces me lightly in his arms. "Besides, you weigh nothing. If I don't carry you like this, you could blow away."

"Well, you and a scale would definitely disagree about that." I fiddle with the dirty hem of my hotel robe. "I don't suppose this room you're putting me up in comes with some clothes?"

Ros's smile slips away, and he clears his throat. "We actually have your suitcase."

I gape up at him. "You do?"

He grimaces. "This is going to make me sound like a villain."

"Probably more like a henchman." My eyes narrow on his guilty expression. "You cleared out my hotel room and hid what happened, didn't you?"

His face hardens. "The police aren't equipped to deal with rogue vampires."

"How did you explain the broken slider?" I demand, or Tris's body, but I can't bring myself to say that last part. I don't want to know what Tris looked like after his fall.

"Honeymooners like to party." He gives me an apologetic look. "And we might have embellished the scene with some bottles of alcohol. We told the manager we were detectives running down a couple going on a spending spree with a stolen credit card." His lips quirk. "Surprisingly, it wasn't hard to sell the story. The lady at the front desk said she'd known on some level that the card wasn't yours."

I puff my cheeks at him before blowing out a frustrated breath. "It's because I'm short. The staturely challenged are always having to deal with that kind of crap."

He smirks down at me. "Is that right?"

"Damn straight it is! I am *clearly* an adult." I jab him in the chest. "And don't you dare laugh at me."

He smooths out his smile. "I would never even think about it."

I press my head over his chest. "I can hear it even if you're not letting it out."

"You're an odd one, Rowe With No Last Name," he informs me as the lift begins to slow.

I point my nose into the air. "And you're unoriginal."

"Well, I'll endeavor to change that." The elevator comes to a stop and the door opens into a parking garage.

As he walks out, I peer around. "There aren't a lot of cars here."

He waggles his eyebrows. "The better to sneak our victims in and out of the office."

"Does your organization own the building?" I asked, curious.

"We own part of it," he informs me. "And this garage is reserved for our use."

I wag my finger under his nose. "You really shouldn't tell me that." When his brows lift in question, I hook a thumb toward my chest. "Supervillain, remember?"

"I don't remember the super part of it." He stops next to a large, black SUV with heavily tinted windows and waves one foot under the bumper.

The door to the trunk magically pops open, then slowly lifts. He steps back to give it room.

"That's pretty convenient." I return my focus to him. "Are you sticking me in the trunk? SUV trunks are horrible for kidnapping. I'll totally ninja over the seats while you're driving and garrote you from behind."

"Let me guess, with the tie to your bathrobe?" He steps forward and gently sits me upright on the bumper. "Aren't you forgetting you have a gun now?"

I roll my eyes at him. "I'm not going to waste bullets on someone stupid enough to stow victims in an open trunk."

"Noted. I'd hate to die in such an undignified way, so hang on while I open the passenger door for you." He jogs around to open the front passenger one before returning to lift me once more.

"So, back to me being a supervillain," I say as he carries me around to the front.

"Ah yes." He leans into the car to set me on the bench seat. "Do tell me how you earned the super in your title."

"For all you know, I could have masterminded my own rescue, just to infiltrate your organization." I sweep my hand around the cab. "All of this is just part of my diabolical plan."

"That would be really clever, actually." He gently shifts me around to face forward and adjusts the seat belt to short person height, which really isn't short enough. "There's just one flaw."

"What's that?" I ask.

His hazel eyes twinkle. "You didn't know anything about vampires."

I tap my temple. "Playing stupid is all part of the plan."

"Then we're already doomed, right?" He closes my door, then jogs back to the trunk and closes that, too, before he slides behind the wheel. "It's not a long drive, so hopefully, the numbing agent on your feet won't wear off before we get there, but if it does, let me know. The doctor gave me some pain pills."

I stiffen. "I don't like pills."

"Even so, you'll have to take the antibiotics, at a minimum."

I squint at him. "How do I know you're not giving me some random medicine that will mess with my head and make me crazy?"

"That's a very specific concern." He reaches into his pocket and pulls out two bottles, handing them to me. "You can look them up online to verify that the pills are the correct ones. Beyond that, I don't know how to reassure you."

If I had gone that far with my old medication, I would have questioned it more. When I felt my mind slipping, I just chalked it up to grief and more of the general fuzziness I'd always felt, compounded by the increase in my dosage. Dr. Lopez, though, had discovered the discrepancy with embarrassing ease.

"Is there internet where we're going?" I ask. "Do vampires use the internet?"

"Yes, vampires use the internet," he laughs. "And, yes, there's internet where we're going."

I nod and shove the pill bottles into the pocket of my bathrobe, my knuckles bumping against the gun. Hotel pockets can hold a shocking number of items. I'll look the medicines up once I have access to the internet and decide how much of a risk I want to take in believing that they are what he says they are. It's not like they had a lot of time to engineer fake pills. They're not the masterminds in this situation.

Besides, if I start to feel my mind slipping again, I can always shoot him.

My fingers shift to wrap around the handle of my gun, taking comfort in its solid grip and the weight of it in my lap. I really shouldn't feel reassured by it. Even if I managed to pull the trigger, would I even be able to hit a target? But it's more of a weapon than I had when Bryant kidnapped me, and that means something. If I had a gun and the knowledge to use it when Bryant first tracked me down, I could have saved Tris.

I'm done with being helpless. And if Ros is serious about teaching me how to defend myself, then I plan to take him up on that. I'm tired of things happening to me and being unable to stop it.

It's time I become my own best weapon.

Ros starts the engine, then points at the glove box in front of me. "There's a notepad and a pen in there, if you'd like to take notes on where we're going."

Curious, I lean forward and pop open the glove compartment, finding the promised notepad and pen exactly where he said it would be. "You are so failing on the whole kidnapper thing."

"Am I?" He holds up a finger. "Or is allowing you to take notes about where we're going *my* master plan? That pad of paper only matters if you manage to escape with it."

"Very true." I flip the pad of paper open to a clean page. "We'll put this one under unnecessarily rigged in my favor."

As he drives out of the underground parking garage and into the night, he turns on the light in the cab so I can see my notebook, then points out the street signs and landmarks as we pass them.

I dutifully write them all down.

When we take the entrance onto the highway, he announces, "We'll be on this stretch for about ten miles. Do you have anything you'd like to ask?"

Flipping to a new page, I create a Yes and No column, then turn my head to study his sculpted profile. "Do you have to shoot vampires in the head to kill them?"

He chokes on a laugh. "Right to the point, huh?"

"It's all part of my evil, master plan," I inform him.

"Yes, vampires have to be shot in the head to kill them, as you saw with Bryant." He shakes his head. "A stake through the chest doesn't do it."

"Yeah, that was a real letdown on multiple levels." I carefully write *shoot vampires in the head* in the *Yes* column before I return my attention to my driver. "Are you the walking dead?"

He turns his head to stare at me. "Do I *look* like a zombie?"

"Focus on driving." I point my pen at the dark road ahead of us. "And that's not an answer to my question."

"Touché. No, I'm alive." He reaches out to take my left hand and press it over the thick material of his tactical vest. "See?" His heart beats steadily under my hand, his body heat warming me. "I'm a natural-born vampire."

Disquieted, I pull my hand free to grip my notepad. "Are there other kinds of vampires besides naturally born?"

He returns both hands to the wheel. "There are some who've been cursed, but we don't have any where we're going."

"Why would anybody curse their enemy to be a vampire?" Witches really need a talking-to about all these curses they throw around. "Giving your ex fangs just sounds like an upgrade to me."

"Usually for revenge," he explains. "Cursed vampires are mindless with hunger when they start out. They didn't grow into the blood thirst the way we do when we're naturally born. It just hits them all at once, and they wake up with a burning desire to sink their teeth into the nearest living creature. Say your boyfriend is cheating on you—"

I snort. "Do all curses originate from cheating boyfriends?"

"It's just an example." He waves a hand. "So, say your boyfriend cheated on you, and you curse him to become a vampire. The first person he sees when he wakes up is the person he cheated with, and he munches on them. Revenge."

"That's kind of harsh, right?" I shake my head. "Did the person he munched on even know he was a cheater?"

He gives me a surprised look before he refocuses on the road. "For the sake of my story, yes."

"Still feels like there's a better way, but okay. How often do you have to feed?" I asked next.

"Once a month, at the dark of the moon," Ros says, confirming what Bryant told me. "But we can feed at other times, too. As you've seen, the fangs are always there and willing."

"Typical male," I mutter.

Ros starts to laugh again. "Hey, there are female vampires, too. The fangs don't discriminate, and neither should you."

"What about living forever?"

"We don't tend to die young, but we don't live forever, either," he tells me. "Our bodies are very resilient."

"Yeah, I remember." I remember in full, bloody detail.

"Unless we suffer irreparable brain damage, we can live to be about a hundred and twenty," he continues.

I straighten with disbelief. "That's it?"

"Sorry to be such a disappointing vampire," he says dryly.

"What about creating sexy vampire ladies who crawl on the ceiling and try to seduce visitors to your castle?" "No, none of that, either," he sighs. "Much to many a young vampire's disappointment."

I slump back in my seat. "There's probably nothing to the three bites thing, either, huh?"

Silence fills the vehicle.

I perk back up. "Oh, so there *is* something to the three-bite thing?"

"It's not enslavement or anything, but it does create a bond that can't be broken," he says slowly. "It's usually only done between those who are really close, such as family members and lovers who have sworn themselves to each other."

I make a note of that. "So, if Bryant had done this to other people in this supposed facility, him being dead now would have broken that link?"

His tone turns grim. "Yeah, if such a thing existed."

"Does the link go both ways?" I ask.

"Yes, which is why it shouldn't be done lightly, especially with humans." His gaze leaves the road for a moment. "Some people can't handle the bond. It can feel like there's somebody else always with them."

"Got it. No bite times three." I write that down and underline it. "Is that the vampire equivalent of taking a mate? Or do you have mystical chemicals in your brain that direct you to your perfect partner?"

"Someone's read too many vampire romances, haven't they?" he teases. "No mystical brain chemicals."

"What about turning into mist or fog?"

"Why, so we can creep into the rooms of virgins?" He shakes his head. "That one doesn't even make sense, if you think about it. Vampires need blood to survive. If they turned into mist, then where does the blood go that's keeping them alive? Mist doesn't have blood."

"That makes a lot of sense." I add *mist* to the *No* column. "What about turning into a bat? Bats have blood." "That's actually a skill some of us have."

My eyes widen. "Seriously? Can you turn into a bat?"

He shakes his head. "No, that talent doesn't run in my line."

"What about turning into a wolf?"

His grip tightens on the steering wheel. "No, that's not a vampire thing."

I frown at him. "Do you hate wolves?"

He shrugs stiffly. "I'm not fond of canine breeds in general. I got bit as a kid."

I rest my head against my seat, my head turned toward him. "Uh oh."

He shoots me a fast look. "What?"

"I fear we can't be friends," I inform him in a serious tone.

Disbelief fills his voice. "You're friend blocking me because I don't like wolves?"

"When I was growing up," I say, "I had a lot of time alone to read, and something I always found fascinating was this baby name book my dad kept on the bookshelf, right next to this thing called a dictionary."

He glances at me again. "Please don't say your name means wolf."

"It doesn't." I wait for his shoulders to relax before I add, "It means Renowned Wolf."

He groans loudly. "No! That's *worse* than a regular wolf!"

I point out the window at the quickly passing landscape. "Should I just get out here?"

"It's probably for the best." He nods firmly. "This friendship will never work out."

I keep a straight face until he cracks a smile and then the giggles erupt, and I lean against the door, gasping for breath until tears stream down my face.

I clutch my sides, trying to control myself. I haven't laughed like this since Tris got stuck in his sweatpants when he forgot to take them off before shifting to his wolfdog form.

My eyes sting and the tears flow faster. I wipe my dirty sleeves over my face and press them against my mouth, trying to stifle the sound as my laughter turns to sobs.

Laughter dying, Ros pulls over on the side of the empty highway and puts the SUV in park.

He scoots across the seat, his arm hesitantly slipping around my shoulders. "Hey, it's going to be okay. You'll get through this."

Turning in his arms, I cling to him and sob for the first time since Tris died.

# THERE BETTER BE A BATHTUB

I feel embarrassed and sleepy by the time we get back on the road, and barely have the energy to take notes when Ros points out the exit.

Without even a hiccup, he returns to being my personal, vampiric GPS, calling out all the streets and landmarks we pass. It's like my breakdown didn't even happen, for which I'm grateful. It helps with the embarrassment, though it does nothing for the exhaustion.

Eventually, he drives us into an expensive-looking neighborhood, passing mini-mansions, and interest stirs within me.

What would be the odds of attaching myself to a billionaire who's weird enough to not hold it against me that I tried to kill his dad? Will I get my own wing in his mansion? Will this be like being adopted by Batman, even though Ros can't turn into a bat?

When he stops at a gate that blocks a long, private drive, I whistle. "Count Dracula really does have a castle to imprison me in."

He casts me a grin as he rolls down his window, then digs in his pocket for his wallet. "I think you'll really like my underground lair."

"Was Dracula a real vampire?" I ask, full of curiosity.

He shakes his head. "No, he was just a dick who liked to impale people."

"Yeah, I wouldn't claim him at a family reunion, either." I watch as Ros pulls out a card from his wallet and holds it against the black box.

A soft beep follows, and the gate in front of us rolls open.

"Oh, I see your plan." I point at the card in his hand. "This is how you'll keep me prisoner here. Your dastardly plot has been revealed."

"Oh no. Whatever will I do?" He flicks the card into my lap. "I have dropped my super-secret key card."

I slip the card into my pocket. "Really, really bad kidnapper."

"What can I say?" He drives through the gate, then pauses to watch through the rearview mirror as it rolls closed. "You're just too clever of a villain."

"Supervillain," I remind him.

"Oh, yes, how could I forget?" With the gate safely locked, he continues forward up the long driveway.

Trees cover the winding road, their branches creating a canopy of leaves that block out even the minimal light cast by the crescent moon. Only the headlights offer illumination, the beams restricted by the press of the trees on either side.

From the street, it would be impossible to see the house that lies at the other end of this road, and my heartbeat quickens with excitement, tamping down my exhaustion.

As the end of the trees comes into view, I lean forward and hold my breath.

Then, we exit the prestigious tree tunnel, revealing rows of tiny houses with large lawns.

My held breath leaves me in a gust of dying dreams, and I wave my hand in front of the windshield in a wiping motion. "These are not the mansions we are looking for."

He chuckles. "Disappointed so fast?"

I turned to look at him. "Tell me the truth. This spare bedroom you spoke of doubles as your bathroom." "What? There's plenty of room!" He gestures to the tiny houses, which can't be more than five hundred square feet. "We'll barely bump elbows!"

"You can't be serious." But when he pulls into a driveway and parks in front of a blue one, I start to suspect he actually *is* serious.

The house in front of us doesn't look like it's big enough for even one bedroom, let alone two, unless Ros has a very loose understanding of what "bedroom" means. There better at least be a bathtub I can curl up in.

Ros climbs out, shuts his door, and hurries past the front of the car, his form flickering in and out of the headlights as he comes around to my side. I unbuckle my belt, and pop my door open, shifting closer to the edge of the seat to make it easier on him.

He stops next to me and drops a set of keys into my lap before he scoops me into his arms, hip-bumping the door closed behind us.

A small pathway leads to the front of the house, and as we near a door, a motion sensor light flicks on.

Ros stops in front of the door and angles me toward the handle. "It's the key with the smiley face on it."

I check the keyring and, sure enough, I find one with a yellow smiley face on it. I hook my fingers in the neck of Ros's tactical vest for balance and lean over to unlock the door and push it open. Another light flicks on in the house.

Ros strides inside, hooking the door with one foot and closing it.

The house is everything I dreaded it would be. I don't even know if it's wide enough for Ros to stretch out without his head and feet touching the walls on either side. The front holds a narrow table and bench seat against one wall and a minimalist kitchen across from it. A sitting area at the back offers room for lounging, and the loft above it looks to be the one and only bedroom in the house. I eye the dining table. Maybe it folds down for a second bed?

Ros bounces me in his arms. "Are you excited for your new home? Should I give you the grand tour?"

"I think I can see the grand tour from here," I say faintly.

"Oh, ye of little faith." He walks toward a raised platform at the back of the house. "Bring out your key card."

I pull the piece of plastic from my pocket.

He nods to the wall behind me. "See that picture of a sunflower?"

I turn my head to stare at it. "Yes, I see the very generic and boring picture of a sunflower. Very nondescript. Did it come with the frame?"

He ignores my dig at his choice of decor. "Hold the key over it."

I do as instructed, and the ladder that leads up to the loft swings inward, revealing a staircase down.

Eyes wide, I stare at the steep staircase. "Oh, I get it. You're mole people. That's why you were bragging about your underground lair."

"I like to think we're a little bit better than that." Ros shifts me so my feet tuck closer to his body. "With sunlight being a problem, though, it *is* easier to build our compound underground. Even a brief time in the sun can result in a firstdegree burn. An hour can lead to death. That's another thing for your notebook."

"Got it." I commit that information to memory. "If you don't have time to shoot for the head, slow torture by sun works, too."

"You got it." He glances down the hidden staircase. "Now, are you ready to see your mole home?"

"Sure," I wrap my arm around his neck. "Today's as good a day as any to take a dirt nap."

### BOIL ME ALIVE

A s Ros carries me down into the depths of his underground dwelling, I take a deep breath, half expecting to smell dirt, because that's a vampire thing, right? They sleep in the dirt of their home country or something?

Instead, the sweet scent of cookies fills the air, and I stare up at Ros. "Do you *bake*?"

"I feel like I should be offended by your shock." He shakes his head in disappointment. "Is it because I'm a man or because I'm a vampire?"

"Because you're a badass manly man who grunts and shoots guns," I admit.

That pulls a smile from him. "Baking helps me relieve stress. And I have a sweet tooth."

My eyes widen with no small amount of avarice. "I like pie."

"Noted." Ros steps off the bottom stair and onto plush carpet that cushions his heavy boots.

I take in the pale blue walls that remind me of sunny days, and the framed artwork of the ocean at sunrise. Tipping my head back, I study the high ceiling, which must be at least ten feet tall. Aren't basements supposed to have drop ceilings that make you feel claustrophobic? This feels like a beach house.

"Your lair is very...bright," I say at last.

He laughs. "I just keep disappointing you, don't I?"

I scrunch my nose up. "I'm beginning to think you're not really kidnapping me, and I'm not sure how I feel about that."

"Allow me to further disappoint you." He turns to the right, where the hall opens at the end into what looks like a living room, judging by the back of a couch I spy. "Down this way is the shared living area, complete with living room, dining room, kitchen, and workout room." He turns to the left, where two doors sit facing each other. "This way leads to the sleeping quarters. Both rooms have ensuites, so you'll have a private bathroom."

At the word bathroom, my gaze drops to my dirty robe, and suddenly, all I can smell is myself, which is way less appealing than the cookies, to say the least.

I turn my eyes up to Ros. "I would very much like to see my personal bathroom first."

He grins down at me. "I was hoping you'd say that."

I smack him on the chest, which, thanks to his tactical vest, hurts me more than him. "Shut up. I smell like daisies."

"Daisies in a compost pile, maybe." He laughs when I smack him again. "Nothing a bath can't fix."

He strides down the hall and into the room on the left.

He uses his elbow to turn on the lights. "This will be your room for as long as you want to stay."

Curious, I glance around. A queen-sized bed rests against the far wall, with whitewashed nightstands on either side, each holding a lamp. A dresser stands against the wall directly across from the bed, and a blue, checkerboard chair sits in the corner. Slatted, white doors cover what must be a closet. Again, the light-blue walls and white linens give the space a beachy feel.

Ros carries me through a doorway to the right of the entrance, and elbows on the light to reveal a standard bathtubshower combo, a single sink vanity, and a toilet tucked between the two. It's far from a resort, but way more than I expected, especially since Ros hasn't brought up any form of rent for the use of such a nice space. Is this what a guilty conscience gets me? And how long will the guilt last?

"You have a really nice underground dwelling," I inform him.

"Just because we have to stay out of the sunlight doesn't mean we have to give up basic comforts." He sets me on the counter next to the sink. "The doctor said to keep your feet out of the water for a few days. Will you be okay with a bath?"

I wiggle my toes in their bandages and grimace. "Yeah, but I might have to take a couple to feel clean."

"Water isn't a problem here. I have a tankless heater, so refill as many times as you need to." He leans into the bathtub and moves the soap bottles from a recessed shelf to the rim of the tub. "Shampoo, conditioner, and body wash are all unscented. I hope that's okay."

"Do vampires have super sensitive noses?" I ask.

He turns on the hot and cold taps without looking back at me. "We do."

I grimace and pluck at the soiled hem of my robe. "Wow, I must be a real treat for you."

"Smells don't affect us the same way they do humans, much like any predatory animal. The unscented soap just removes a distraction," he explains. "What smells bad to you is perfectly natural, but we do need to make sure your wounds don't reinfect. The smell of infection isn't pleasant."

I sit up primly. "Well, I will endeavor to be more pleasant on your nose."

"And I will endeavor to appreciate your efforts." He tests the temperature of the water. "Do you like the temperature warm or hot?"

"Let's go with scalding on the first pass. I want to burn off at least two layers of skin."

"Scalding it is." He lowers the tap on the cold and presses the plug in the bottom of the bath. The water pours out of the faucet in a rush, quickly filling the tub. Watching him work, I wonder how, exactly, I'm going to take a bath while keeping my feet out of the water. Washing my hair might be a problem, and the numbness on my feet is starting to wear off.

I had gotten used to the pain, but the reprieve stripped away all of my immunity, and now a deep throb travels up my legs that promises to become excruciating.

I dig into my pocket for the pills and study the label for the pain medicines.

"Are your feet starting to hurt?"

Ros's question startles me, and I glance up to find his eyes on me. "A little, but I can bear it for now."

"I'll get you a laptop to use when I go find your suitcase," he promises. "But if your feet hurt too bad, I can ask the doctor to numb them up again."

I shake my head. "No, I'll be okay for now."

"Until I get your suitcase, are you fine with wearing a pair of my pajamas?" His cheeks pinken. "I'm afraid I don't have any undergarments for you to wear."

I eye his large frame and shrug. "One of your T-shirts will be like a dress on me. That'll do." I set the pills on the counter, then move my gun and key card to the counter as well. I'm collecting quite the little hoard.

As Ros turns to check the tub once more and turn off the water, I push my hands under my robe and work my leggings off, being careful around my bandaged feet.

"What are you doing?" Alarm fills Ros's voice, and I glance back up to find his eyes on me once more.

My brows pinch together. "You don't expect me to get into the bathtub fully clothed, do you?"

"But..." His eyes flick down my body, and the pink in his cheeks deepens.

"Oh, come on." I tug on the knot in my robe. "I was boobies out in the cabin."

"I wasn't focused on your boobies at the cabin." He turns his back to me. "I had other things that required my attention."

"Then don't focus on my boobies now. They're not that amazing, anyway," I tell him. "I'm practically a boy."

He clears his throat. "You are most definitely not a boy."

I shrug off the robe. "How would you know if you weren't looking?"

He remains silent.

Naked under the bright lights of the bathroom, I start to feel a little self-conscious. "Look, you can just stare at the ceiling and think of baby bats or something, but I'd really like to get into the bath while it's still hot enough to boil me alive."

"Baby bats," he mutters in disbelief, but he turns and fixes his eyes over my left shoulder. "You're ridiculous."

His red face actually makes me more comfortable with being vulnerable in front of him. It's funny to see the badass warrior blushing like a virgin.

"I believe in you, Ros. You can do this." I grab his hands and move them to my waist. "Now, just heave-ho, into the water I go."

Despite his obvious embarrassment, his lips twitch, and he grips my waist more firmly.

I settle my hands on his shoulders. "Just don't make this weird."

His smile vanishes. "It's not weird to want to give you privacy after what you went through."

The reminder dims my mood. I've been trying hard *not* to focus on anything that happened. I realize that means my trauma will rear its ugly head at the most awkward time possible, but I just can't deal right now. "Heave ho, Ros."

With an easy bunch of his biceps, he lifts me and swings me toward the tub. My feet bang against the edge, and he mutters an apology as he slowly lowers me in.

My ass enters first, and I hiss at the first lap of hot water against my skin.

He freezes, partially suspended over the tub, and his eyes shoot to mine. "Is it too hot?"

"Burns so good," I grit out. "Can't wait to boil alive."

"You're definitely the one making things weird." His gaze shifts to the tiles behind me as he slowly lowers me into the bathtub until my body is fully submerged, with only my feet propped up on the rim.

"Solid landing." I give him two thumbs up. "The judges give you a ten out of ten."

Straightening, Ros grabs the shower wand and brings it down to dangle in the water. "If you flip this knob here"—he points to one on the tub spout—"and turn the water on, it will switch to the shower wand."

I reach for the washcloth and soap. "Got it."

"Do you need help with anything?"

I consider teasing him, but I'm no longer in the mood. "No, I've got it."

"Yell if you need me." He turns and heads for the door. "I'm not leaving the house."

"I'm a good yeller," I assure him. "I'll yodel for you once I'm clean."

He bends and scoops up my leggings before gathering the bathrobe off the counter. "I'll just burn these for you."

I start scrubbing at my shoulders, doing my best to rub those top two layers of skin off. "Solid plan."

He pauses at the door, back still to me. "Do you want anything to eat?"

Despite my earlier demand for beef jerky, my stomach protests the idea of food. "Maybe after I wake up. I'd really just like to get clean and then sleep for a solid day, if that's okay?"

He nods in agreement. "I'll get you that T-shirt."

"And a toothbrush?" I ask hopefully.

He backtracks and opens the mirror, revealing a medicine cabinet, and pulls out a new toothbrush and a tiny tube of toothpaste.

In his effort to not look at my nakedness, he almost drops both into the water before I take them from him, my soapy fingers leaving suds on his hand.

"Thank you, Ros," I say as he heads back for the door.

He pauses, his head turning slightly, though not far enough to see anything. "You're welcome, Rowe. I'm sorry that you were caught up in all this."

He leaves before I can respond, and I finish scrubbing down my body and use the toothbrush before tossing it toward the sink, where it clatters around. Grabbing the shampoo bottle, I fill my palm with soap, and work it into my hair, then rinse and repeat before adding conditioner.

While it soaks in, I pop up the plug on the tub and let the gray water drain out. Then, I soap my body again and use the wand to rinse it and the conditioner off before I refill the tub with fresh, lukewarm water and sink into its embrace.

The water covers my head, my hair floating around my face. The ceiling wavers in with the ripples of the water, and I imagine I see clouds passing by.

Is this what it would have been like had Tris and I made it into the hot tub? If Bryant hadn't interrupted, where would we be right now? What adventures would we have gone on?

My lungs burn with the need to breathe, and I close my eyes, blocking out the bright world. I don't like to see all that light when Tris isn't there to share it with me.

My hands clench into fists, my nails digging into my palms to add new wounds to my body. If not for my super special blood, none of this would have happened. Not Haut, not Owen, and not Tris. We could have all lived on and been happy.

Pain joins the burn in my lungs, traveling up my throat in a seething mass that demands release. My mouth opens, the screams I've pushed down boiling out of me.

I scream until there's nothing left inside me, my body turning heavy and lethargic. I should get out of the water, but I can't will myself to sit up, to take that next breath needed to keep on living.

My eyes open once more, the light above the water sparkling like firecrackers.

A person appears above me, a golden halo shining around his head, and for a moment, I think Tris has returned.

Then hands close around me, pulling me from the water, and a hard thump against my back forces me to gasp in air.

I cough and push against Ros's hold. "Stop it. I'm not drowning."

Ignoring my protests, he scoops me out of the tub, water pouring everywhere.

He grabs a towel on his way out of the bathroom and strides to the chair in the room, sitting down in it with me on his lap.

Wrapping the towel around my wet body, he hugs me close. "Please, don't give up on life."

"I wasn't—" I cut off as his arms tighten around my body, squeezing the protest out of me.

"Going on after you've lost someone important is hard, but you didn't fight to stay alive just to give up now." He rubs the towel over my face. "Promise me you won't do that again, or I won't feel safe leaving you alone."

"I wasn't—" This time, the protest dies on my lips on its own, and anger simmers inside me. "Why do you care? Your dad was willing to let me die. Why are you trying so hard?" "Because *you* tried hard first." He drops the towel to grip my chin. "You wanted to live in that cabin. You wanted it so hard that you made me break rank to go in and ensure you made it. Don't throw all that away. You're a survivor. You fight. You don't give up in a bathtub in a stranger's house."

"You don't know that," I whisper. "I could be very good at giving up."

He releases my jaw to stroke my cheek. "No, you aren't. I've seen you driven into a corner with impossible odds. Giving up isn't in you."

Tears prickle in my eyes. "But it would be so much easier."

"Easy is for the weak." He leans down to press his forehead against mine. "You're a supervillain, remember? Supervillains aren't weak."

Tears slip from the corners of my eyes. "I'm going to hate you, aren't I?"

"Probably." He lifts the towel to blot at my face once more. "But you'll thank me, too."

"Don't hold your breath." When he winces, I grimace. "Too soon?"

"Too soon." Standing, he sets me on the foot of the bed, then walks to the bathroom, returning with a large T-shirt in his hand. Without asking, he shoves my head through and lets the material go.

It puddles around me like a loose dress, covering my knees. I dutifully thread my arms through the appropriate openings, then pull the damp towel out from beneath with a half-hearted flourish that makes neither of us smile.

Ros kneels in front of me to check that my bandages didn't get wet during the Save-Rowe-From-Drowning incident before he stands and scoops me up under the armpits and walks me to the side of the bed where he had already turned down the blanket and sheet.

"You know, just because I'm not six foot three doesn't mean you have to treat me like a child," I tell him.

"Six foot three and three quarters, thank you very much." He settles me on the soft mattress, which sinks beneath me. "And the doctor said you need to stay off your feet. Without the pain meds, you really don't want to be walking around on them."

"How long do I have to stay off them?" I spot a tall glass of water sitting on the nightstand and reach for it, sniffing the liquid for any signs of drugs.

"It's just water," he says. "And you should avoid putting pressure on your feet for a week at least. They're pretty bad."

"So, big strong man will carry me everywhere?" I don't like that idea.

"I can get you a wheelchair, if you prefer. We have some in storage for when our people get injured." He rubs his shoulder absently, and I notice he had changed out of his tactical uniform into a dark knit sweater and flannel pajama bottoms that cling damply to his thighs.

Tipping the glass back, I chug until I drink all the water, then thrust the empty glass at him. "I'm going to need to pee in the middle of the night." My brows crinkle. "Or would that be day? Either way, the bladder has needs."

"I'll listen for your yodel." He sets the glass on the nightstand. "Can I ask you a question?"

I squint at him with suspicion. "Can I stop you?"

Slowly, he reaches out to tap my chest. "Was this to hide from Bryant?"

Confused, I stare down at where he touched before realizing he's asking about my necklace. I had grown accustomed to its heavyweight and forgot it was even there.

I pull it out and study the twisting maze of metal. The clay disc at the center looks dark from the water, with no sign of the blood that had powered the spell. "It was supposed to throw off anyone trying to find me through magical means." I pull it over my head and set it on the dresser. "Guess I don't need that anymore." His hazel eyes hold mine. "It's a pretty advanced piece of work for someone who doesn't know much about the paranormal world. You said you didn't have a coven."

"Are you asking for all my deep, dark secrets?" Too tired to make a joke, I curl onto my side and pull the blanket over myself. "It was a gift. It didn't work, though. Bryant found me anyway."

Ros searches my face. "Do you know why he was so fixated on you?"

I lift one shoulder. "I'm special." When he still doesn't look convinced, I sigh. "He was crazy. Who can understand the reasoning of a crazy person?"

At last, he nods and stands, taking the empty water glass into the bathroom and refilling it.

He shuts off the light, then walks back over and sets the fresh glass on my nightstand before reaching for the switch on the lamp. "Goodnight, Rowe."

"Goodnight, Ros." I close my eyes, then open them once more when I hear a soft scraping noise.

The light from the hall provides enough for me to make out Ros dragging the chair across the room and setting it next to the bathroom door.

"What are you doing?" I demand as he settles into it.

He crosses his legs and settles back. "It will be easier to be at your beck and call this way."

"I'm not going to try to kill myself as soon as you leave the room."

"Never said you would." He leans his head back. "Now, go to sleep so you can wake up and eat."

"Kidnappers are so annoying." Rolling onto my other side, I present my back to him. "You better not snore."

"Goodnight, Rowe," he says again, amusement in his voice.

This time, I don't respond as I close my eyes, willing myself to sleep.

But sleep doesn't come as I lay awake in the darkness, listening to Ros's even breaths and the quiet tick of a clock from somewhere in the house.

I hadn't been lying to Ros when I said I wasn't trying to kill myself, but there had been a moment when not getting out of the water had felt like the easier option. If he hadn't returned at that moment, if he had continued to wait for me to call out to him, would I be with Tris and Owen right now?

The question won't let me sleep, nor will the knowledge that I'm not sure I'm happy to still be among the living.

Rowe.

My eyes open, and I peer over my shoulder at Ros, but he doesn't move, and his breathing remains even.

Rowe, you're in danger.

Ugh, not this again. Flopping back down, I stuff the pillow over my head, but it can't block out the witch's voice.

Rowe, you've been captured by the huntsmen. You must escape before they find out who you are.

# NOT A VIABLE FOOD SOURCE

**R** *owe, you're with the huntsmen.* Yeah, I was pretty sure that's who Ros and his supersecret organization were, but nice to have an invasive voice in my head confirm it.

The gun I took from Leon looks exactly like the one in my dad's case that I pulled out from under the bed at my grandma's house. I hadn't checked for silver bullets in the magazine, but I'm sure that's what I'll find if I look. Ros had already said that silver carries magic, and how many weird organizations could possibly be running around with that kind of equipment?

Added to that is their history with Bryant, the *rogue*, and his connection to my father, also a huntsman, and even my noodle brain can put the pieces together.

#### Rowe.

Huffing in annoyance, I roll over and reach for the necklace on the nightstand, curling my fingers around the cold iron.

Either it has enough *oomph* left in it to block out the witch, or they give up, because they disappear from my brain.

"Everything okay over there?" Ros murmurs from the darkness.

I yelp, dropping the amulet, and it thumps heavily to the floor. In my avoidance of the witch in my head, I forgot about my unavoidable kidnapper camped out in my new bedroom. "Everything's unicorns and rainbows over here." I pull the blanket up over my shoulders. "You can go back to sleep."

The foot propped on his knee drops to the floor, and he stands with a stretch. "I'm actually hungry. I think I'll go rustle up something to eat."

My stomach grumbles at the mention of food. Despite the queasy feeling, my body demands sustenance.

I sit up and push the covers back. "As long as you're not serving rice cereal or tomato soup, I'll join you."

"I was thinking waffles and sausage." He walks over and kneels in front of me, lifting the necklace from the floor.

He touches my bare knee before he finds my hand and presses the amulet into it. I wait for him to ask why I suddenly wanted it when I had rejected it earlier, but he stays silent.

If he's waiting for me to offer the answer on my own, he can keep holding his breath.

"Do you breathe?" I blurt out.

In the shadows of the room, I make out his head tilting to the side. His fingertips trail across my lap, sending shivers through me, before he grasps my other hand and brings it to his lips. Gentle puffs of air sweep over my knuckles.

I lean closer to him and whisper, "You could be faking."

Chuckling, he pulls my arm over his shoulders, stands, and scoops me up in his arms, walking out into the brightly lit hall. "You'll just have to perform an investigation."

"You'll have to stop talking, then, because I'm pretty sure that requires breathing." I press my ear to his chest to listen to his lungs, but all I hear is his heartbeat. I hold my breath and listen harder before I lean back to glare up at him. "Are you holding your breath?"

"I don't know. Am I?" he squeaks out as his face turns red.

I throw my head back with a groan. "You're the worst vampire in the world!"

He gasps in offense. "Worse than all the other vampires you've met?"

I reconsider my statement. "You're the fourth worst vampire in the world."

He squints at me. "You're counting my dad and the guy who wanted to shoot you as worse than me, right?"

I nod. "Definitely."

"Phew." He takes a left at the end of the hall and enters a small, L-shaped kitchen. "I thought I was in danger there."

He sets me on a stool at a small island, then strides to the fridge to pull out ingredients.

When he adds flour and sugar to the growing stack, I lean forward eagerly. "Are you making waffles from scratch?"

He winks at me as he pulls out a mixing bowl. "Will that make me the best vampire in the world?"

I tap my chin. "How many other vampires can make waffles from scratch?"

"For the sake of my ego, none." He plugs in an electric griddle. "I'm the only vampire in existence who makes waffles from scratch."

"I believe you." I set my amulet on the counter. "Do you have candles? And does the sight or smell of blood bother you?"

He pulls open a drawer in the island and rustles around before tossing a small box of birthday candles across the counter to me. A box of matches follows. "Decided to renew the spell on that one, huh?"

"Can't hurt, right?" I extend my hand, palm up. "Gimme a knife."

He barks out a laugh. "No."

I wiggle my fingers at him. "Come on, I won't try to stab you."

"I'm not worried about you stabbing me. None of my knives are spelled silver." He adds ingredients to his bowl. "I'm worried about you giving yourself another wound that could get infected."

My brows pinch together. "Don't you have a first aid kit?"

He shakes his head, his focus on the batter he's whipping together. "Vampires are naturally immune to disease and our saliva has a coagulating enzyme that counteracts the anticoagulant in our venom. It's all very sciencey and ensures we don't unduly murder those we bite."

"Must be nice to be so impervious." I open the box of candles and pull out the white, blue, yellow, and red ones. "Which way is North?"

He glances up at me. "Do I look like a walking compass?"

I roll my eyes. "No, you look like a freaking boy scout, Mr. Combat Leader."

Lips pursed, he points to my left.

"See? I knew you were the man to ask. Don't downplay your skills." I use one of the non-elemental candles to light and drip wax onto his fancy countertop and position my candles around the Maze of Misdirection pendant. "The first time I did this, I used one of those finger sticks for diabetics. I had to stab myself multiple times, and it really sucked. Blood was far too coagulant."

His gaze flicks up to me again. "I'm not biting you."

"Come on." I wiggle my finger at him. "Super special witch blood. You help me with reactivating my charm, and you'll get to walk around in the sun for a few hours. Win-win for everyone."

His eyes flick to my neck, though the bite Bryant gave me healed supernaturally fast and didn't even leave a mark behind. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"You're right. You'd look terrible with a tan. So healthy. The horror." I pluck at the bandage on my arm. The scab there should be fresh enough to get a few drops of blood. "What are you doing?" Ros demands.

"No knife, no finger stick, and no fang." I rip the bandage off quickly and hiss at the sharp pain that accompanies the action. "A girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do."

Ros throws his whisk into the bowl and rushes around the counter to grab my hand before I can pick off the scab left by the IV. "Can this girl *not* keep injuring herself?"

I tip my head back to look up at him. "I'm going to get my blood, one way or another, so either I pick off my scab, or you offer a different solution."

He searches my face. "You really want me to bite you?"

"Want is a strong word." I lick my lips as nerves set in. "A little poke on the finger can't hurt as much as the neck bite, though, right?"

Pity flickers across his face. "The bite only hurts if a vampire wants it to." He lifts his other hand and strokes the spot on my neck where Bryant sank his fangs into me. "This was maliciously done."

My pulse quickens under his fingertips. "How can you tell?"

"It may look healed to you, but to a vampire, the entire side of your neck is vibrant purple." He traces from just below my ear to my collarbone. "It's to warn other vampires that you've been bitten in the last two weeks and are not a viable food source."

I flinch back from him. "Am I contaminated?"

"No, nothing like that." He pulls my hair over my shoulder to cover my neck. "People can only afford to lose so much blood, and it takes your body time to replace what was taken. If two vampires fed on the same person, it would put that person's life at risk, possibly killing them. Creating a scarcity in the food supply endangers vampires. It's a survival thing on both sides, though an outdated one, as we get our blood from donation centers now." I scowl at that. "You're stealing blood donated for hospitals?"

"All these bad thoughts you have." He tugs on my hair before walking back around the counter and pulling a knife from a drawer. He returns to me. "Every year, over a million pints of blood are thrown out. We simply take what would otherwise go to waste."

"Huh." I reach for the knife but he lifts it out of range and extends his hand, so I set mine in it. "So you're constantly drinking stale blood? That must suck."

"I'm used to it." He poises the knife over my fingertip. "Ready?"

I brace myself. "Do it."

He flicks the knife, and blood wells from the cut before I feel the sting. That's one sharp knife. I totally would have cut off my fingertip.

I fumble with the matches, getting one to light while trying to keep the blood from falling, then quickly go through the process of invoking the four corners and renewing the spell on the amulet.

As the final drop of blood falls, a brisk breeze sweeps through the apartment, snuffing out the small flames, and the clay disc in the center of the iron maze turns a dull red.

"Impressive," Ros says. "Well done."

I grin up at him. "I'm getting pretty good at this, but having a teacher would be nice."

"Do you have your family's grimoire?" He gently takes my bleeding hand in his. "Is that how you've gotten this far?"

I think of the journals I left behind at my grandma's house and shake my head. "No, I've had a couple people show me some stuff, but—" I cut off on a startled yelp as Ros pops my finger into his mouth.

Wet heat surrounds my finger, followed by the slow sweep of his tongue.

"What are you..." My voice comes out faint even to my own ears. "That can't be sanitary."

He pulls my finger free and studies the glistening tip. "Vampire saliva is a medical miracle. Just don't tell the humans, okay?"

Pulling my hand free of his hold, I examine my fingertip, turning it back and forth. I can barely make out where he cut me. "Such a gross miracle."

Once more on the other side of the island, Ros opens the griddle and sprays it with oil. "You're..." His brows pinch together, and he shakes his head as he pours batter into the hot waffle iron. "Never mind."

"No reason to be shy this late in the game." I loop the amulet around my neck and break the candles off their wax seals before putting them back into the box. "Go on. You've got me curious now."

"After what you went through, shouldn't you be more afraid?" He closes and locks the griddle, and steam hisses from the sides. "Specifically of vampires? How can you so casually ask me to bite you?"

"I'm weird," I remind him. I scrape at the wax on the countertop with my broken fingernails. "If a dog bites, there's something wrong with it. It's hurt, scared, or sick. There's a reason. Bryant was sick. I understand being sick. But you're different. You're the person who deals with rabid animals. Besides, I offered you my finger, not my throat. I could live without a finger if it turns out you're evil."

He shakes his head. "Please don't risk your fingers."

I prop my chin on my hand. "So, how was it?"

His brow lifts in question. "How was what?"

I wiggle my finger at him. "My super-special witch blood."

"Ah." He opens the griddle to peek inside, then opens the lid all the way to reveal a perfectly-golden waffle with deep pockets just begging to be filled with butter. "Sweet." "Tingly?" I prod.

He shakes his head as he turns to grab a plate from the cabinet behind him. "Just sweet."

"I guess sweet is okay." Eagerly, I extend both hands across the island for the plate. "Was it enough for you to go outside when the sun is up?"

"No, I'd need a bit more for that." He expertly flips the waffle onto the plate and places it in my hands, along with a crock of butter and utensils. "To be out in the sunlight, I'd need to fully feed so the blood could suffuse my entire body. I wouldn't have been able to get enough just from biting your finger."

"Sucks to be you." I pause, then snicker. "Oh, that's good. Sucks. So many new jokes available."

With a groan, he pours in the batter for a second waffle. "I've heard all the vampire jokes, so just give up now."

As I slather butter onto my hot waffle, I glance around his tidy kitchen, and my eyes settle on his coffee machine. "Is your coffee de-*coffin*ated?"

He gives me a thumbs down. "I don't sleep in a coffin. Next!"

I widen my eyes at him. "Are you any good at art?"

Suspicious, he slowly says, "No."

I give him a sad pout. "So, you can only draw blood?"

A laugh escapes him. "Okay, point for you."

Beaming, I ignore my fork and lift my waffle with both hands to tear a bite out of it. The exterior crunches while the soft interior melts in my mouth, and I groan with appreciation.

"Glad you approve." He opens the griddle and flips a second waffle onto a new plate. "I use a secret ingredient."

Swallowing, I eye the stuff still on the counter. "Is it veinilla?" He shakes his head. "You're going to be a real pain in the neck."

"Ha!" I point at him. "That's what she said!"

He shakes his head again. "You win."

"You're a tough opponent." I raise my waffle again. "It was really neck and neck there."

He smiles before his eyes drop to my throat. "Can I ask you something?"

I nibble on my waffle. "Sounds high stakes."

This time, he doesn't smile. "Is there someone besides Bryant that you're hiding from?"

I freeze with the waffle halfway into my mouth. I have no idea how to answer. Obviously, yes, but someone to actually worry about? Also, yes. But in the same way that I worried about Bryant? That is the million-dollar question.

Before I have to figure it out, though, the door in the living room bursts open, and a stocky, older man strides into the room. "Ambros, we need to—" He cuts off as he spies me sitting at the kitchen island, and hazel eyes the exact same shade of blue and green as Ros's narrow at me. "What the fuck is she doing here?"

Dropping my waffle, I snatch the abandoned knife off the counter.

Looks like I get a second shot at killing the boss after all.

#### THE STEALTH-LESS NINJA

A s fast as I grab the knife, Ros plucks it away from me and slaps my abandoned waffle against my palm.

I glare up at him. "You're not winning any points here."

He bends close, his lips almost brushing my ear. "Play nice. He's the boss."

"Not my boss," I grumble, but I don't try to reclaim the knife.

I'm at a significant disadvantage with my feet out of commission and no chance of using the element of surprise in my favor. I should have grabbed my gun from the bathroom. Now that I know how to turn the safety off, I definitely could have shot Ros's dad this time.

Ros's boss—Elias, I remember him telling me—closes the door without a hint of concern. "She's a murderous little thing, isn't she?"

That's funny coming from the leader of an organization that actively hunts down and exterminates wolf shifters.

"Should I assume she's your newest pet project?" he continues.

I bristle at that question and take an angry bite of waffle to stop myself from snapping back.

Ros stands with his feet shoulder-width apart and his hands clasped behind his back, more like a soldier reporting to his leader than a son talking to his father. "She's still recovering." Elias's eyes cut back to me, and his lip curls with distaste. "Well, put her in whatever room you've decided to keep her. We have business to discuss."

I point my half-eaten waffle at him. "You're one rude ass \_\_\_\_"

Ros slaps a hand over my mouth, cutting off my very valid assessment of his father. "Yes, Sir."

Turning his back to his dad, Ros widens his eyes at me.

Since I have no idea what that's supposed to mean, I widen mine right back at him.

He must take it for the answer he wants because he lifts me off the stool and carries me back down the hall, depositing me on my bed, waffle and all. "Do you have to antagonize him?"

"Do you have to be related to him?" I counter.

He sighs. "Unfortunately, yes, so behave while I find out how much trouble I'm in."

Grumbling, I flounce back on my pillow and rip off another bite of waffle. I should have grabbed Ros's as well, since it will likely go cold during his meeting with his dad. Now that real food is going into my belly, it's waking up to let me know how badly it's been mistreated.

Ros stands over me for a moment, his head cocked to the side before he turns on his heel and strides into my bathroom.

When he returns with my gun tucked into his waistband, I bolt upright. "Hey, that's mine!"

He turns off the lights. "You'll get it back when I'm sure you won't try to murder my dad in my own house."

"You're really annoying!" I yell as he strides out the door, closing it behind him.

As soon as his footsteps fade down the hall, I shove the remaining bites of waffle into my mouth, my cheeks bulging, and roll off the bed. My feet may be out of commission, but my ability to crawl is still top-notch. Quickly, I cross the room, reach up, and crack the door open.

The sound of their voices comes from down the hall, too muffled for me to make out words. Opening the door wider, I crawl like the stealth-less ninja that I am.

Really, if they move to the kitchen, I'll be totally exposed.

Surprised they don't hear me thunking down the hall, I make it to the bottom of the stairs without drawing attention. Since I made it this far, I crawl up the first few so that anyone passing the hallway won't catch me eavesdropping.

Their voices become clearer from the direction of the living room.

For the first five minutes, I kind of regret my curiosity as I listen to Ros get reamed for disobeying orders and commanding his teammate to terminate Bryant.

But that guilt vanishes when the conversation turns to a more personal topic. Me.

"What's your plan for the girl?" Elias demands.

"As I said before, she's still healing," Ros says in a dispassionate voice.

"Then you should have left her at the clinic," his dad snaps. "We're not a charity, and bringing her here compromises our location."

"We're responsible for her current condition." Ros's voice begins to rise at the end before he clears his throat. "Bryant killed her husband and kidnapped her. She has no one else, and she's a witch in training. You're always saying we don't have enough witches on our side, and she wants to learn combat. She could become an asset."

"Fine, but she's your responsibility. If it turns out she's a hindrance, you'll be the one to wipe her mind before you put her back where you found her." The sound of the front door opening drifts down the hall. "If you fuck up again, son or not, you'll go back to Base 1, and Leon will take over your team."

"Yes, Sir—"

The slam of the door cuts Ros off.

His heavy sigh fills the room before he walks to the hall and pauses next to the stairs. "Did you hear all of that?"

I scoot down to sit on the bottom step, my bandaged feet out in front of me. "Can vampires really erase memories?"

"Some can." He drops onto the step beside me. "It's a rare gift."

I pluck at the hem of my borrowed shirt. "A gift you have?"

"Yes." He leans back to prop his elbows on a higher step. "Are you afraid now?"

I twist to study his sculpted features, noting the weary cast to his face. "Can you pick and choose what memories you take? Or is it an all or nothing type of deal?"

His blue-green eyes meet mine. "I can take chunks of time, but not specific memories. There's no picking and choosing. It's like rewinding a tape, then pressing play again. Everything that came after that point originally is gone."

"How do you do it?" I ask.

"I'd have to drink your blood, *really* drink it, and not just taste it like I did earlier. It builds the beginning of the link," he explains.

"Like the three bites link?" I clarify.

He nods in agreement. "For vampires like me, building the link goes deeper. I'm able to skim the memories of the person as I drink from them, and I can make the person forget." He pauses for a second before adding, "Someone with my skill could take away what happened in the last week with Bryant, if you wanted that."

I consider what my memory would be like without Bryant there and shake my head. "No, I want to keep those memories."

His gaze on me remains steady. "Even if they give you nightmares?"

"Bryant is tangled up with other things I'd like to keep." Like my last moments with Tris. If Ros took those memories away, I would never truly know what happened to him. "Besides, if you took away the last week, I wouldn't remember how awesome I am with a soup can."

His lips quirk, though the smile doesn't reach his eyes. "That would be tragic."

Reaching out, I tap the gun in his waistband. "And I wouldn't remember why you're teaching me how to use this beast."

Now, real amusement fills his face. "I'm not starting you on that. It will knock you right on your ass."

"It would just be showing me who's boss." I pet the handle. "But I'll tame it."

"You can tame it after you learn the basics." He straightens, moving my hand away from his belt in the process. "Let's get you back to bed."

My feet throb in agreement, and I lift onto my knees before flopping into his lap.

With an uncomfortable grunt, he wheezes, "We need to talk about your mounting methods."

I loop an arm around his neck. "To my bedroom, sturdy steed."

He sweeps an arm under my legs and stands. "I feel like I should be offended."

I pet the back of his head. "I shall name you Rosebud, and we will go on many adventures."

"Now I know I'm offended," he huffs.

I tug gently on his auburn strands. "Shall I braid your hair so you're the prettiest pony in all the land?"

His brows shoot up. "I'm a pony?"

"The prettiest pony," I correct. "At least until my feet heal and you don't have to cart me around anymore." "This is going to be a long week." He sweeps into my room and drops me on the bed. "Consider yourself grounded."

I laugh as I bounce. "Well, you could always use your magical vampire spit and lick my feet back to health."

With a dramatic shudder, he pulls back his shoulders and tosses his head. "I'm the prettiest pony."

"Darn right you are." As I slide beneath the blankets, pain shoots up my legs. "Hey, can you do me one more favor before you ditch me here?"

He bends to pull the blanket up higher. "What's that?"

I reach over to the nightstand, turn on the lamp, and grab the water still on my nightstand. "Can you get me the pain meds?"

He straightens with a startled look. "You don't want to wait until you can verify that they're not mind-altering hallucinogens?"

I shrug. "You can wipe my memories without drugs, so it kind of feels pointless now, and my feet really hurt. I don't think I'll sleep without them."

"Sure. No problem." He hurries into the bathroom and returns with the pill bottles, already shaking the dosage out into his palm. "It's about time for your antibiotics, too."

I hold out my hand. "Thank you for not leaving me at the clinic."

He drops the pills into my open palm. "You deserve better than that."

I toss back the medication and chase them down with water. "And thank you for ordering What's-His-Name to kill Bryant."

He grimaces. "That was as much for me as it was for you. We could have saved you without killing him, but I don't like those kinds of loose ends."

"All the same, seeing him dead helps with the future nightmares." I set the glass back on the nightstand and scoot

lower in the bed. "When will we start my commando training?"

"As soon as you're up for it." He smooths the hair away from my face, then tucks the amulet under the collar of my shirt. "Sweet dreams, Rowe."

"Sweet dreams, Rosebud," I say.

He turns off the lamp on the nightstand, then crosses back to his chair by the bathroom. He resumes his seat and props his foot on his knee once more, like the interlude of the last hour never happened.

This time, though, no voices keep me from sleep, and I don't dream.

# TRIP WITHOUT A Problem

O ver the next two weeks, Ros and I find a pattern of living together.

Mornings start with breakfast, followed by him teaching me how to handle a much smaller gun than the one still stashed in my bedroom.

While he doesn't take me to a shooting range, he does show me how to completely dismantle the tiny gun and reassemble it, how to clean it, how to check for bullets in the chamber, and a dozen other things I wasn't even aware I needed to know before I was allowed to fire one.

He then leaves me to watch TV in the afternoon while he does secret work outside of the house before returning in the evening to make me dinner.

For the times that he's gone, I use the little wheelchair he brought in, but when he's home, he still carries me everywhere, probably because I put more than one dent in his walls while learning to wheel myself around without using my feet.

The doctor comes to visit a few times to check on the progress of my healing and announces that I'm progressing faster than expected for a human.

The way he says that sounds like humans are a rare species he's still learning about, which makes me *super* confident in his skills as my physician. But when he announces that I should be able to walk around for brief trips the following week, I decide he's okay. More and more of the bandages fall away, and I watch my bruises transform from deep purple to ugly green. Ros does his best to fatten me up, too, by serving rich foods along with a balanced diet of bacon and vegetables.

He also found my suitcase on the third night of my stay. I haven't had the fortitude to open it, though, and it sits in the corner of my room like a silent specter of my past. My life exists as BB and AB, Before Bryant and After Bryant, and the suitcase lives in BB where I stuffed away all the things I don't want to think about.

Ros kindly ignores my continued use of his clothes and even returns home one evening with a pair of velcro tennis shoes.

If he wanted the glittery unicorns on the side to get a reaction out of me, then his expectations are fully met as I enthusiastically rip the velcro back and forth and press on the puffy unicorns to make their eyes light up.

I'll take shoes from the kid's section any day of the week. They're so much cooler than adult shoes.

He also blushes as he hands me a bag of underwear and runs away when I start pulling them out one by one to admire them in the living room. The chicken.

I don't see Ros's dad again, but Leon stops by once and greets me with a chilly glare that promises revenge if we ever meet alone in a dark alley. Ros later tells me that I knocked out one of Leon's fangs in our fight and explains that, while a vampire can regrow their fangs, it takes time. Apparently, their swift healing ability doesn't extend to their pointy appendages.

On the Monday of our third week—which I only know is a Monday because Ros gave me a little calendar to check the days off on—I get up and dress before him, then lurk in the hall outside his closed bedroom door until he emerges.

"About time, sleeping beauty." I clap my hands. "Chop chop. We have things to do today."

"We do?" He rubs the sleep from his eyes and takes in my outfit. "You're dressed the same as always, though." I shake the hem of the T-shirt I wear at him. Today's shirt is red and hangs to my knees. "It covers everything it needs to cover." I stick out a foot. "And look, I'm wearing my new sneakers!"

He stifles a yawn. "Can we at least have breakfast first? I need coffee."

I squint up at him. "That depends on whether or not your underground lair has a place to eat out."

"There's a mess hall." He scrapes his hands through his auburn hair, which is just as luxurious as I originally pictured when we first met.

It's really not fair that he rolls out of bed with such bouncy curls. He should do shampoo commercials.

"Mess hall as in a cafeteria-style eating environment that has subpar food and strangers sitting next to you?" I ask for clarification.

"They're not strangers to me, but yes," he says.

Excitement shoots through my body, filling me with the urge to explore. "Let's do that."

He stares down at me. "Did you miss the part where I agreed that it's subpar food?"

"It's time for adventure, Rosebud!" I thrust an arm toward the end of the hallway.

I'm tired of the blue walls and beach vibe, however soothing it may be. It's time to get out and see the world. The underground world, that is. We haven't gone up to the tiny house above ground since we arrived.

In the beginning, I thought I'd go stir crazy at the lack of sunlight, but the house is so well designed that, half the time, I don't even remember we're underground.

But that doesn't mean I'm not getting tired of being trapped inside. That was a large portion of my pre-teens and teen years. I want to see what's beyond these walls. "Okay, just let me..." Yawning again, he points back into his bedroom before he turns and shuffles inside, shutting the door in my face before I can get a good look at his inner sanctuary.

Unlike every other part of Ros's house, his bedroom remains a mystery. From the glimpses I've managed, though, it doesn't share the same seaside feel that the rest of the house holds. It looks darkly masculine, possibly bordering on luxurious, which just drives my curiosity wild.

Who is the real Ros? The one who paints his walls with the color of a sunny sky and the wishful yearning for beach vacations? Or the dark cave where he slumbers every night?

When he steps back out into the hall five minutes later, he finds me still waiting in front of his door, though I took a seat on the floor to ease the pressure on my feet.

He looks far more awake with his curls tamed, and he swapped out his casual lounge clothes for fitted black pants and a tight, black T-shirt. A holster hugs his shoulders, with the silver pommel of a gun poking out from beneath his arm.

I point up at him. "I want one of those."

"We can get you fitted at the range." Without thinking, he bends and scoops me up into his arms, weeks of carrying me around having ingrained the action into his muscle memory.

I clap my hands against his cheeks, startling him. "I'm mobile, now, remember? The doctor said I can walk all on my own."

"But your legs are so short." he protests. "You'll never keep up."

"Do we need to get you a doll so you can carry that around instead?" I kick my legs. "Put me down."

With a huff, he bends and settles me on my feet, his gaze fixed on my face for any sign of discomfort. "Are you sure you're ready for this?"

"We'll keep this to a small outing, I assure you." I pat his firm chest. "Mess hall, gun range, then back home." "Well, if you assure me," he teases.

I tap my chin. "You see this? This is my sure face."

He nods solemnly. "Very assuring." He turns me around to face the front of the house. "Now, watch where you're going before you trip and fall and break something else on your body."

"Oh, ye of little faith." I hobble forward, the ache in my feet telling me this will be a long adventure. But it *will* be an adventure. "I can trip and fall even when I'm watching where I'm going."

"If you keep saying things like that, I'm going to go back to carrying you," he threatens. "I can even buy a purse to put you in."

"Oh, my own little purse? Will it match my sneakers?" I picture Ros carrying a unicorn purse next to his gun and giggle. "Will you also feed me biscuits? And buy me a pretty, rhinestone collar..."

I trail off as I remember the excitement of picking out Tris's pink collar, and sadness slaps me out of nowhere. He had been so happy when I spent extra on his engraved tag and clipped it around his furry neck. He never took that thing off, even in his human form.

Tears sting my eyes. I wish I still had the collar. I'd wear it in his memory.

"How about I buy you some pants instead?" Ros tickles my sides. "Does little Rowe Rowe want pants?"

Barron's voice overlays Ros's, sending another stab of pain through me, and I stumble over my own feet, running into the wall.

What had happened to Barron and the others when I ran away? I never even stopped to make sure they'd be okay. I just left them.

Ros catches me, his big hands steady on my waist and concern in his voice. "Are you okay? Is it too soon to walk around? We can wait another week. There's no rush." "No, it's just..." I take a shaky breath and straighten, my head down as I fight the urge to cry. "Not that nickname, okay?"

"Ah." A wealth of understanding fills the words as we continue down the hall in a more somber mood.

We reach the living room before Ros speaks again. "You know, if you ever want to talk about it—"

I shake my head. "Totally not wanting to go there."

"If you ever are, I'm a good listener." He clears his throat and forces a brighter note into his voice. "Now, do you want me to warn you about the worst items on the menu at the mess hall? Or do you just want to be surprised?"

I force a laugh, hoping that if I pretend long enough, eventually I'll trick myself into being happy. "Let's have it be a surprise. It will be like playing roulette with food."

Stepping ahead of me, he reaches for the front door. "Okay, then you have to order first so I don't give anything away."

I blink quickly to clear the last of the sting from my eyes and smile at him. "Deal."

Sympathy flickers across his face, and he touches my shoulder. "You don't have to fake things for me."

"I'm not faking them for *you*," I tell him, and focus on his pretty eyes. "I'm thinking about hash browns."

His brows lift. "If you're trying to trick me into reacting, you'll fail. There will be no spoilers from me."

I sweep my hand at the door. "Lead on, good sir."

Bowing, he offers me his elbow. "My lady."

Together, we step out of the house and into the underground world of vampires.

## RACCOONS AND SEA UNICORNS

I 'm not sure what I expected, but I had a vague picture in my mind of mining tunnels with raw earth and roughly cut wooden posts preventing the ceiling from collapsing. Maybe some flickering lanterns.

The reality though, leaves me grinning up at Ros.

He stares down at me. "I don't like that look on your face."

I bounce on my toes before the ache in my feet tells me to stop. "I feel like we're in one of those hamster mazes."

He groans and slaps a hand over his face. "I knew I wasn't going to like it."

My head moves back and forth as I take in the circular metal walls. Venting runs along the ceiling high above us, the curved walls partially intersecting Ros's house. The majority of the house appears to be buried behind the tube, but a small porch on the front offers a place to sit and enjoy the view of the tube.

A thin strip of AstroTurf gives the illusion of grass, which separates the houses from a roadway. The road has stripes and pictures painted on it, one half marked for pedestrians and the other half for what looks like stick people on scooters.

I look back up at Ros. "Do we get scooters?"

"You have to earn your scooter, young one." His hand on the small of my back propels me off the porch and down the short—one might even say *minuscule*—path to the pedestrian side of the road. We pass other porches almost identical to Ros's only with different colored paint. The house numbers on metal boards above the porches decrease as we go, and I fix the number fifteen in my mind as our house. I also spot what looks like skateboards with motors on them in front of some of the houses. I twist to peer back at our house, hoping I somehow missed Ros's scooter on his microscopic fake lawn.

When I don't see one, I prod him in the side. "Where's our scooter?"

"In storage," he tells me.

I press against his side harder. "Admit it. You got a little too frisky one night and lost your scooter privileges. Storage is code for scooter impound."

Wincing, he grabs my hand and links our fingers together to stop my poking him. "As part of the security team, I'm either on foot or we have..." He trails off and tips his head up to study the curved ceiling. "Did you see the vents? That's how we pump clean air down here."

"Don't change the subject!" Without letting his hand go, I take three quick steps to get ahead of him and block his path. "You have a go-kart, don't you?"

He gives a pained smile. "Would you find a go-kart cool?"

I nod vigorously. "Very cool."

"What about a golf cart?" he offers.

I slash my free hand through the air. "Way not cool. Very, very not cool."

Raising our linked hands above my head, he pirouettes me in a circle that points me forward once more. "Say that again when you're riding on the back seat, the wind in your hair, and no idea where we're going."

"If you put me on the back of the golf cart, I'm going to puke," I warn him.

"Do you get motion sickness easily?" He moves us off to the right as another couple passes us, and they give me wideeyed stares. I lift my free hand to wiggle my fingers at them until they pass. "The few times Tris—" His name sticks in my throat, and I swallow it down before it makes me cry. "The few times I've had to sit in the back, it's made me a little queasy. I don't actually know how I'd fare facing backward."

Ros ignores my brief pause and keeps his tone jovial. "We'll make sure to give you a trash can before we experiment with that."

"Am I going to need one of those trashcans after we eat in this mess hall?" I ask.

He winks down at me. "That depends on what you order."

"Oh, this is going to be so much fun." I clap his hand between mine with enthusiasm. "Is there gravy?"

"Gravy is an option for some of the dishes," he informs me.

"If there's gravy, it's an option for all of the dishes," I counter. "And obviously there will be bacon."

"Obviously," he agrees.

I consider what else I like to eat, but there's really no limit to what I'll put in my mouth. "I'll skip any waffles, since I already know you do those better."

"I'd be flattered if I hadn't tasted their waffles and know you're only speaking the truth," he sighs.

I pat his hand in sympathy. "It's good to win where you can."

"Why, you little...!" He uses our linked hands to yank me off balance, then loops an arm around my waist and picks me up, tucking me under his arm like a giant stuffed animal. "You're about to lose your talking privileges."

Laughing, I dangle my arms toward the ground. "What was your favorite stuffed animal as a kid? Mine was a raccoon."

"A raccoon?" He chuckles. "That's not the standard stuffed animal parents buy their kids." "My dad wasn't standard, and my mom loved raccoons." I kick my legs gently as the ground passes below me. "We had a little house at one point with a back patio, and my mom would leave out bowls of eggs and cat food so we could watch the raccoon families come and eat."

Ros gives me a big swing, making me laugh, before he gently settles me back on my feet and smooths down my tousled hair. "When did you lose them?"

The question puts a dampening tone on the conversation, but not a sad one. I've had time to process my grief.

I move back to Ros's side and link our hands back together, swinging them between us. "My mom died when I was nine, and my dad died a few months ago in a car accident."

"Losing a parent is hard." He squeezes my fingers. "After my sister was taken, my mom just kind of gave up on life. She passed on a couple years ago."

I squeeze his fingers in return, silently communicating that I understand his grief. It felt much the same with my dad, only his was a slow slide to death, like he was just holding on to life until I was old enough to be on my own. If not for the accident, I'm sure he would have kept on going until I flew the coop, and then followed my mom into the grave.

"What about your stuffed animal?" I say, shifting the conversation back to a lighter topic. "It's something embarrassing, isn't it."

Ros lifts an eyebrow. "What stuffed animal would be too embarrassing for a child?"

I bite my lip as I consider that. "None. There are no embarrassing stuffed animals."

"Exactly." He nods like that's answer enough.

I tug on his arm hard enough to bend him closer. "So, what was your non-embarrassing stuffed animal?"

"A narwhal," he admits.

"A narwhal?" I scrunch my nose as I try to remember what that is. "You mean the sea unicorn? You really *do* love the ocean. That's not just an interior decorator decision in your house? You really did design it to look like a beach."

He presses a hand over his chest. "Are you mocking my childhood love?"

"Oh, definitely no mocking here," I assure him. "Sea unicorns are cool."

"Well, okay then." The look he gives me says he's not sure if he believes me, but he lets it go and points to a larger building up ahead. "That's the mess hall."

"So the sign says," I say dryly.

A metal sign protrudes from the front of the building so passersby can't miss it. A picture of a plate with a fork and a knife crossed over it sits at the top, with the words *Mess Hall* written in block letters below.

He releases my hand to grasp the door handle and looks back at me. "Are you ready for an intestinal apocalypse?"

"That sounds so hardcore." I pump my fists. "Let's do this!"

Ros pulls open the door and half bows as he gestures for me to go inside ahead of him.

Curiosity propels me forward, and I rush into the mess hall, only to stumble to a stop when all eyes in the room turn on me with suspicion.

I backpedal quickly and crash against Ros, who followed me in.

His large hands on my shoulders steady me, and I don't know what he does, but suddenly everyone stares down at their plates and ignore us.

When I tip my head back to see, he just winks and steers me toward a buffet-style case of food with glass blocking the way on our side. Servers stand on the other side of the food case, their plastic-gloved hands ready to take our orders. Suddenly feeling out of my element, I glance back at Ros.

He gives me a reassuring smile. "Go ahead and take a walk down the line to check out your options before you decide."

Since no one stands in line behind him, I do as I'm told. The mess hall offers a wide variety of fruits, hot and cold cereals, toast, pancakes, French toast, waffles, biscuits, breakfast meats—including steak—and the promised gravy.

When I scoot back down the counter to Ros's side, he lifts a brow. "Have you decided?"

I nod and face the waiting server. "I'll have biscuits with gravy, a double serving of bacon, pancakes with mixed fruit, and scrambled eggs."

The server's eyes rake over me before flicking to Ros, who dips his chin in approval. Scowling, the server pulls out two plates from under the counter and loads them up with my order before passing them over the top of the glass case.

"I'll have oatmeal with blueberries and two sausages," Ros orders.

I glance up at him in surprise. "That's all? You usually eat more." Then, I gasp. "Wait, is that the *only* thing that's edible here?"

An evil glint enters his eyes. "You've made your selection. There's no turning back now."

I gulp. Trashcan vomiting, here I come.

Ros takes his bowl of oatmeal and leads me to a drink station, where he fills up a mug with coffee and a glass with what looks like apple juice.

"I'd like coffee, too," I say as he steps away from the station.

He ignores me as he heads for one of the long, plastic tables in the room. He had learned the danger of giving his pet Rowe coffee on day four of our cohabitation and has refused to repeat the amazing experience. I eye the coffee carafe and the two plates in my hands before I huff and follow him.

As I slide onto the bench across from him, the other people at the table take their plates and leave.

I stare after them, then lift the collar of my shirt for a sniff test, but I smell fine. "Is it something I said?"

"Just ignore them." Ros pushes a napkin-wrapped set of silverware over to me. "They're citizens, and they don't like to sit with the guards."

"Well, that makes them assholes." I peel off the little paper band and shake out my fork and knife. "What was with the server needing your permission to give me food?"

"We don't like to waste food down here, and she was questioning your ability to eat everything you ordered." He lifts his coffee and takes a sip. "Don't worry about it. It's your first time at the mess hall, so you should try things out."

"Don't go underestimating my hollow legs." I neatly cut the first of my biscuits into quarters. "The only thing that will stop me from eating all of this is a sudden urge to run to the toilet." I glance up at him. "Where is that, by the way?"

He points back toward the drink station, where I spot a shadowed hall.

"Got it." I shove the quartered biscuit into my mouth.

He watches me with an amused curl to his lips. "How is it?"

"Really dry," I choke out, reaching for my glass of juice. I force down the bite. "And why does the gravy taste like it should be on a pot roast?"

"Because it's the same gravy they make for pot roast night." He dips his spoon into his oatmeal. "Ready to give up?"

"Never!" I stab another bite of dry biscuit. "But I'm going to need more juice."

# FOOD BABIES AND Weapons

A burp escapes me as I toddle down the walkway next to Ros, rubbing my distended belly.

He casts me a concerned look. "Are you sure we shouldn't stick closer to the bathroom?"

"No, we're fine." I pat my tummy. "Aren't we, baby?"

He shakes his head with horrified respect. "I can't believe you ate all of that food."

I'm kind of surprised I did, too. And I'm glad we're taking a walk to help me digest it. "You said we can't waste food."

"I got an oatmeal so that I could help you," he mutters.

"Well, the joke is on you, Rosebud, so be happy with your oats." Another burp escapes, and I slap a hand over my mouth. "I swear I'm not going to throw up."

"Uh-huh." Ros takes a step to the side, putting a little distance between us.

I waddle after him. "Do you have cleaning robots down here?"

"We're a vampire dwelling, not science fiction." With quick steps, he outpaces me. "There are no robots to clean up after your mess."

"Don't you run and make me chase you," I warn. "If you do, I really *will* puke. And believe me, it will be projectile. It will get you." Properly afraid, he pauses to wait for me. "Next time, take a reasonable amount of food."

"I thought that was reasonable." I catch up to walk by his side. "By the way, which food items were supposed to make me run to the bathroom?"

"The gravy, obviously." He shudders. "It's pure, meat-flavored grease."

I give him a solemn nod. "Yeah, I suspected that might be the case."

"And the scrambled eggs," he adds.

"They did have a distinctly rubbery feel to them." I reach out to grasp his arm for support. "Do they just keep putting out the same food every morning until it eventually goes away?"

"I've tried to launch some investigations into that," he whispers. "But my dad turned me down."

"It's time you abuse your power—" I cut off on another burp and cover my mouth as my stomach rumbles and cramps. "Oh, God..." I grip Ros's arm until the pain passes. "It's okay. False alarm."

He stares down at me with wide eyes. "Are you sure we shouldn't go back home?"

I nod firmly. "Back on topic. It's time to abuse your power as the boss's son to fix the mess hall. Your people deserve better than that."

"It would help if we actually had a professional cook down here." He shakes his head. "There's a chore rotation, and everyone takes a turn at the mess hall."

"You're a good cook." I pat his arm with appreciation. "You could do better than that."

He barks out a laugh. "Yeah. I'll let you have that conversation with my old man. Sorry, Dad, can't follow in the family trade. Have to cook in the mess hall instead."

"Your mole people will give you a medal for your heroic sacrifice," I tell him.

"Do you really want to stick with the plan to go to the gun range?" His hand moves to my waist to lend extra support. "We can do this tomorrow."

"No, no." I lean against his side as another cramp travels through my stomach. "We had plans."

He slows his pace for me. "Our previous plans didn't involve your food baby."

I spread a hand over my stomach. "Don't talk about it like that. You'll make it sad."

"If I make it sad, does that mean you're going to puke?" he whispers.

I press my hand against my lower stomach, hoping it will ease the cramping. "Most likely."

He rubs a hand up and down my back. "I love your food baby. Your food baby will be the most precious food baby in the history of food babies."

The cramping eases, and I straighten to pat my belly. "You hear that? Daddy Ros is so excited to meet you."

"Oh my God," Ros groans. "You just put a horrifying visual in my head."

I break out into a cackle. "Did it involve an actual baby? Or a toilet?"

"That's it, I've decided I don't want to be your roommate anymore." He tries to escape my clutches, but I hold on tight.

"Oh, no, there's no running away." I fist the front of his shirt for good measure. "I'm like a fungus. You'll never get rid of me."

"Can we at least put the mess hall on a list of places we'll never go again?" he begs.

"Yeah, I think that's a safe bet." We pass out of what must have been the residential area and move into a more businesstype district. By which I mean the porches disappear and the fronts of the buildings become the same gray as the walls of the tube. The few pedestrians we passed on the street trickle out of existence, replaced by people in black military gear that matches Ros's outfit.

I pause to twist and stare back the way we came.

"Is something wrong?" Ros immediately stops next to me. "Do we need to go back?"

"No, no." I pat his firm stomach. "I was just looking for the line that separated the somewhat friendly area from the unfriendly zone."

"Ah." He leans down, his voice lowered. "I thought the color of paint made that statement clear enough."

"Oh, it does." I turn backwards to study the gray zone. "Did you have to get special permission to live on the civilian side of the tube?"

"I did, actually," he admits.

I stare up at him with wide eyes. "Oh, you poor, abused child. It's okay, I'm here now. I'll take care of you. You, me, and the food baby will be happy together."

Grinning, he pinches the tip of my nose. "That's what I'm hoping for."

The cramp comes again, only this time in my chest, making it hard to breathe for a moment.

Ros straightens. "Our destination is just one more block away. Do you think you can make it?"

Despite the growing ache in my feet and all the cramping, I nod with determination. There were only two things on our list today, and I aim to complete both.

Ros grasps my hand and tucks it into the crook of his arm.

As we start walking again, we pass a pair of men in black gear. They step off to the side of the road, clearing the walkway, and give Ros smart salutes, their eyes on the ground.

When I salute back, Ros gently but firmly grasps my hand and pushes it down. "Salutes are only for those who are above you in power." "Oh, well, no one's above me, so no more saluting." I purse my lips. "Can I wave instead?"

He sighs. "Just ignore them."

We pass two more pairs of guards before we stop in front of a gray building in the long line of other gray buildings.

I stifle my sigh of relief as I try not to shift from one foot to the other to ease my discomfort. This was a longer walk than I expected. The tube is surprisingly long compared to the tiny housing development that can be seen from the surface.

Between the lack of movement over the last few weeks and the cramps from overeating, I'm ready for a nap.

Ros releases me to step ahead and opens the door, then ushers me inside with a hand on my back. He treats me with all the careful concern I imagine he would if I really was pregnant and not just tortured by the gut bomb created by my stubbornness to clear my plate.

Inside the building offers more gray walls and a cement floor. If it had ever been polished, years of scuff marks have worn it down to a dull sheen. Another gray wall cuts through the space only a half dozen steps inside, with a small, waisthigh, rectangular opening covered by black, metal mesh. A reinforced steel door to the left of the window bars the way into the back of the building.

Ros lifts a hand toward the man who sits behind the metal mesh, and a loud buzz sounds from the door.

Ros opens that one as well and ushers me through.

Here, a long countertop divides the room, with more black mesh to stop anyone from climbing over the counter. Through the small holes in the metal, I make out a wall filled with rifles on the top half and a drawer system on the lower half.

The same man who buzzed us through slides off his stool and ambles over, eyeing me with curiosity. "This the witch you brought back? I heard about her from Leon when he came in to get a new gun." Through the mesh, I make out salt and pepper hair that looks like it hasn't seen a brush in a while and a bushy caterpillar mustache that completely covers his upper lip.

I pull back my shoulders. "Ros is going to teach me to shoot Leon's gun, which is now my gun. So, Ros is going to teach me to shoot *my* gun."

Ros pats my head. "But first, Ros is going to teach you to shoot a more moderately sized gun."

I roll my eyes at the old man. "He says I have to use a trainer."

"Because you need training." Ros turns to the man. "Dubrough, this is Rowe. Rowe, Dubrough is the man who handles all our weaponry."

"A pleasure to meet you, Weapons Master." I salute him, because Dubrough is the gatekeeper to my training, and it never hurts to flatter someone. "It's a privilege to be in your care."

His bushy caterpillar mustache wiggles. "I like a person who shows respect and wants to learn. We'll get you trained right up."

Ros takes a step closer to me, his arm brushing against mine. "We also need to fit her for a shoulder harness and two different holsters. One for her trainer and one for her adult gun."

"I'm sure we can find something for her." He eyes my baggy T-shirt. "Maybe from the kid's section."

I point my finger at him. "Ha! You're funny. Very original."

His mustache twitches again before he turns to the wall behind him and starts opening drawers.

When he turns back, he holds a leather contraption of long straps and buckles. "Let's give this a try."

He passes it under the narrow gap between the mesh and the countertop.

As Ros lifts it and turns to me, I narrow my eyes. "Is this some kind of bondage?"

"Yes, very sexy bondage." He swings the thing over my head and drops it down my back. "Put your hands through the holes."

"Yes, Sir, Ros, Sir." I slip my hands through the loops next to my fingers.

He slides the contraption up my back and settles it around my shoulders.

I shrug to test it out. "It feels kind of loose."

"Yeah, it is." He undoes the buckles at the shoulders and cinches them down to their last holes, tightening them as much as possible. "Turn around."

I present him with my back, and he adjusts the buckle back there as well, shrinking the rig even further, before he has me turn back around.

I shrug again. "Still feels loose."

Ros nods in agreement. "We'll have to punch some holes in it."

"We don't actually have shoulder holsters for children," Dubrough says. "And that's the extra small, so we'll just have to make it extra, extra small for you."

"You can make it as many extras as you want as long as it'll hold my gun." I hook my thumbs under the straps to settle it more comfortably over the large T-shirt. "Where do the holsters attach?" I grab Ros's arm and lift it to examine his shoulder holster. "Why does yours look cooler than mine?"

He dutifully holds his arm above his head so I can study how his gun holster attaches. "Because mine is custom made."

"I want a custom-made one," I demand.

"Baby steps," he reminds me.

I sigh. "Fine, punch some holes in this one to make it work, for now."

"Good girl." He pats my head again before he turns back to Dubrough. "Can I get a trainer and a box of target rounds?"

The old man turns to the wall of guns behind him and opens yet another drawer, turning back with a mirror of the gun Ros has been having me learn back at our house.

When Dubrough sets it on the counter in front of Ros, he steps to the side and gives me a nod.

I know a test when I see one, and I check the safety first before popping out the magazine to check if it's loaded, then checking the chamber before stuffing it into the holster Dubrough sets on the counter beside it and fastening the safety strap.

"Such a good student." Ros cups the back of my neck in a warm squeeze. "You deserve a biscuit."

I groan. "Please don't mention food for at least another year."

"Why? Am I making the food baby jealous?" he teases. "Don't you think the food baby needs more food babies to keep it company?"

I smack his chest. "I'm the only one who gets to joke about food babies from now on."

"That hardly seems fair," he protests.

I shake my head at him. "Didn't anybody ever tell you life's not fair?"

"I may have heard that once or twice." He turns back to Dubrough. "We'll need eye and ear protection, too. And have box five set up with a target."

"Sure thing." Dubrough reaches under the counter and pulls out a pair of earmuffs and clear goggles, shoving them beneath the mesh.

Ros slides one of the goggles over my eyes before he grabs a pair of earmuffs and tilts them to show me the dials on the right one. "These will allow us to still hear each other talk while we're wearing them but muffle the sound of gunfire. You can adjust the volume with this knob as needed." I nod in understanding, and he fits them over my head.

"Can you hear me?" he asks.

I give him a thumbs up and grab my trainer off the counter.

Ros puts on his protective gear, then takes the box of bullets Dubrough offers before he turns back to me. "Ready for your first lesson in self-defense?"

Nervousness tightens my stomach, or maybe it's just cramps from the horrible food at the mess hall, but I nod regardless.

It's time I stop being a victim and take control of my life.

#### HIT AND MISS

I follow Ros through another door, and we enter a long room with a partitioned countertop that breaks the space up into individual booths.

We walk past the first few empty ones until Ros steps into one with a number five above it.

When I join him in the small space, our arms brush together. I place my little gun on the counter, which is a smidge too tall for me. A large, open space extends from the other side of the counter. Dark-gray walls, floor, and ceiling make the area feel even larger, the back wall looking like shadows.

Ros sets the box of bullets down and opens the lid. "Do you remember how to load the magazine?"

"Yes, I remember how to load the magazine," I say in a long-suffering tone.

I take one of the tiny bullets and shove it into the magazine, forcing down the spring, then grab another.

By the time I load the last bullet, my fingers ache, and my hand trembles slightly. I try not to imagine how much harder this would be with a bigger magazine and bigger bullets. I'll never admit it, but I'm kind of glad he started me with a smaller weapon.

I drop the loaded clip onto the countertop and massage my hand.

"It gets easier with practice," Ros assures me. "You'll build up your hand strength. Go ahead and load the gun."

I triple-check that the safety is on before lifting the gun and pointing it downrange. When I slide the magazine into the butt of the gun, it locks in place with a click.

Suddenly, the gun feels three times heavier in my hands and a lot scarier. For the last two weeks, I've been learning safe handling and care of my weapon, which has also made me a lot more aware of just how complicated and dangerous guns are.

While I may have tried to shoot someone—Ros's dad—in the heat of the moment, it had been driven by anger and pain. In the cold lights of the shooting range, handling a loaded gun and knowing I'll be pulling the trigger without the safety on makes my hands feel suddenly clammy.

A whirring noise come from out in the range, and a paper, man-shaped target slides down a set of wires, coming from the direction of the ammunition room. As it stops in front of us, locking in place, I spot the lines of a target drawn on its chest and a smaller target on its head.

Ros lifts a hand to a panel on the side of our booth and flips a switch. The target jumps, then rolls closer, stopping at mid-range distance.

"Remember, keep both eyes open when you aim," Ros instructs, his voice crackling in my ears through the speakers in the earmuffs.

We had practiced this back at his house, without bullets in the gun, and I nod.

My pulse flutters nervously. "Will the goggles really protect my eyes from stray bullets?"

"No, but it will protect them from flying cases and shrapnel." Before I can freak out about that information, he points at the target. "Don't worry if you don't hit the paper the first time. Just get used to the feel of firing the gun. It will have a little kick, so try not to drop it." I lick my dry lips and turn to face the target. Lifting the gun to eye level, I stare through the sights on top and aim for center mass. My heart pounds hard, and I glance over at Ros once more to make sure I'm holding it right.

Ros gives me a thumbs up, and I take a steadying breath before I refocus, thumb off the safety, and slowly curl my finger around the trigger. He had said it wouldn't need much pressure, and the trigger moves smoothly beneath my finger before I encounter a mild resistance. My hand shakes a little before I steady it and squeeze harder.

The gun jumps in my hand, startling me so much that I almost lose my grip. Quickly, I put the safety back on and set the gun down on the counter.

Ros grips my shoulder. "Good job. How did that feel?"

"Macho?" I squeak out.

He pulls me into a side hug. "It's okay if it was scary. I won't tell anyone."

I turn to grip his shirt and stare up at him. "My hands are so sweaty right now and my heart is beating a mile a minute."

His hands drop to my waist, and he smiles down at me. "I know, I can feel it. But I promise it gets easier with practice. Are you ready to try again?"

I twist to stare at the target. "Did I hit it?"

Ros laughs. "Not even close."

"Damn." I release him and turn back to the counter. "I was really hoping I was a natural at this."

"That's what training is for." He steps up behind me and crouches to peer over my shoulder. "Let's try again."

I wipe my hands on my T-shirt before lifting the gun once more and taking aim.

Ros's arms reach around me, and he makes minor adjustments as his voice fills my ears. "Not every weapon fires true, so you'll have to practice with your primary and learn how it handles. For now, though, we'll just work on hitting the paper." He nudges the gun a little higher. "Make sure the center dot is in the sight."

I squint at the target, the red dot jumping left and right between the tiny crosshairs until I get it lined up.

"Last time, you flinched right before you pulled the trigger," Ros murmurs, his body a solid presence around me. "Now that you know what that feels like, you know it's not going to hurt when the gun jumps."

His calm voice steadies my nerves, and the red dot comes into sharp focus.

"Now, take a breath in," Ros instructs, "and as you breathe out, pull the trigger."

Air rushes into my lungs through my nose, and I blow it out through my lips as I gently squeeze the trigger. The gun jumps in my hand, more like a little chirp than the jerk it had felt like the first time, and a tiny hole appears in the target's shoulder.

A thrill rushes through me. I put the safety back on and set the gun down before I spin to face Ros. "Did you see that?"

He smiles at my excitement. "I did."

I punch the air. "Take that, bad guys everywhere! No shoulder is safe from me!"

His smile broadens into a grin. "Bad guys everywhere are shaking in their boots."

"Yeah they are! Fear me!" I thump my chest. "I'm amazing!"

His gaze softens. "Super amazing."

Spinning back to the counter, I reach for my gun. "Let's do that again."

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Halfway through the box of bullets, I'm consistently hitting on or near the center of the target and my stomach informs me that I need to find a bathroom.

The cramps have only gotten worse, and my bladder can't contain all the juice I had to drink to force down breakfast.

Ros finds all this amusing as we return the gun and remaining ammunition to Dubrough before we finally leave the shooting range.

"Stop laughing at me," I grumble as I quickly step out of the building and aim for home.

"I'm not laughing," he protests. "I'm marveling you made it as long as you did. I was about to give you the award for an iron stomach."

"Your mess hall should be outlawed," I groan. "Serving food like that can't be legal."

Ros rubs my back. "You're welcome to pen a strongly worded protest to the head of the community."

I glare up at him. "You mean your dad?"

Ros gives a helpless shrug. "He is the head of the community."

Ahead of us, a pair of military men step off to the side and salute.

As we breeze past them, I grumble, "Don't you ever get tired of that?"

"Not really." At my raised brow, he adds, "I did a lot of saluting growing up. Feels good not to have to do that for anyone besides my father now."

Another cramp stabs me in the gut, and I press a hand to my lower stomach. "How long have you been the big man on campus?"

"Five years, and believe me, I earned it." His voice hardens. "My dad wanted to make sure no one thought I got my rank through nepotism."

"Should have gone into the food industry instead," I grunt as I breathe through another stab of pain. "You could open a five-star restaurant making waffles." Ros's brows pinch in concern. "Are you sure you don't want to stop at a bathroom along the way?"

"No, I'm good," I wheeze out and fix my eyes on where the gray buildings give way to colorful porches. "Look, there's the friendly sector just ahead. We're almost home."

"I shouldn't have let you eat there," he mutters. "Suddenly, food poisoning isn't so funny..."

When he trails off, I glance up at him to see what caught his attention and find his eyes fixed on me, his nostrils flaring. "You okay, Rosebud? You're looking a little freaky."

"You're bleeding." His eyes drop to my feet. "You must have pushed it too hard. We should have waited until next week."

"What are you talking about?" My feet ache, but not enough for my healed wounds to have broken open somehow. And I don't feel enough pain for there to be blisters from the new shoes.

A slick warmth trickles down my inner thighs, and I freeze, pressing my legs together. Oh, God, no. This can't be happening. My period has always been erratic, and my IUD only made it worse. Why did it choose *now* to pay me a visit while I'm in a town of vampires?

Ros reaches for me. "It's okay, I'll carry you the rest of the way."

"No!" I slap his hand away in a panic. "Don't touch me!"

"Rowe?" Ros takes a hesitant step closer. "It's okay, baby, I'm not going to hurt you, but you can't keep walking."

A whimper of distress escapes me, and I tug on the hem of the T-shirt. Why didn't I put on pants? Pants would have given an added layer of protection. I tug harder on the T-shirt, willing it to grow in length and cover me all the way to the tops of my rainbow unicorn sneakers.

Ros tracks the motion, and his lips part on a surprised, "Oh." He swallows hard, his pupils dilating. "Okay, we got this." He glances around before holding up a finger. "Don't move."

I stay frozen in the middle of the street and stare after him in confusion as he spins on his heel and strides back to the guards we passed earlier.

I don't know what he says to them, but the one on the right strips out of his black, long-sleeved shirt, revealing a tight tank top beneath.

Ros takes the shirt and strides back to me, swinging it around my hips and knotting the arms around my waist. Then, he bends and scoops me up into his arms. "Don't worry, I have you."

Embarrassed heat floods my cheeks, and I tuck my face against his chest as he runs us the rest of the way home.

#### TAKING CARE OF ROWE

R os leaves me in the bathroom to clean myself up while he heads back out to whatever supply store is in this underground mole tube.

I end up taking a shower, even though I showered the night before. It's the only way I'll feel clean after that embarrassing experience. I can't even remember the last time I had my period, but I think it was when my dad was still alive. I should probably talk to a doctor about it. I could switch to the IUD with hormones now that I know I'm not actually crazy. Or maybe there's some witchy moon dance I can do to regulate my feminine aura?

"Rowe, baby, I brought some supplies," Ros calls from the other side of the shower curtain, startling me.

He must have run there and back. That, or I lost track of time in the shower, which is always a possibility. And did he call me baby?

"I'll leave them on the counter," he continues. "Do you need me to bring you a change of clothes?"

I hadn't even thought about a change of clothes. "Yeah, can you just grab something for me?"

"You got it."

Hmm, no endearment this time. Maybe I misheard?

I picture Ros digging through my clothing supply for underwear, and embarrassment flushes my face, making me feel stupid. Ros has seen everything I have to offer, in the worst condition I could possibly be in. Him handling the underwear we bought for me should *not* fluster me, but my cheeks feel like they should be steaming, so I shove my head under the fall of water to pretend that's why I feel so hot.

Everything happening right now is a perfectly natural part of life. There's no reason to be mortified by any of this. Fifty percent of the human population goes through this every month. Maybe even more? Are there more women than men in the world? It feels like something I should know.

I step out of the water and wipe it from my face. "Hey, Rosebud?"

"Yeah?" he calls back.

I twist the water from my hair. "Statistically, are there more women than men in the world?"

"Hold on a sec." A long pause follows before he announces. "Roughly fifty percent, though more like a hundred and five boys to every hundred girls are born every year."

See? Perfectly natural. Fifty percent of the world suffers through this kind of shit every month. It's nothing to be embarrassed about.

"Could all the vampires on the street smell me?" I squeak out.

His voice draws nearer as he returns to the bathroom. "As I told you before, vampires have a heightened sense of smell, but it's not bad. It's just blood, and most of us can control the hunger triggered by the scent of blood. It's okay."

"Oh my God," I wail. "I made you hungry?"

"I'm a fully grown adult, and I can control myself," he reassures me. "You have nothing to worry about."

Groaning, I look at the soap, contemplating a second scrub down. "I'm not leaving the house for a week. In fact, I'm not leaving my bedroom for a week. You can just leave food at the door." His laughter fills the bathroom. "That's really not necessary. There are over three weeks until the next new moon, so you're totally safe with me."

Stomach clenching, I stick my head out of the shower curtain to stare at him. "The new moon happened a week ago?"

His head cocks to the side. "Yes?"

My brain does the easy math. "But I was here a week ago."

"Yes, and I was a good little vampire and drank my bag of blood without you even noticing." He steps closer, his expression soft. "Really, it's okay."

I snap the shower curtain closed once more. "I'm going to get out now. Can you leave the vicinity?"

"Oh, so now you're shy?" he teases.

"I don't hear you leaving!" I yell.

"This is me leaving." He stomps loudly. "And this is me closing the door."

The door slams.

I reach out to turn off the water, then pull the shower curtain back and grab a towel. As I dry off, the tower of feminine hygiene products on the counter draws my eyes, and I blush all over again.

Did he buy one of everything in the aisle?

I step out of the shower and rummage through the stack of clothes he brought to find a pair of underwear before snatching up the pads. Tampons would be better for stoppering up the blood. Like a grisly cork. But I've never used them before. I'll wait to go on *that* adventure for the first time when I'm alone.

A small box within the stack catches my eye, and I lift out what appears to be a silicone cup. Did he grab this on accident? Should this be in the kitchen?

I turn the box over, find instructions, and drop the box back into the pile. Okay, not meant for the kitchen, and *also* 

not something I'm experimenting with right now, or ever. That just sounds like a bloody disaster waiting to happen.

After damming up the red tide of doom, I dress quickly. Ros had brought me another one of his large T-shirts, for which I'm grateful, but he also added a pair of leggings that he brought home for me the same day he brought home the sneakers.

I pull the tag from them and slip them on, then unroll the giant pair of socks he also brought courtesy of his sock drawer. I love the way they completely envelop my feet and the heels go halfway up my calf. So cozy.

I scrape the brush through my wet hair and braid it before stepping out of the bathroom.

A yelp of surprise escapes me when I find Ros sitting in the chair in my room, and I quickly backtrack toward the bathroom. "When I said I was going to lock myself in my bedroom, I didn't mean that you were supposed to lock yourself in with me. I don't want to make you hungry."

"I'm fine, Rowe." He stands from the chair, crosses the room in four long strides, and plants himself in the opening before I can shut the door. "More to the point, are *you* okay? I grabbed some pain medicine, too. It's lighter duty than what you have for your feet. It's in the pile."

"It's such a huge pile," I whine.

He shrugs. "I can take back what you don't want, but I didn't want to not get you the right thing. I'm told women like specific items."

"What women?" I demand. "Who told you that?"

"I *did* have a sister, as well as a mother," he reminds me. "And there are females in the compound. The lady at the general store was also helpful. Which reminds me, she told me to get you this." He turns and walks to the bed, grabbing a soft rectangle with a cord that dangles from one end.

I squint and take a hesitant step back out of the bathroom. "What is it?"

"A heating pad." He places it over his lower stomach to demonstrate. "She said this would help."

"Your efficiency is embarrassing!" I yell at him, my cheeks catching on fire again.

He grins as he comes over and claims my hand, pulling me toward the door.

I dig in my heels. "Where are you taking me? I'm hiding in here, remember?"

"You're not hiding in your bedroom." He keeps pulling me forward. "We live together, and this is going to happen again."

"No, it's not," I tell him firmly.

His smile softens. "It's going to happen again, so let's just get past this whole embarrassment thing, because there's nothing for you to be embarrassed about. You went through a traumatic experience, and it's completely normal that you lost track of your cycle, but now we can mark it on the calendar."

I smack his muscular back. "We are *not* marking this on your calendar!"

"You can mark it on your personal calendar," he revises. "And we'll be prepared next time."

If only it were that easy, but I really don't want to get into a conversation about my weird body right now.

"Glen at the general store also told me you might want some junk food, so I got that, too," Ros continues. "And sappy movies that make you want to cry."

Surprise rushes through me. "You got me sappy movies?"

"I also grabbed some action, horror, and one comedy." He glances over his shoulder. "I didn't want to assume what you like."

"I like sappy movies." I stop resisting and follow him down the hall to the living room.

There, I stand to the side and watch in bewilderment as he plugs in the heating pad and sets it on the couch, then opens the ottoman slash coffee table and pulls out a fluffy blanket and more pillows. He piles the pillows into a nest on the couch, then shakes out the blanket and holds it up.

"Go on." He nods for me to take a seat in the middle of the nest. "You want snacks?"

"No." Gingerly, I sit down and pull the heating pad over to press against my stomach. "I'm still full from breakfast."

"Right. I suppose it wasn't that long ago." He drapes the blanket around me and tucks it in, his face close to mine. "Hey, this means you get the Cast Iron Stomach badge."

I stare into his beautiful blue-green eyes for a second before my brain kicks back into gear. "Yeah, I do. I won the mess hall battle."

Those eyes twinkle at me. "I hope you don't mind a homemade badge. I'm pretty sure I can't buy one of those."

My stomach flutters. "You can shower your praise on me in the form of baked goods."

Amused, he straightens and walks to the TV, selecting the movie from the top of the stack.

I shift and adjust the pillows around me. "You know those come digital these days, right?"

"I don't have any streaming services." He pops the disc into a Blu-ray player. "You have to provide too much personal information and they track your IP address."

"Must be hard living in a secret society," I say.

"It has its trials." He grabs the controller and settles onto the sofa next to me, his arm draped over the back of the couch.

I turn my head to study his profile. "So, is this what we're doing? For the next three to seven days?"

His brows lift. "Maybe not the *entire* three to seven days, but definitely for today."

"Huh."

"Is this bad?" A worried look crosses his face. "Is it too much? This isn't what you usually do?" "No, it's not what I usually do." I turn my attention to the TV. "But I like it. I've never had anybody take care of me quite like this."

Tris, when not in doggy form, had been a pretty typical man, not understanding the trials of being a female. Haut had taken care of me by feeding me, but it hadn't been with this level of concern. It was more like he was trying to tame a wild animal he wanted to play with.

"Oh, wait." Ros leaps off the couch and rushes to the kitchen, returning with a box of tissues that he settles onto my lap. "Just in case. I don't actually know if this one will make you cry or not."

"I guess we'll find out when and if it happens."

He settles back down next to me, a little closer this time, and his arm returns to the back of the couch, not quite hugging me but close.

Biting my lip, I look up at him again only to find his gaze on me, the soft look in his eyes making my heart flutter. "Ready?"

"No," I whisper, "but I will be."

Ros studies my face. "You will?"

"Probably." I drag my eyes from his and look back at the TV. "Now, let's do this sappy thing."

# MOVIE TIME TALKS

I t turns out Ros cries far more during sad movies than I do. Either he's a giant sap, or he needs some cathartic crying to be able to deal with his horrible dad.

The third time he sneaks a tissue from the box on my lap to dab at his eyes, I move the box to his lap, then cuddle up against his side, draping the blanket around him as well. His arm slips off the back of the couch and around my waist, hugging me closer.

After that, I barely pay attention to the rest of the movie, my focus claimed by the war between my body and my mind.

It feels way too natural and right to be with Ros. We clicked right away, and he understands how my brain works. I'm not stupid. I know it takes a special kind of person to keep up with my mental gymnastics. I've been lucky that the people in my life understand my brand of crazy.

If anyone had asked me a month ago, I would have said I had already tapped out my lifetime of good fortune in finding people who understand me, but then Ros showed up at the worst moment in my life and took me home like it was perfectly normal. And I went along with it because I had no better offers or any sense of self-preservation. But on an instinctive level, I knew Ros wouldn't hurt me back then, the same way I know he won't hurt me now.

Under the blanket, I touch the ring around my finger, twisting it back and forth. I barely had time to get used to it before Tris was taken from me. In the following weeks, the ring has become a reminder that I've been loved deeply, and not just by Tris, but by Owen, and Haut in his own way.

The movie hits a quiet scene, and I ask into the lull, "Did you really invite me to live with you because you felt responsible for what Bryant did?"

Ros's thumb strokes over my arm, and I feel his gaze shift to me. "That was part of it, but not the entire reason. I don't usually invite people to my home, no matter how bad I feel for them. It's a big risk to bring a stranger back here."

"You don't feel like a stranger." I peek at him from the corner of my eye. "Were you lying about vampires not having mates?"

I hold my breath, unsure what answer I want him to give me. On the one hand, having four mates feels like three mates too many, but maybe the magical mojo that decides these things knew I was too much of a handful for just one person.

Ros stays silent a moment before he turns to give me his full attention. "When we met, you had just lost your husband and been terrorized by one of my kind. I didn't want to lie to you, but it felt prudent at the time.

"It's probably for the best," I agree. "I definitely would have told you to pull over and drop me off on the side of the road."

He strokes my arm gently. "I won't push for more than what we have right now. I know it's too soon, and you're not a vampire, so you don't feel the same connection that I do."

Isn't that the story of my life? Finding paranormal men I share a bond with that I can't sense the same way they can. Maybe that's the only way that I can ever find anyone who's willing to just roll with whatever I say. Of course, there has to be a mystical reason why anyone can follow the crazy paths my brain takes. After I stopped going to Hartford Cove, my dad was the only one who understood me for a long time.

"Does your dad know?" I ask.

That surprises a laugh from him. "No, and I don't plan on telling him until you decide if you want to stay with me."

I turn on the couch to face Ros. "Why? Is it shameful that I'm not a vampire?"

"Oh, baby, no." He touches my cheek. "There's nothing shameful about what you are, and that's not why I haven't told him. I'm not ashamed of you."

"I like it when you call me baby," I say. "I never thought I'd be okay with that kind of pet name, but you make it work."

"If it makes you uncomfortable, I can call you something else." Ros strokes my cheek again. "Iron Belly?"

"Let's stick with baby for now," I tell him before getting back on track. "If it's not shameful, why don't you want to tell your dad? If he knew, he might be a bit more accepting of me freeloading off of you."

Ros's hand drops away, and he looks back at the TV. "There are traditions that he'd want to push forward with. I don't want to force you into something you're not ready for."

I hazard a guess. "Are you talking about the three bites?"

He nods. "That's one of them. I don't want to do a mindmeld and then have you decide to leave. It would make it harder to let you go if we're linked like that."

"But you *would* let me go?" I search his profile for signs that he's lying. "You'd just let me leave?"

"You're not a prisoner." He looks at me once more. "And I can't wipe your memory, just to clarify that issue. If you had wanted to forget Bryant, I would have found someone else I trusted to do it. But, if we don't tell my father you're my mate and you decide to leave, then you can go with your memory intact."

"But... You'd really just let me leave?" I press, because my brain doesn't want to believe him. "You wouldn't hunt me down and try to change my mind? Now that you've found your mate, don't you want to keep me?"

"Of course, I want to keep you. But my desires mean nothing if you don't feel the same." His arm around me tightens possessively before it relaxes, and Ros reaches under the blanket to find my hand. He lifts it and touches my ring. "You were in love and happy before. If we had met while your husband was still alive, I would have had to let you go then, too."

My forehead scrunches. "You wouldn't have tried to separate us?"

He shakes his head. "No, of course not. As much as it would pain me to see my mate with someone else, I'd never want to hurt you by forcing you to give up someone you love."

I give him a wobbly smile. "You would have liked Tris. You guys would have gotten along well."

"I'm sure I'd get along with anyone you love," he assures me. "You're a good judge of character."

Not that good. I've made more than one doozy of a mistake.

I push away thoughts of the past. "We could have been a throuple. Everyone wins in a throuple."

He blinks at me slowly, his quick mind struggling to keep up with that one. "I've...never considered that."

"Too weird?" I pat his hand. "It's okay if you're old-fashioned."

"I'm not sure, honestly." He shakes his head. "It's not a concept I've considered before."

An ache opens in my chest, and I look away. "It's not something you have to consider now, anyway."

He links our fingers together. "Tell me about Tris?"

The ache grows, but after three weeks of not talking about Tris, I suddenly want to with a desperation that hurts. "Do you really want me to tell you about another man that I love?"

Ros lifts the TV controller and turns off the movie. "He's an important part of who you are. So, yes, I want to know. It won't hurt me."

I fiddle with my ring some more. "We met at the pound, and it was love at first sight. He had the most beautiful brown eyes."

Voice halting, I tell Ross about Tris, only leaving out the parts about him being a wolfdog.

He listens silently, offering me the tissue box when tears trickle down my cheeks. His arm stays around me the entire time, offering silent reassurance that, despite my loss, I'm not alone.

When I run out of words, my throat feels raw, and my eyes are puffy.

We sit in silence for a bit before Ros rubs his cheek against the top of my head. "Thank you for sharing your memories with me. I agree, we would have gotten along. A throuple would totally have worked."

"You're weird," I sniffle. "Most men wouldn't want to hear about their mate's past lovers."

"Why not? It shows you have a big heart. That you love deeply." He turns his head to press his nose against my hair. "If you can open that heart to me one day, I'll count myself a lucky man."

I sniffle wetly. "I'll remind you of that in the future when you want to strangle me."

He leans back to look down at me with a goofy smile on his face. "You're that sure I'll want to strangle you in the future?"

I nod as I snuggle my head against the curve of his shoulder. "Definitely."

"Then, feel free to say I told you so." His hand drops to my hip, and in a smooth move, he lifts me onto his lap and bundles the blanket around us. "So long as you're talking about still being here in the years to come, I'll happily accept any future fights."

"I'll remind you of that, too." I curl my legs up and push my toes between the cushions next to his thigh. "Is a silver bullet in the head or prolonged exposure to the sun really the only way that you can die?" My morbid train of thought doesn't throw him off or freak him out. As he's done since the day we met, he rolls with it.

"Yes." His arms around me tighten. "Nothing else will take me from you."

"I like the indestructibility part," I mumble. "And I guess I can get on board with limiting how much time I spend in the sun." I lift my arm to show off my pale skin. "I don't exactly sunbathe as it is."

"I had noticed you're very pale," he admits.

"I was a bit of a recluse growing up." I curl my hand into his shirt over his steadily beating heart. "I didn't go outside much."

He tucks the blanket around us. "I'd like to hear more about that."

I pat his chest. "Maybe you should do some sharing first. I did just pour my heart out."

"My life is pretty boring," Ros says.

I push myself off his chest so he can properly see my expression of disbelief. "You're a commando vampire who lives underground and hunts rogue paranormals. How is that boring?"

He laughs and tucks me back against his chest. "When you put it like that, it does sound exciting. It's just the only thing I've ever known. I grew up with a handful of other recruits in a barracks-type community. We didn't have a lot of personal space or encouragement to expand our knowledge past fighting and tactical maneuvers."

I tip my head back so I can see his profile. "Where did you learn to cook?"

A soft smile spreads over his face. "That was my sister. She loved to bake and be in the kitchen. She loved watching people enjoy her food. I'd help her when I had time off. She was older than me. My parent's love child, I suppose you'd say." My brows pinch together. "If your parents are vampires, how was your sister a witch?"

Sadness enters his voice. "My sister was a witch because her mom was a witch."

That only confuses me more. "I don't understand. Is it a fifty-fifty thing on which paranormal parent you'll take after?"

Doubt fills his voice. "You don't know about witch blood?"

"Let's assume I don't until I tell you otherwise," I tell him.

"Witch DNA pretty much neutralizes other paranormal genes," Ros explains. "It's part of why drinking witch blood allows vampires to walk in the daylight. It temporarily circumvents my vampire blood."

My lips part in surprise. "Do you not have fangs when you drink a witch's blood?"

"I still have fangs. Those are part of my body. It's more like..." He pauses, searching for the word. "The best way I can explain it is that I temporarily become a witch. I still have heightened senses, and I'm still stronger and faster than a human, but it's at a quarter of the normal level. There are stories about vampires who lived on witch blood and they became powerful witches themselves."

"So, if a vampire and a witch have a baby, it will always be a witch baby?" I clarify.

He nods in agreement.

I push myself up once more to see his expression. "If witch blood is so powerful, how come you're not a witch?"

"We were only related on our father's side," he says quietly, not quite meeting my eyes. "He used a surrogate to have his vampire heir."

The sad cast to his features makes me want to knock his dad's fangs right out of his head. Since I can't do that right now, I settle for distraction. "If a witch curses another witch to become a vampire, does that make them not a witch anymore?"

"I'm not sure." He shakes his head to dispel the heavy mood. "I haven't heard of that specific thing happening before. It's an interesting question, though."

"Can a vampire be cursed into becoming a witch?" I ask next.

He shakes his head. "I doubt anyone has ever tried."

"What if a witch was cursed to be a vampire, and the vampire then drinks a witch's blood?" A maze of questions unravels in my mind. "Could they then break their own curse?"

Ros laughs. "You're going to be stuck on this for a while, aren't you?"

"It's like one of those paradoxical loops." I knead his muscular pecs as I think. "A cursed vampire would have to first find a witch to drink the blood from. They would know a witch, though, because a witch cursed them, so they could just bite the witch who did the curse—"

His hand covers my mouth, stopping the train of thought. "I can't answer your questions, Rowe. I don't know enough about witches or curses."

I mumble my next question against his palm.

He lowers his hand, his thumb stroking over my bottom lip. "What was that?"

My heart tries to flutter, but I'm too stuck in my maze to be swayed by gentle caresses. "If a witch curses another witch to be a vampire and the vampire accidentally kills somebody because they don't know how to be a vampire, then is the vampire the bad guy? Or is it the witch who cursed them?"

He squints at me with uncertainty. "Both? I've never considered that angle."

"You should," I tell him.

"Yes, I should," he nods slowly. "You're very right about that."

Vibrations travel through me, and I flatten my hands on Ros's chest. "Do vampires vibrate?"

Laughing, he moves me off his lap. "No, that's my phone."

"When are you going to get me a phone? And my laptop," I add. "You promised me a laptop."

"I did, and I filled out the form for both." He pulls his phone from his pocket. "I'll check on where they're at on setting them up for you."

"Can't we just go to a store and buy one?" I demand.

"That wouldn't be secure." As he lifts his phone, the smile falls from his face and tension replaces it.

I touch his arm. "Everything okay?"

"It's the coroner." He swallows thickly. "They've identified most of the bodies from the cabin."

My stomach sinks. There's only one reason they'd contact Ros this late in the day about that. "Did they find your sister?"

He nods slowly. "They think so. They're asking me to come verify her remains." His hand drops to his lap and he leans over, burying his face against my neck. "I was hoping that one of the bodies would be hers so we'd know what happened to her, but..."

I rub his back. "You still had some hope that she was alive somewhere, waiting to be rescued."

He nods and takes a shaky breath. "I don't want to go alone."

"Then don't." I thread my fingers through his auburn locks. "Take me with you."

I've gone to see a loved one's body before, and that's not something anyone should do alone.

# HOW ROWE FALLS APART

**R** os's arms loosen around me, and I slide off his lap, raining pillows and our blanket to the floor. "What do we need to bring? We'll get that ready and then head out."

An affectionate smile spreads over Ros's lips as he gazes up at me, not making any effort to rise. "We have to wait until dusk."

Confused, I glance toward the front door. "Isn't this place entirely underground? Why can't we go now?"

"This area *is* entirely underground, but the coroner is back at the medical facility where you were patched up." Ros catches my hand and tugs me back onto the couch beside him, dumping the heating pad back on my stomach. "Let's finish the movie, then we can get some sleep and leave at nightfall."

I turn my head to stare at him. "Being a vampire has a lot of unexpected limitations."

He slouches lower on the couch until our shoulders touch and turns his head to face me. "Sunlight is basically the *only* limitation. But you get used to compensating for it."

My brows pinch together. "But wouldn't you prefer to get it done with right away? Why call now if we have to wait to go?"

His shoulder lifts against mine. "To give me time to prepare myself?"

"I bet the coroner likes to pull band-aids off really, really slowly," I mutter darkly.

Ros laughs. "Probably. But even if we weren't restricted by sunlight, there'd be no point going now."

"Why?" I ask.

"Because they'll be closed by the time we arrive," Ros informs me. "They're run by vampires, so they close thirty minutes before sunrise to give everyone time to get to a secure location."

"I guess that makes sense." I lean forward slightly before digging my shoulder into Ros's armpit until he takes the hint and wraps an arm around me. Properly ensconced now, I gesture at the TV. "Let the sappiness continue."

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I expect things to be weird when Ros and I go to bed after the movie ends. He *did* just admit that I'm his mate, and I admitted that I'm open to the idea. That conversation feels like it should have moved our relationship into a new zone, one that potentially includes kisses goodnight.

I pause awkwardly in front of my door, unsure what to do.

Ros, however, acts as the perfect gentleman, staying on his side of the hall. "Goodnight, Rowe. I'll see you in a few hours."

Then, he disappears into his room across from mine and firmly closes the door.

I remain where he left me, staring at the closed door as I evaluate exactly what I'm feeling.

On the one hand, Ros said he'd wait for my feelings to catch up, so that's obviously what he's doing, and this is absolutely not him rejecting me right now.

But he could have at least tried a little something, right? That wouldn't have been too presumptuous. I mean, we cuddled for hours on the couch, practically wrapped around each other.

Am I expecting things to move too fast? Am I disrespecting Tris and Owen's memories by being ready to see what can happen with Ros?

I don't think I am. I know for a fact both men would be angry at me for spending too long in my grief. I can practically hear Tris's voice demanding that I pounce on Ros right now. Tris was never one to linger long on the past. He was always pushing us to move forward, to embrace new experiences.

As for Owen, sweet Owen, he said that my happiness was his happiness. He wouldn't like me shutting myself away from life, even if that life pulled me farther away from his memory.

And it's not like anything would have to happen if Ros and I tried sharing the same bed. We could just continue to cuddle. I really miss cuddling. Since the day I adopted Tris, I stopped sleeping alone, and even a full-size mattress is too much open space just for me.

Ros respecting my boundaries is damn attractive, though, so I back into my room and close the door.

I go through the motions of getting ready for bed, noting that, despite all the cramping earlier, I barely bled. After all the fuss, was that it? I can't say I'd be sad about that. Periods might be more inconvenient than no sunlight.

Leaving the bathroom light on, I close the door so that only a strip of light shines around it and crawl into bed, pulling the covers up around my shoulders.

One benefit of being underground is that the place stays cool, which means there's none of the struggle of getting the blankets just right to prevent overheating in the middle of the night. Or, rather, the middle of the day.

Just as I nod off, a body slides up behind me. At first, my sleep-fuddled brain thinks it's Tris, and I relax against the solid warmth.

But then a large hand caresses over my hip, and the alluring scent of a forest fills my senses. Haut's lips press to

the back of my neck, sending shivers of pleasure down my spine. His mouth opens over my sensitive skin, his teeth lightly scraping, and my back arches, my ass pressing into the curve of his hip. His hard length nestles between my ass cheeks, and the hand on my hip drifts lower to cup between my legs.

Sensations course through me, but it feels distant, too. I can clearly see Haut and me smashing our bodies together, which shouldn't be possible since I'm also in the bed, like there are two versions of me, and I realize I'm dreaming.

Of course, I'm dreaming. I'm in my room in Ros's house. Even if Haut tracked me this far and slipped past the security gate, the underground living space requires a special key card.

The Rowe in bed writhes like a wanton hussy, moaning to the tune Haut plays on her body.

I stomp over to them, my hands moving to my hips. "Hey, stop it! We are not this easy!"

"That's not what I remember."

The low growl comes from behind me, and I spin around, sweeping the shadows of my bedroom. Glowing green eyes stare at me from the corner of the room farthest from the bathroom, too low to be a human and too high to be an average-sized wolf.

Haut's voice drifts out of the darkness to curl around me. "I remember you opening up for me the first day we met." Phantom fingers push into me, and the Rowe on the bed moans louder. "You couldn't wait to have me inside you."

I press my legs together as pleasure surges through me. "You're not here. This is a dream." I pinch myself, pain flaring up my arm, but I don't wake up. "None of this is real."

"Oh, it's real." The eyes blink out of existence before reappearing on the other side of the bed. "Our bond wants to form, anyway it can."

"Get out of my dream!" I yell.

"I can't." Frustration fills his voice. "You called me here."

"No, I didn't!" I protest. "After what you did to Owen, I never want to see you again!"

"What, exactly, do you think I did to Owen?" Haut snarls. "You ran away before you saw anything."

"I saw you bite him, the same way that monster in the woods bit him when we were kids!" I try to grab the Haut in the bed, to pull him away from me, but my hands pass right through him. Shocked, I lift my hands in front of my face. "Am I a ghost?"

"You're no more a ghost than Owen is. The mate bond just won't allow us to stop what's happening." The eyes vanish again before Haut's voice comes from directly behind me. "Just come home, Rowe. Nothing is what you think."

My hands curl into fists. "Any chance of me returning to Hartford Cove died with Tris. I blame you for that, too."

"But Tris isn't dead." Something soft brushes my back. "You'd know if he was. You'd know the same for Owen. We're all still inside you."

"Don't lie to me!" I spin around and kick out, my foot connecting with the gray wolf in my room.

The blow connects, and Haut flinches back with a sharp whine that yanks at my heart. Behind me, the moaning stops, and the phantom sensations of pleasure vanish.

I push down the pain that tightens my chest at hurting Haut and step forward. "Get. Out. Of. My. Mind!"

Pressure builds behind my eyes, like my brain's a balloon being filled with too much air, and then it pops, and wolf-Haut vanishes.

Shadows sweep into the space where he stood, then spread out to fill the rest of the room until it's just me in the darkness, alone.

I jolt upright in bed, gasping for breath. The pain in my chest remains, carried over from the dream in a tightness I can't draw air past. I throw back the stifling covers, not even the chill in the room enough to fight back the burn left in my body from those phantom touches. Anger and desire combine in a confusing mess inside me.

Was that real? Or is this self-inflicted guilt at forming a bond with Ros? Is this my brain's fucked up way of telling me to pump the breaks? Wishful thinking that there's any way Owen and Tris survived? Or some mystical bullshit that allows Haut to torment me in my sleep? I need answers but have no way of getting them while hiding here.

Scraping my fingers through the sweaty strands of my hair, I try to force my mind to find order in the madness. I'm not crazy, so why is it so hard to think through this?

Because I have no training and no means of getting training. Bryant said a witch's mind falls apart if they don't get control of it. Is that what's happening? Is this how I fall apart?

The heat in my body intensifies, and a deep throb sends pleasure through me, as the mate bond continues to try to force a connection with a man who isn't really here.

I stumble across the room, shedding my T-shirt as I go, and yank open the door to the bathroom.

I need to cool down. Then I'll be able to think clearly.

I'll wash away the heat and the memory of Haut with it.

### WHAT FEELS RIGHT

W hen I finally step out of the shower, goose bumps cover my body, but the heat hasn't lessened even a little.

I snatch the towel off the bar and wrap it around myself before stumbling back out of the bathroom.

As soon as I step into my room, I know I'm not alone by the way my pulse quickens, the fire in my blood surging with new life as it senses my mate within reach.

Instinctively, I turn toward the chair in the corner of the room and find Ros sitting in the shadows. He hadn't bothered to put on a shirt before coming into my room, and only a pair of boxer briefs keeps him from being naked.

My breath catches at the firm lines of his body, honed from years of combat training. Desire surges through me. My body wants a mate, wants a bond, and Ros is a delicious offering to appease the beast growing inside me.

"I heard the shower turn on," he says without making a move to stand. "Are you okay?"

"No." I stride over to him, pulled by the magical connection we share, and stop between his spread knees. "No, I'm not okay. I want to sleep with you."

His lips part on a quick intake of breath. "I'm not sure this is a good time for that. While I've bragged a lot about my ability to restrain my urges, I don't know if I can keep that up if I sleep next to you right now." I step forward until my knees bump against the edge of the chair and lean over him. "Why?"

He swallows hard enough that I hear it, and his voice comes out thick and guttural. "You know why."

Should it bother me to know that he's this affected by the scent of my blood? If I were a normal person, it probably would, but I've never been normal.

"What if I said I don't care?" The burn in my body chases away the artificial chill left by the shower, the deep need to bond wiping out all hesitation.

Is it fair to Ros to demand this now, knowing Haut started the fire? Absolutely not. Will it stop me? No. I warned Ros that I was a bad guy. It's not my fault he didn't believe me.

Ros's tongue flicks out over his lips. "Why the sudden change?"

"Why didn't you kiss me goodnight?" I counter.

His eyes sweep down my body, lingering on what the towel hides. "You're not ready."

"Do I have to be in love with you before we have sex?" I grasp his hand and slip it through the slit in the towel's front to press his palm against the throbbing heat between my thighs. "Or can we both satiate our urges now and figure out the sappy stuff tomorrow?"

His breaths quicken, his fingers stroking my outer folds as if unable to stop himself. "I want to do this the right way with you."

I rock my hips against his fingers, urging them to dip inside. "This feels right to me." When he resists my silent request, I cover the back of his hand with mine and push his fingers into me. "Does it not feel right to you?"

"Rowe," he groans, his fingers sliding deeper of their own volition. "I'm holding onto my self-control by a thread. If there's any doubt in your mind that you want this, please say so now, because I don't know if I'll be able to stop later." "I'm not asking you to stop," I moan as he strokes my inner walls.

"I won't be able to stop myself from biting you," he warns.

"You don't have to." Despite my body's demands, I pull his hand from me and lift it to his lips. "You have my permission to give in."

With a hungry groan, Ros sucks his fingers into his mouth, licking them clean.

In the next heartbeat, he surges to his feet, lifting me in the process. I wrap my arms around his neck, my mouth seeking his. It's not the chaste kiss I'm sure Ros planned to woo me with. It's messy and open-mouthed, our tongues tangling together like starving beasts feeding off each other, and it's all I hoped it would be. I taste myself on his lips and moan at the thrill of the forbidden.

In three quick strides, Ros crosses to my bed. With a hand on my back to support me, he lowers us to the mattress. His mouth leaves mine, and he sits back on his heels to make quick work of the towel, spreading it open, but leaving it beneath me. Then, he leans over and turns on the bedside lamp for a better view of my naked body.

He strokes a hand down my center from my collarbone to the light dusting of hair that covers my mons, making my back arch at the sensation. "You're perfect."

The reverence in his look and touch leaves no room for embarrassment, and I spread my legs in invitation for a more intimate view.

His gaze drops to my glistening folds, and he licks his lips, hunger twisting his features.

I catch a sharp flash of fang, and my pulse quickens, but not with fear. It makes me feel powerful to see how much he hungers for me. My hand follows the same path his did down my body, drifting past where he stopped to dip between my legs, and I spread my swollen folds open to display my most intimate place. A groan rips from his depths, the sound of a man losing control.

Ros's hands move to my hips, lifting me to meet his descending mouth. He nips at my fingers, chasing my hand away before his hot lips open over my aching center, followed by the broad swipe of his tongue tasting me. His moan of satisfaction vibrates up my channel, sending pleasure through my body.

My hands tangle in his soft curls, urging him on.

Tongue thrusting past my entrance, he licks my inner walls, the hard press of his fangs against my sensitive flesh increasing the pounding of my heart.

His hands leave my hips to grasp my legs and hike them over his shoulders before his arms wrap around my thighs from beneath, locking me in place. There will be no escaping his hungry mouth.

Pleasure surges through me in waves as he feasts on me, his tongue driving me to new heights as his lips suck on my folds, and his nose rubs against my clit.

Reaching up, I grip the comforter near my head as my body tenses, the pleasure becoming too much to withstand.

Ros licks up my folds to my clit, where he sucks hard, his fangs pressing against me without piercing my skin. My hips buck against him as much as they can within his firm hold as I shout my release. My inner muscles spasm, desperately seeking something to squeeze down on.

My orgasm still surges through me when Ros releases my clit and turns his head to my inner thigh, his fangs sinking deep.

A fresh wave of pleasure crashes over me, and I come again, my body shaking with my release. Every time Ros sucks on the wound, it sends a new rush of pleasure through me.

When he pulls his fangs free, I sob with relief and protest, but instead of letting me go, he turns his head to my other thigh, biting me again. My vision blurs, the pleasure of his bite too much to bear. My entire body pulses to the beat of my heart, driven by the suction of his mouth on my thigh, as another orgasm rolls through me.

When he finally releases his hold, my limbs fall limply to the bed, every bone in my body turned to liquid.

He rises from the bed, licking his lips as his eyes sweep over me once more. With unhurried motions, he hooks his thumbs into the waistband of his boxer briefs and pushes them down, revealing his thick, uncut cock.

Despite multiple releases, my inner muscles clench at the sight of him, and Ros's lips curl into a satisfied smile. He wraps one large hand around his shaft and strokes himself, his glistening, ruddy head emerging and then vanishing within his fist.

Legs trembling, I bend my knees, tilting my hips as I lift my arms toward him, silently begging to be filled.

He releases his cock and crawls back onto the bed, his muscles sleek ripples beneath his skin. He embodies power and grace as he crawls over my body and slowly lowers himself until his weight covers me.

I wrap my arms around him, pulling him as close as two people can get, and marvel at the way our bodies fit despite our height differences.

Ros bends one knee, his powerful thigh pressing against the side of my ass, and his cock slides against my center without entering.

Holding his weight on one arm, he brushes the hair back from my face with his free hand. He bends over me, his forehead against mine and our gazes lock as, slowly, his cock presses into me.

My over-sensitized nerves don't know what signals to send to my brain as he stretches me open. Pleasure bordering on pain ripples through me, and I clench down around his cock.

Ros's nose nudges against mine, urging my head back, and his lips slide over mine, the kiss no less hungry for the control he shows as he continues to press forward inside me, giving my muscles time to adjust but not stopping. His tongue strokes against mine, then retreats, and I chase after it, investigating the sharp points of his fangs and the soft walls of his mouth.

As my body relaxes beneath him, he slides all the way inside, the head of his cock nudging at my womb.

My nails scraped down his back to find his ass, and I dig my fingers into the firm muscles.

Just as slowly as he entered me, he withdraws, his tip sitting at my entrance, before thrusting forward once more in a languid, rolling pace that stokes the flames of my desire.

Soon, my pulse quickens once more, and my fingers on his ass squeeze in demand for more.

His lips leave mine to trail down my throat, sucking on the sensitive skin over my pulse without biting. His weight lifts off me far enough for him to cup my breast and roll my nipple between his fingers.

My breaths turn choppy with pleasure, and I press my feet against the mattress, lifting my hips to meet his thrusts.

The room fills with the slap of our bodies coming together and the musky scent of our passion. Every surge of his body into mine presses against the tender flesh of my inner thighs where he bit me, adding sparks of pleasure to the growing tide within me.

I thrust my hips up hard, my fingers digging into his ass as I yank his hips forward. His cock head slams against my womb, and my inner muscles begin to spasm around his hard length. He grinds into me, his hips swirling, dragging out my release. Then he starts thrusting again in short bursts, the pace no longer steady as he drives toward his own completion.

With a groan, he stills against me, and his cock pulses, hot cum flooding my channel.

My muscles continue to jump in aftershock, my breaths coming fast.

Ros rises above me, our pants mingling between us. "Are you okay?"

My legs fall limply to the mattress, and I nod, unable to find the will to form words.

He searches my eyes. "No regrets?"

I shake my head and wrap my arms around him, once more pulling him down on top of me.

No regrets.

# TOO MUCH TO BEAR

R owe, come to me. I groan and swat at my ear. Not this again.

A low chuckle sounds above me, and a hand catches mine. "Rowe, I want you to come with me."

"I've done enough coming with you," I mumble and smash my face into the pillow.

That little chuckle comes again, and Ros nuzzles my neck.

I slap the top of his head. "No biting. My thighs are already sore."

His lips move to my ear, and he catches my lobe between his teeth, tugging playfully before he releases it. "Your thighs aren't sore from my bites. They're sore from my hips slamming into them."

"You're a monster." Blindly, I pat the bed until I find the other pillow and pull it over the top of my head.

Too bad for me, Ros somehow gets his head under the pillow with me. Down is a horrible barrier. "Come on and get out of bed. I have something to show you."

With a groan, I toss the pillow away and sit up to glare at him. "It better not be your dick."

He grins, displaying adorable dimples. "You know you'd swoon if I showed you my dick again."

"Lies," I hiss. "Evil, evil lies."

"Oh, yeah?" Ros slides off the bed and snaps the waistband at the front of his boxer briefs, which are the only thing he wears. "Care to make a wager on that?"

I scowl at him, then push the blanket down and spread my legs, pointing at my inner thighs. "Do you see purple?"

His eyes drop to my thighs, and he lets out a low growl.

I tap my thighs right where he bit them, even though the puncture marks already healed over. "No more dick until the thighs have recovered. Them's the rules."

"Them's rules don't exist." Growling, he pounces on the bed.

I giggle and roll off the other side. "Okay, I'm out of bed. What's the fuss?"

Ros's tousled head pokes over the edge of the bed, and he peers down at me. "The fuss is that you taunted me and then left the bed. But the reason I woke you up in the first place requires that you get decent."

"How decent?" I crawl toward the dresser on my hands and knees. "Are we talking T-shirt and underpants? Or are we talking about actual pants and shoes? What's the minimum decency you require?"

"Definitely a T-shirt." A thud comes from the bed as I pull open the bottom drawer. "Underpants are only required if you plan to enforce the *No Purple Thighs* rule."

The air shifts behind me, and I snatch up a unicorn sneaker, throwing it over my shoulder without looking.

Ros's yelp of pain rewards my half-assed effort at self-defense.

I grab a T-shirt off the stack of my stolen hoard, pulling it over my head. I close the bottom drawer and open the one above it, grabbing a pair of panties Ros bought me, then fast crawl to the bathroom door. "I'll be out in a minute. You go make yourself decent, too."

"I can't," Ros moans pitifully. "You killed me. Death by unicorn sneaker."

Suspicious, I peer over my shoulder to find Ros sprawled on the floor, the offending unicorn sneaker a couple of feet away from him. "Did I really hurt you?"

Ros's head turns, and he widens his hazel eyes at me. "I'm practically human right now. All of my amazing vampiric invulnerability is gone."

I snort in disbelief. "I clearly remember you saying you'd still have fangs even after drinking my blood. You can't have lost all your awesomeness. Otherwise, vampires would never drink a witch's blood."

He rolls onto his side and nudges my sneaker out of his line of sight. "You drastically underestimate the desire to feel the sun on your face."

Uncertain now, I crawl over to him. "Did it really hurt more than normal when I nailed you with the sneaker?"

"How would I know what's normal?" His brows shoot up. "You think I get hit with sneakers all the time?"

"You don't?" I nibble my bottom lip. "I would've thought that would be a regular occurrence for you, on account of how annoying you are in the morning." Reconsidering that, I rise onto my knees to check the clock on the nightstand before dropping back down to Ros's level. "Annoying in the afternoon."

"Solid recovery." He lifts a hand with four fingers raised. "Four out of five for effort."

Smiling, I snatch up the sneaker and throw it at his stomach.

His muscles bunch into a well-defined six-pack, and the sneaker bounces off. He glares. "Seriously?"

"Ha!" I rise onto my knees once more and point at his stomach. "Look at those amazing vampiric abs. Your weakness is a myth."

"Vampires aren't born with six-packs." He slaps his welldefined stomach. "You can thank my rigorous training routine for this awesomeness." Since I do appreciate the eye candy, I bow my head at his stomach. "Thank you, rigorous training routine for this awesomeness."

Ros reaches out a finger and lifts the hem of my T-shirt. He stares at me for a long moment, his gaze appreciative, before he drops the shirt to cover me once more. "Okay, I'm healed. Go finish getting ready and meet me in the hall."

Giggling, I turn and crawl back to the bathroom.

"I know you can walk again, but I really do like this view better," Ros calls after me.

Still laughing, I kick the door closed.

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By the time I make it out to the hall, Ros is already fully dressed and waiting for me.

I study the basket he holds in one hand. The pale wicker, with a red-and-white checkerboard border around the lid, looks so out of place with Ros, who wears black pants and a dark maroon shirt. "What's that?"

"Just you wait and see." He turns and sticks out his elbow. "My lady?"

"Good sir." I tuck my hand into the crook of his arm and let him lead me to the stairs.

There, he nudges me ahead of him, and I grip the railing as I ascend the steps for the first time since he brought me home.

At the top, I pause in front of the door and turn to look down at him.

He gives me an encouraging nod. "Go ahead."

"I didn't bring my key." I fidget with the bottom of my shirt. "And the sun is still out."

"You don't need a key to leave." He pats his front pocket. "And I have mine for when we come back down later." Still, I hesitate as I turn back to the door and press the button on the wall next to it. The panel pops inward and then slides to the side, spilling sunlight down the steps.

My heart lurches with panic, and I spin back around, half expecting to see Ros on fire.

Instead of fire, though, he stands with his eyes closed and his face raised, a beautiful expression on his face as the sun warms his features.

I search for any signs of pain but find none. Ros had told me that witch blood makes it so vampires can walk in the sun, and I witnessed that firsthand with Bryant when he forcefully took my blood, but I still doubted it.

Ros's eyes open, and that beautiful expression turns to me. "Go on up. We're having a picnic."

My focus drops to the basket he carries. "I've never been on a picnic."

He takes another step up the stairs, his head on level with mine. "So, I'm your first?"

"I suppose so." I narrow my eyes at him to hide the squishy feelings inside. "Feel the privilege."

"It's felt," he assures me.

Pulse quickening, I turn and step out of the secret stairwell. "Whoa, I forgot how tiny this place is."

Ros joins me and looks around the space. "I like to think it's cozy."

"Cozy is just another word for small." When his lips twitch, I prod him in his awesome abs. "Don't you dare call me cozy."

"The thought never crossed my mind," he chokes out around a laugh.

"Humph." I march to the front door and open it. "What's the opposite of cozy?"

"Uncozy?" Ros offers as he follows me.

"You're *uncozy*." I hop off the front stoop and into the grass, marveling at the feel of the blades between my bare toes. I had missed this more than I realized. The sun blazes down, warming the top of my head, and I squint against the brightness. "Commence with the foodening!"

When Ros doesn't immediately join me, I turn to find him hesitating in the doorway.

I frown at him. "Are you doubting the potency of my blood?"

He shakes himself and steps out into the bright sunlight. "No, of course not."

"It would be okay if you did." I drop my gaze to my bare toes, wiggling them in the grass. "I'm a pretty crappy witch."

"What are you talking about?" Ros sets the basket down and opens it to pull out a thin blanket. "You did that spell a couple of weeks ago. It felt powerful."

I lift a hand to the twist of metal that hangs between my breasts. "Yeah, but someone else did the hard work. I just renewed the spell."

"Do you want to learn more?" Ros moves the basket onto the blanket and sits, then pats the empty spot next to him. "We can find you a mentor."

I settle down on the ground. "Are there witches in the community? You sold my staying here to your dad as a possible recruitment thing. Are there witch soldiers?"

"We have a few." He opens the basket and starts pulling out containers. "They mostly work as support, though, so they're stationed at Base Three. It's bigger than this one."

"I was going to look for a mentor through the witch who gave me this." I touch the necklace. "There was a meeting I was supposed to go to, but then Bryant showed up..."

He reaches over and clasps my hand. "Do you want to go talk to them?"

I look up at him in surprise. "Really?"

His head tilts to the side. "You're not a prisoner, Rowe. If you think that's the best place to find a mentor, then we'll go there. We'll figure something out for classes. Maybe you can do some of it virtually, and I can take you there for in-person classes when I'm not on duty."

"That would involve getting me that laptop," I point out.

He sighs. "I swear I put in the request. I don't know why it's taking so long."

Excitement fills me at the idea. "Really, really?"

"Really, really," he assures me.

"When?" I demand.

"Well, it's on our way to the medical facility." He tips his head back. "And since we don't need to wait for nightfall, we can leave early—"

Squealing, I tackle Ros, throwing my arms around his neck. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

His arms wrap around me. "Anything for you."

I cling to him tighter, that squishy, sappy feeling almost too much to bear.

Someday soon, I hope to be worthy of him.

### THE BOOB BULGE ISSUE

H ours later, I adjust my flannel as I once more walk up the stairs ahead of Ros.

Okay, let's be honest, we all know it's Ros's flannel, but it's totally going into my purloined clothing pile. Come this time next year, Ros will just have to buy himself an entirely new wardrobe, because all of his clothes will be mine.

"I still don't see why you need to bring the gun," Ros grumbles from behind me as he hauls my heavy suitcase up the stairs.

He had suggested we spend the night outside of the vampire community to take full advantage of his ability to move freely during the day. Apparently, my special blood will let him walk around for about a week, and he wants to take full advantage. If we had planned this better, he could have taken the entire week off. We'll totally have to better plan our next spontaneous, thigh-munching sexathon.

I pat the bulge next to my arm where my big gun rides in my non-custom shoulder holster. "Because, now that I'm a gun-toting mama, I can't go anywhere without my bling."

A beat of silence follows my statement before Ros says, "Please never use that string of words together again."

"Was it the mama part? The gun-toting part? Or the bling part?" I ask, wanting to know where I failed. The silver gun is pretty blingy, though, so it's probably not the last one.

"All of it." He nudges me to open the secret door. "All of it is bad." I step out into the mini house and pat my pocket to make sure I grabbed my key card for getting back into the bat cave. "I think we should buy me some combat boots."

"Combat boots will not make that kind of language any more appropriate." Ros steps out of the stairwell behind me and the door to his secret lair slides closed.

"I can't help what life the flannel shirt breathes into me." I spin on my unicorn sneaker and fuss with the hem of my shirt. "Are you sure you can't tell I'm packing?"

Ros's gaze drops to my boob region. "If you're that worried about it being obvious, then don't wear it."

"Hey, my gun is over here." I point to the left of my boob. "I have the safety on and the holster locked. But if we run into any bad guys—"

"You'll let me handle them," Ros interrupts with a stern glint in his eye.

"But if you run out of bullets, won't it be nice that I'm right there next to you with a spare gun?" I straighten to my full, though insignificant, height. "Just think of me as your walking armory."

Ros just shakes his head. "I hope I don't have to erase anybody's memories of this little adventure of ours."

I glance down at the bump beneath the flannel shirt. "If I had bigger boobs, no one would even notice my gun bulge."

"Your boobs are fine," Ros assures me.

I roll my eyes. "Of course, my boobs are fine. They're mine, and I'm perfect."

His lips quirk into a smile. "Good to see that your selfesteem is intact."

I head toward the front door. "I have all the esteem."

"If you had brought the trainer instead—"

I hold up a hand to stop him. "We shall not speak of the trainer. People can just think I have a lopsided boob."

"No one better be staring at your lopsided boob." My suitcase catches on the decorative throw rug. "Are you sure you need the *whole* suitcase?"

"It's already packed," I say without glancing back. "Why downsize?"

"Because you haven't opened it since I brought it back for you?" he says gently. "I could have just packed extras of my clothes."

I stop with my hand on the knob to the front door. "I thought maybe we could go through it outside of our home?"

Ros stops next to me. "You sure?"

"Yeah." I look down at the suitcase. "I don't actually know what's in there or how I'll react when we open it."

"We'll take it at your own pace," he murmurs.

"Thank you." We step out of the house, and I stop on the front step, my eyes on the driveway. Squinting against the glare of unfamiliar sunlight, I yell, "Ros! Call the men in black! Someone stole our sexy SUV and left a turd in the driveway!"

"That's not a turd." Ros passes me, his reasonably sized overnight bag slung over his shoulder while he drags my large suitcase behind. "Sedans are more fuel-efficient and don't stand out as much."

"But..." I trail after him, my gaze on the very plain, brown, four-door car. "Gun-toting mamas don't drive around in grandpa mobiles."

Ros pops the trunk and throws our bags in. "This is *not* a grandpa mobile."

"Are you sun blind?" I squint at him. "It's the color of chocolate pudding, and I'm being really generous with that description."

He slams the trunk closed. "Well, I like chocolate pudding. Now, get your gun-toting butt into the passenger seat so we can get this grandpa mobile on the road." "Fine." I open the passenger side door and flop into the seat as Ros slides behind the wheel. "But next time, I get to choose our mode of transportation."

"With some stipulations, I'll agree to that." He turns on the car and checks the rearview mirror before backing out of the small driveway.

"What stipulations?" I demand.

He stops, puts the car in gear, and cruises down the road. "I don't have access to horses, race cars, go-carts, jet skis, snowmobiles..."

Laughing, I wave my hands for him to stop. "Okay, okay. I get it. You have very limited choices in vehicles."

"Do you know one good thing about the grandpa mobile?" He reaches across the console and slips his hand into mine. "It's an automatic."

I squeeze his fingers. "If we were in the SUV, I could sit in the center and cuddle with you."

He lets out a groan. "Damn my desire to save the planet with fuel-efficient transportation."

I pat his hand. "It's all about the big picture." My eyes drift out the window as the tiny house community falls away, and we enter the tree-lined road. "How did all this come to be, anyway?"

He glances into the rearview mirror. "Well, we hired a construction company and— Ouch!"

I release the skin I pinched on the back of his hand. "That's not what I meant. The whole secret operation that protects humans from rogue paranormal entities. How did *that* come to be?"

Ros gasps. "You want me to just tell you all of our supersecret secrets?"

I move my fingers back to his hand, right over the red pinch mark. "Don't make me get out my diabolically evil interrogation methods." "Oh no, I am unable to resist such levels of pure torture." He lifts our joined hands and kisses my knuckles. "It's not an especially original story."

I give him a disbelieving look. "How can the origin story of a secret organization not be interesting?"

"I didn't say it isn't interesting." He lowers our hands back to my lap. "I just said it isn't original."

"Well, bore me with all of your lack of originality," I encourage. "I want to know more about what you do and the reason behind it all."

My interest seems to please him. "I have to give an advisory warning that everything I'm about to tell you was orally passed down through the generations until my grandfather's time. A big part of that was the need for secrecy. They couldn't risk somebody stumbling upon a handwritten confession of paranormal activity."

I nod in understanding. "Burn the witches."

"Basically," he agrees. "So, I don't know how much has changed from the original accounts of what happened, but my dad swears he tells the story the same way that his dad told him and his dad before him told him and so on and so forth, and now it's in our records so it's been set in stone."

"But history is written in the eyes of the victor, right?" I say. "So there's always room for interpretation."

He takes his eyes off the road to smile at me. "Yeah, only we weren't the victors in our origin story."

"Oh?" I curl my legs up onto the seat and turn toward him as much as my seatbelt allows. "That's a little unique."

He chuckles. "Yes, I suppose it is. I'm not sure how many generations back this really goes, but it predates cars and electricity, so at least a few centuries. My ancestors—"

"Were they also vampires?" I cut in.

He nods. "As far as I know, vampires evolved alongside humans, witches, and shapeshifters. So, yes, my ancestors who were vampires—were hunters who traveled for trade." "That must've been really hard if they could only do that at night," I interrupt again.

He squeezes my hand. "Do you want to hear the story or not?"

I mime zipping my lips.

"My ancestors were hunters and traders, traveling all over the continent to do their business, but they always returned home on the dark of the moon." My lips part on a question before I remember that I'm supposed to be quiet, and Ros squeezes my hand to acknowledge my show of restraint. "The way the story goes, there used to be a big celebration during the dark of every moon, where our people would gather and be blessed by the witch in the woods."

I shift in my seat, this story tickling my mind with a sense of familiarity.

"Once a month, the witch in the woods would leave her hut to come out and grant my ancestors the gift of walking in daylight. In return, they would give her food and the best furs from their hunt," he continues. "But, no matter how powerful the witch was, she couldn't stave off age, and she was growing old. My ancestors offered the pick of their young to learn at her side and take over her position, but she refused them all, and as the years passed, they began to despair."

By now, all the red flags are going off in my head, and I tuck my free hand under my thigh to stop myself from wiggling with my need to jump in.

"My great, great, however great, grandfather was the chieftain of their village, and he tasked his only son to go out and find another witch who could learn the spell. There were rumors of one in a nearby village whose garden always grew and whose animals never sickened. Those who spoke of her spoke of her beauty, her gentleness, and her kindness to all who approached, man or animal. It was even said that a wolf guarded her home at night and birds welcomed her every morning. And so the chieftain's son set out to meet this fair maiden in the hopes that she would be the witch his village needed. "When he arrived, he discovered that all the rumors were true. Agatha Wendall was fair, gentle, and kind. Like many a man before him, he lost his heart to her the same day they met. He returned to her village many times, bringing her exotic gifts from his travels to win her hand."

I hold myself very still, not even daring to breathe. I had heard this story before, just not this version of it.

"His village rejoiced that he had found such a powerful and kind witch, and they made plans to present her at the next dark of the moon in the hope that she would learn the spell when the chief's son brought her back as his bride.

"As winter neared, the chieftain's son set out to bring his love back to the village. But when he arrived, he discovered that the people in her village had been struck down by a dark curse and turned into monsters.

"Grief-stricken, he returned to gather his strongest warriors and avenge his love. A great battle was fought over many weeks, and the losses on both sides were devastating. In the end, my ancestors were victorious in wiping out the evil, but the chieftain's son fell in the final battle against the greatest of the monsters, though many believe his death came at his own hand, as he could not bear to continue without the woman he loved and the knowledge that he had failed to find a new witch to learn the spell that would save his people.

"The hunters returned home to clean their wounds and mourn their dead.

"When the next dark of the moon came, they gathered their few remaining numbers and made the trek to the meeting grounds to receive their blessing. But the witch in the woods never came, and when the chief sent a young hunter to her hut, they found it ravaged and abandoned. While they had waged their battle against the cursed creatures, they had not realized that the evil had spread into the woods and snuffed out their only hope.

"While they had won the battle, they had lost the war, and with it went their ability to walk in the sun. So they vowed that night, as the spell wore off and they fled back to their homes for safety, that they would continue to hunt the evil in the world so that nothing like this would ever happen again."

## HOP, SKIP, JUMP AWAY

I clear the lump from my throat. "Yeah, that's a pretty unoriginal origin story. Don't all monster hunter groups start by avenging a loved one?"

Ros chuckles. "See? I told you it would be boring."

"So, that witch in the story, the one who was all pretty and stuff, she died during the battle?" I ask, my pulse pounding as I keep my tone casual.

"Agatha Wendall." Ros glances at me. "She vanished. Since her body was never found, the theory is that she was too grief stricken by all the death and fled her village. The witch in the woods was gone, and her spell books vanished with her. My ancestors decided not to seek Agatha out after the fight ended. Nothing good would come from telling her of the chieftain's son's death. We don't know where she went from there."

"And no one could ever re-create the spell that allowed vampires to walk in the sun?" I scrunch my nose. "I mean, the witch in the woods is an awesome archetype, but surely there were other witches who could have come up with the same spell?"

Ros squeezes my fingers. "Many have tried over the centuries, but none have succeeded."

I lick my lips nervously. "What do you think happened to her spell book?"

He shrugs. "Rumors pop up every so often. There was actually one a couple of decades ago, before either of us were born, that a descendant of Agatha Wendall had popped up. Out of pure curiosity, my father sent someone to look into it, but nothing ever came of it. There are also rumors of paranormal sanctuaries hidden by magic, but I'm pretty sure those are just myths, kind of like the moving island of Avalon in Arthurian legend. People like to have hope, you know? Even if it's silly."

My stomach squeezes into a hard ball of anxiety. The huntsman sent to check out the rumor of the Wendall descendant must have been my father, but instead of reporting his findings, he fell in love and went rogue from the organization. He hid with my mom, and then he stayed in hiding until Bryant somehow found him.

What would my ancestor, Aggie, have to say about all this? I bet she wrote something about it in her journals, which are still back at Hartford Cove.

The anxiety within me grows. If there's a possibility that one of those spell books in my grandma's house belonged to the witch in the woods, do I have the right to keep it from Ros? It could help his people so much.

But what about all those stories of huntsmen killing perfectly normal wolf shifters? Ros says they only hunt down rogues, but there can't be that many crazy wolves out there, can there?

Is this entire situation something that could be resolved if the two groups only talked? Is that something my mom and dad thought all those years ago, when my mom brought my dad to Hartford Cove for the first time? But something back then had stopped them from turning the spell over to the huntsmen and ending this feud.

Ros gives my hand a little jiggle. "What has you in such deep thought?"

I give him a saucy smile. "I was just thinking that your origin story could have been so much cooler."

Amusement fills Ros's eyes when he glances over at me. "And what has your imagination whipped up?" "Well, obviously there would have to be a love triangle," I begin.

Ros nods. "Obviously."

"And one of those convoluted misunderstandings," I continue. "You know, for the redemption arc."

Ros chuckles. "You're going to turn this into a paranormal teen drama, aren't you?"

I pat his hand. "It's the only way the modern generation will accept it."

"Oh, well, if it's for the modern generation, then we really must get with the times," Ros agrees. "How else will we get our new recruits?"

My brows sweep together. "How do you get them now?"

Ros squeezes my knee. "Outside of rescuing damsels in distress and then kidnapping them?"

I punch Ros's arm. "That better not be your standard method."

Laughing, he captures my hand and lifts it to his lips, nibbling on my fingertips. "No, you're the only damsel I've kidnapped."

"Sure I am," I drawl. "You probably have damsels in every base of operation."

Ros looks away from the highway to widen his eyes at me. "You're the only one for me." He pauses dramatically before adding, "In Base 2."

"That's it. You asked for this." I wag a finger under his nose, which he tries to bite. "Our next stop is at an office supplies store. We're getting erasers."

Ros's head tilts to the side. "Erasers?"

"Yes." I nod firmly. "Little erasers that I'm going to smoosh onto the tips of your fangs. There will be no more damsel biting for you." Ros chokes on a laugh. "You know bite guards exist, right?"

"Erasers aren't sexy," I inform him.

"Bite guards aren't sexy, either," he protests, "and they're actually made to go over teeth."

"Can you chomp through them?" I demand.

For the next hour and a half, we debate various fang protection methods, of which Ros agrees to none, before we switch over to a game of quizzing each other, and I get to know Ros even better.

His favorite color is blue, which I could have guessed from the ocean theme of his house. He doesn't have a favorite food —no, I didn't allow him to categorize blood as a food—but he has a preference for crunchy things. He really does love sappy movies, and he's always wanted a pet but never had a lifestyle that allowed it.

When our exit comes up, instead of excitement, all I feel is dread.

This is the last place I saw Tris alive and where Bryant began my torturous captivity.

Ros reaches across the dashboard and clasps my hand. "If you're not up for this, we don't have to do this today. We can go to a different city, or I can request one of the witches transfer from Base 3 to come give you more training."

His concern gives me courage, and warmth spreads through me, unraveling the tension. "I'll be okay. You won't let anything hurt me." I pat the lump under my flannel. "And I have my blingy blaster for backup."

He doesn't smile at that, his expression remaining serious. "If you change your mind at any time, we can be back on the road in minutes. No harm, no foul." Worry for me fills his voice. "Do you want to go see your friend first? Or do you want to check in to the hotel and rest for a bit? We have plenty of daylight left, so there's no rush." "I'm glad you're enjoying all the sunshine," I say. "Let's go to the mall and get that out of the way."

Ros glances at me from the corner of his eye. "I thought we nixed the trip to the office supply store. No tiny erasers for you."

"They'd be for you, and we nixed nothing," I tell him. "But we're going to the mall because that's where my friend is. She works at a shop there."

"This better not be some diabolical plan of the villainous nature to get me into an office supply store," he warns.

I lift my chin. "Glad you finally remembered that I'm a villain and not a damsel. If I catch you salivating over anyone besides me, it's the erasers for you."

Ros takes the exit ramp and turns onto the main road the mall is on. "I can't decide if your jealousy is a turn-on or terrifying."

"It's okay if you're scared horny," I reassure him. "That particular feeling is one I've instilled in many a conquest."

"Now, I think I'm offended," Ros mutters under his breath, which I ignore because he's obviously struggling with his conflicting emotions.

At nearly six o'clock in the evening, the parking lot at the mall is still busy, and Ros drives around the parking garage slowly, searching for a spot to park.

On the third level, he does a double take and slows to a crawl as we pass a black, military-style SUV parked on the left that looks a lot like the one we should be driving instead of the grandpa mobile.

We pass it, and I twist in my seat to stare back. "Is that one of yours?"

His hands tighten on the steering wheel. "Yeah, and there's no reason it should be here. Especially since it's still daytime."

I take in the streaks of light that filter in from the open sides of the garage. None of Ros's fangy counterparts should be above ground right now. At the next ramp, Ros takes it down, driving us back to the ground floor.

I grip the seat belt strap that crosses my chest. "Are we leaving?"

"No, I'm just..." He trails off, his eyes fixed ahead.

I peer out the windshield and spot Leon striding out of the mall, passing through direct sunlight with no sign of pain.

Ahead of us, a car backs out of a parking spot, and Ros stomps on the brake, flicking on the blinker.

As soon as he parks, he cuts off the ignition and turns to me. "Stay here until I get back."

Before I can protest, he slides out of the car and heads toward where we last saw Leon.

"Be a good girl, Rowe," I tell myself as I look around for something to entertain myself.

He could have at least left me the keys so I could listen to music, or his cell phone so I could play games.

I rummage through the center console, rejecting the receipts I find there as uninteresting, and pop open the glove box. All it holds is the car manual, proof of insurance, the registration, and a couple of wet wipes. Super boring.

I count to one hundred, then force myself to do it again.

"Bored now!" I announce and unbuckle my seat belt.

The car had grown stuffy in the brief time since Ros left. Taking the keys with him made it impossible to roll down the window, I have no choice but to get out. Really, hasn't he ever seen those commercials warning about leaving pets in hot cars?

Once I'm out, it feels only right to walk to the curb that separates the parking area from the pedestrian sidewalk. I step up onto the curb, rocking back and forth, before hopping to the sidewalk.

I'm only checking to see if Ros is coming back. That's okay, right?

A couple walks toward me, carrying shopping bags, and one munches on a giant, soft pretzel that makes my stomach rumble.

"Excuse me?" I call out, and when they turn toward me, I point to the pretzel. "Which direction is the pretzel stand?"

"Right through those doors, hon." The woman turns to point across the two-lane road at the entrance to the mall. "It's a straight shot through those doors. You can't miss it."

"Thank you!" With a last look in the direction Ros had gone, I skip across the street and into the mall.

The pretzel stand is right next to the new age store where my witch contact works. I'll just pop in, take care of my business, and be back in the car before Ros even knows I'm missing.

## IN NEED OF ANSWERS

I nside, the mall is even more overwhelming than the last time I visited. Without Tris as a touchstone to keep me grounded, all the noises and smells threaten to overwhelm me. Being a recluse in Ros's house for the past three weeks probably didn't help my ability to cope with all the sensory stimulation, either.

But I'm determined to make this quick and fix my eyes on the pretzel cart at the end of the hall, marking it as my first destination.

As I near the cart, some kind of pretzel wizardry takes place, and the smell of soft, savory dough replaces all the other scents in the mall, making it easier to function. The pretzel gods deserve a reward for that.

I pat my pocket and pull out the five-dollar bill I stole from Ros, and by steal, I mean I took it from his wallet right in front of him and put it into my pocket, because I'm an independent woman like that. He had just shaken his head and suggested I go for the twenty instead, so I took that as well.

My wallet is probably somewhere in the suitcase in the trunk, providing Ros's cleanup crew gathered everything from the hotel room and shoved it into my suitcase while they were covering up Bryant's attack. I'll find out later when I crack the seal on it. But for now, Ros's money is my money. I'm pretty sure that's in the mate contract somewhere, but if it's not, I'll write it there myself.

How long should I wait before I reveal to Ros that his mate's rolling in dough? Guys can be weird about that kind of thing. Or so social media tells me.

Speaking of dough... I purchase a regular pretzel from the cart, and when they hand it over, it's nearly the size of my head.

I hold it under my nose like a talisman to ward off evil and fix my eyes on my next destination, the new age store down the next wide hallway.

As I head toward it, I carefully avoid looking at the department store at the very end where Tris and I bought our clothes to go clubbing. That was a happy moment, and I want it to stay that way.

I near my next destination, and the sound of flutes and wind chimes drift out from the open doors, pushing back the chaotic noise of the mall. Eagerly, I step through the entrance, the brightness of the mall giving way to dim lights and soothing tranquility.

Relief fills me when I spot a familiar face behind the counter next to the cash register. On the way here, it occurred to me that there might be more than one employee at the store. I'm glad to see this little adventure hasn't been doomed to failure.

The girl smiles in recognition, her gaze checking the space behind me before returning to fix on my face. "Your friend didn't come with you today?"

Pain twists my guts at the reminder of the empty place at my side.

I shake my head silently as I walk over to join her at the counter and hold out the pretzel.

A bemused look crosses her face as she stares at it. "That's a very nice pretzel?"

The scent no longer brings me peace, and I force out past the lump in my throat, "Are you hungry?"

"I'm peckish." She takes the pretzel and rips off a bite, chewing and swallowing before she asks, "What can I do for you today? More problems with intrusive spell casters?"

While I do want help with magic, I came here with other motivations, ones I'm glad Ros isn't here to listen in on.

My stomach roils with anxiety. "Do you live in this town?"

That bemused look crosses her face again. "I do."

I lick my lips, the knots in my stomach slithering like snakes. "Did you hear about a death in the city around the last time I was here? Someone falling from a hotel, or possibly jumping from the roof?"

Her pencil-thin eyebrows pinch together with worry. "No, but I don't pay much attention to the news. It's too much doom and gloom."

I grip the edge of the counter. "Do you have a cell phone to look it up?"

Concern fills her eyes, and she sets the pretzel aside to lean across the counter and cover my hand with hers. "Are you okay? Did something happen since I last saw you? I was concerned when you didn't come to the meeting, but I figured you moved on."

Bile rises in my throat, but I choke it down. "The morning after we were here, we were attacked. I saw the guy I was with last time killed. But recently, I've been questioning if that was real. If it happened, I thought it might make it into the news."

Her eyes widen in shock. "Oh, my gods. Yeah, we can definitely look that up."

She fumbles her phone from her pocket, her fingers flying over the screen.

After a moment of searching, she glances back at me. "I'm not seeing any jumpers or suicides in the news. What hotel were you staying at?"

I squint as I try to remember. "Something with a lion."

She nods in recognition. "The Lion's Head. That's pretty swanky. If something happened there, it would definitely be in the news."

She punches in a new search, then shakes her head. "No news about a dead person. Just a crazy pair of honeymooners who trashed a suite and ran out on the bill."

That would be Ros's cover-up, but would he have been able to hide a body falling? The room was private, but Tris's plummet would have been pretty public, right? I try to remember exactly what Ros said and realize he never brought up finding Tris's broken body on the sidewalk.

My pulse races so fast that I hear the rush of blood in my ear, and it sounds like waves crashing on the beach.

"Can you look up Books and Blots in the area? It's a bookstore." Maybe Barron has some secret wolf shifter news network with more information. I just wish I remembered his number or the number of the store where he works.

She types in the search. "No bookstores by that name around here."

"Can you try Nesse's Diner?" I ask, feeling lightheaded.

Again, she shakes her head. "No, nothing like that around here."

Damn Hartford Cove for its secrecy. "Okay, thanks for trying."

She sets her phone on the counter. "Do you need somewhere to stay? Are you in some kind of trouble? Us witches need to stick together in this dangerous world."

I shake my head. "No, I have someone I'm staying with. But thank you." I hesitate for a moment before adding, "You said someone might take me on as my mentor? Do you think there's any way that can be done online? The place I'm staying is pretty far from here, so I can only come in for the meeting sometimes."

"Yeah, we can figure something like that out." She grabs a business card and turns it over, scribbling a name and number on the back. "This is my personal number. Call me, and we'll get it set up."

I take the card and glance at the name. "Thank you, Mel. I really appreciate it."

"As I said, we have to stick together. And speaking of sticking together..." She points at the amulet around my neck. "It looks like you need to renew that."

I lift a hand to the twisted piece of metal. "Is there a way to reverse track the witch trying to talk to me? I'd like to find out what she wants. I'm no longer certain she's malicious, but she only communicates one way, and only in short bursts, where she keeps repeating things."

"Yeah, there's a spell for that." Mel turns to her computer and types away. "She just has to have her shields down and be open to receiving you. Most of the ingredients you probably have on hand at home or can be purchased at the grocery store. That'll be cheaper than buying them here."

A *whirring* noise comes from under the counter, and she bends to grab a piece of paper, passing it to me.

I glance at the list before folding it and putting it in my pocket. "Thank you. I really appreciate all of your help."

"About the person who attacked you. Did they have insignia on their clothes or jewelry?" she asks.

I try to think back to what Bryant wore, but nothing jumps out. "What insignia?"

She crouches, disappearing behind the counter, then rising with a crinkled ball of paper in her hands. She smooths it out on the countertop and turns it toward me. It looks like an invitation to a new age get-together type thing with the phone number to contact the organizer. If I saw it posted in this shop, I would have thought it was an advert for the weekly meetings she told me about last time.

She points at a symbol in the lower right corner. "This one here."

I bend closer to see the shield with two upside-down triangles on the front and a pair of crossed swords behind it. "I didn't notice anything like that, but I wasn't in the best state of mind to remember. What is it?"

"It's supposed to be a new style of living community for witches, but I've heard rumors that the ones who go don't come back." She shakes her head. "It sounds like some cult bullshit. So if you see a symbol like this, steer clear, or you might be drinking their crazy juice."

I point to the flyer. "Can I have this?"

"Sure." She passes it over. "I was just going to throw it away."

I fold the paper up, putting it in my pocket with my new spell. "Thanks for the warning. I'll contact you as soon as I get my laptop and phone set up." I stick my hand out. "My name's Rowe, by the way."

"It's nice to meet you, Rowe." She shakes my hand. "My name's Melody, but please, just call me Mel. And if you need anything else—"

"Hey, witch," a feminine voice calls out, distracting us. "I need to place an order."

We both glance toward the door as a trio of statuesque women saunter into the store. The one in the lead is a leggy blond with booty shorts cut so high her girl bits are almost hanging out, and her crop top shows the outline of her areolas.

Curious blue eyes sweep over me, and she frowns. "Do I know you?"

I take another look of my own, but she doesn't ring any bells. "I don't think so."

The friend on her right, also a blond, leans over and whispers something into her ear.

"I *do* know you." Her eyes narrow into a glare, and her lips peel back to reveal lengthening canines. "You're that short bitch from the nightclub who attacked me!"

I stiffen in recognition. "You're that bitch who was groping my man!"

She takes an aggressive step forward. "He wasn't claimed, and you're not wolf enough to satisfy someone like that."

My shoulders pull back, and I lift my chin. "I collared him. He was mine."

"You think it's funny to put a leash on a wolf shifter?" she growls. "We're not fucking pets."

My hands clench at my sides. "He was my mate, and you were groping him when he told you to stop."

"Your kind don't know what mates are." Her nostrils flare as she drags in a deep breath. "And you don't smell like a wolf. You smell like a bloodsucker."

A loud clap fills the shop, and Mel yells, "No fighting in my store! Venessa, you and your girls can come back another time. Please leave."

The leader, Venessa, tosses her hair. "Why do we have to leave? She's the one in the wrong."

"Because she was here first, and I don't take sides in your territorial squabbles." Mel points toward the door. "Come back once you've cooled down, and I'll be happy to place your order."

"This isn't over, blood bag," Venessa snarls at me before she turns on her heel and strides back out into the mall, her hip swaying and the bottom of her ass jiggling where it hangs out of her shorts.

Mel turns to me. "I'm starting to get the feeling you're a magnet for trouble."

"My guy and I were minding our own business, dancing together, when she shoved me out of the way so she could get her hands on him." I shake my head in disgust. "Are all female wolf shifters that desperate?"

"They tend to let their instincts lead them." Mel glances in the direction Venessa and her friends went. "They're probably waiting for you out in the mall. You should go out the back door."

I also glance toward the entrance. "Yeah, that's probably a good idea. Much as I'd like to say I can take them..."

Mel chuckles before her amusement fades. "Are you really hooking up with a vampire now?"

I lift my shoulders. "Life is complicated."

She holds up her hands. "I'm not judging. Just be careful. Once vampires get a taste for a witch's blood, it's hard to shake them."

I give her a salute. "I'll keep that in mind. Be talking to you soon."

"Thanks for the pretzel." She waves as I head toward the back of the store.

I was in here longer than expected and hope Ros didn't return to our grandpa mobile only to find me gone. Knowing him, he'll panic. That man just cares too much, but that's what I like about him.

I find the back exit behind a beaded curtain and brush it aside as I push open the door, slamming it into someone on the other side.

A startled yelp comes from behind the door.

Cringing, I slip through the narrow gap and step out into a back parking lot, calling out, "I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to \_\_\_\_"

The rest of the words stick in my throat as the door closes and reveals Haut standing on the other side.

## NOT DOING THIS AGAIN

H aut looks worse for wear since the last time I saw him. The healthy glow in his skin is gone, and hollow shadows fill his cheeks and under his eyes. He looks like he's lost thirty pounds, and the T-shirt and sweatpants he wears hang from his frame. Dirt and dried blood cover his hands and feet, and leaves stick out of his dark hair, like he's spent weeks crawling through the woods.

Which he has been, if my dreams of Haut are real.

We stand frozen, staring at each other in shock, before I slowly reach out and touch his chest. "Are you real? Or is my mind messing with me again?"

He catches my hand, flattening it over his racing heart. "I'm real."

A tremble of awareness goes through me, and my body moves forward of its own accord, narrowing the gap between us.

Haut moves to meet me halfway, and he cups the back of my head, lifting me onto my toes. With my hand still trapped over his heart, his head dips, and his chapped lips cover mine, rough and demanding. The bristles of a beard scrape against my skin, further signs he's spent too long away from civilization chasing after me.

At the first brush of his tongue against mine, my body melts against his, my thundering heart matching the beat of his desperation. In my dreams, I had always been able to separate my desire for this man from my feelings about him, but when faced with the full meal deal, I suddenly become a starving woman confronted with a buffet of my favorite treats.

I fist the front of Haut's shirt and rise onto my toes, sucking greedily on his tongue.

He groans, his body shaking beneath my hands, and he lurches forward, backing me against the wall. His large body presses flush to mine, his hard cock rocking against my stomach.

An answering warmth pools between my thighs, my body desperate to join with him, to feel his knot growing inside me, filling me with so much pleasure that I pass out.

Haut's lips leave mine as he kisses down my jaw to my racing pulse. "I finally caught up to you. You're really here."

His shaky breaths heat my skin, his hands as desperate on me as mine are on him.

*Mate. Mate. Mate.* The word pounds through me, the need to bond with this man overwhelming reason.

Haut whispers my name over and over, each utterance like a prayer as he paints kisses across my throat with growing desperation.

His hands drop to my hips, and he roughly spins me around before pressing me back against the building, the concrete harsh against my hands and cheek. His taut body covers me from behind, his rigid cock grinding against my ass.

I gasp in a breath, the scent of dirt and exhaust clearing the haze of lust from my mind.

No, I'm not doing this again with Haut. I let our bodies lead once before, and it ended in disaster.

He shoves up my shirt and reaches for my waistband, but I push his hands away before he can pull down my pants. "No. Let me go."

A possessive growl rumbles from Haut's chest in response.

I shove against him harder, but he feels just as solid as the wall in front of me. "I said no!"

He spins me back around and cups my face with his large hands, the wolf shining in his eyes as he growls, "Mate."

The word shivers through me, searching for a response, but I refuse to give in to this mystical bond.

"I said no." My hand slides into the front of my flannel, and I unsnapped the safety strap on the holster, pulling my gun free and shoving it against his chest. "Back off. Now."

Despite my words, my hand shakes with my lack of conviction, and he presses forward instead of moving away. "You don't mean that."

"I do." My hand steadies. "These are silver bullets, and I won't hesitate to pull the trigger. Step. Back. Now."

Despite the threat, it takes Haut a few deep breaths before he forces himself to take a step backward, putting necessary distance between us.

I raise the gun. "Keep going."

He takes another step back, his arms spread at his sides, his open palms faced toward me to show he's unarmed. But Haut doesn't need a weapon. He *is* a weapon. And not one I trust.

"I'm sorry," he begins, "I shouldn't have jumped on you like that. I couldn't stop myself. But you need to listen—"

"Why do you think I'd trust a single word that came out of your mouth?" I inch along the wall toward the customer side of the parking lot. "You have purposely kept me in the dark the entire time I've known you, only giving me tidbits of information when you were forced to."

He starts to follow but freezes when I aim the gun at his groin. "Tris is alive—"

"Don't you say his name!" I yell.

"He's hurt, Rowe." Pain fills Haut's voice. "I can't help him. He needs his mate." I block my ears to his words and harden my heart. "Don't follow me again, or next time, I won't warn you before I shoot."

Reaching the side of the building, I stuff the gun into my flannel, turn, and run.

My heart pounds the entire way back to the main parking garage as I wait for Haut to chase after me and force my return.

When he doesn't, I shove down the instinctive disappointment. I will *not* be one of those wishy-washy women who wants her man to do the opposite of what I say. He's doing what I asked of him. There's absolutely no reason to be sad that, after chasing me for so long, he just let me go.

With another glance back, I adjust my flannel to make sure it hides my weapon before I cross the street to the parking garage.

"Rowe!" a male voice shouts, nearly scaring me out of my skin, and Ros swoops out from between two parked cars to hug me against his chest.

For a heartbeat, every instinct in my body stiffens, telling me to shove Ros away, that these are the wrong arms holding me.

Not seeming to notice my reaction, Ros leans down to nuzzle my face. "You scared the crap out of me. You couldn't wait in the car for ten whole minutes?"

My jumping nerves settle, the bonding instinct for Haut quieting, and I tilt my head back to gaze up at Ros. "You were gone way longer than ten minutes."

His blue-green eyes narrow on me. "It was nine minutes and thirty seconds."

"Really?" My brows scrunch together. "Are you sure? I swear I sat in the grandpa mobile for at least that long."

"I'm sure," he growls, his arms tightening around me. "I take it you went and met with your friend?"

"Yep!" I pull the business card from my pocket and show him the back. "We're going to set up online classes."

He grins. "That's great, but introduce me next time, okay?"

"You're such a worrywart." I reach up and tweak his nose. "Did you catch up to Leon?"

The smile vanishes, and he glances around at the few pedestrians passing by. "Yeah, I did. Let's go back to the car and I'll tell you about it."

His arms drop away, and he catches my hand, linking our fingers together and tugging me along like a child he's afraid will wander off.

I peer over my shoulder at the corner of the building, half expecting to see Haut there watching us, but the sidewalk remains empty.

When we reach the car, Ros opens the passenger side door and gestures for me to slide inside. "You made a mess."

The meager belongings of the glove box lay scattered across the dashboard, proof that I tried to entertain myself before I wandered off. "The next time you want to abandon me for over nine and a half minutes, leave me with something to entertain myself, like your phone."

He shakes his head and reaches into his pocket, plucking the device free and dropping it into my surprised hands before he shuts the door.

Through the windshield, I watch him walk around the nose of the car before he opens his door and slides behind the wheel.

I wiggle the phone at him. "Ha! Another step in my diabolical plan to take over the world."

"My world." He turns on the car.

I stop wiggling the phone. "Huh?"

"I'm letting you take over my world, and you're welcome to do so," he elaborates. "Does that mean there aren't any master plans on here?" I press the power button on the side, and the screen comes to life. Incredulous, I look back over at him. "You don't even have it password-protected? What kind of secret organization do you belong to?"

"The kind that doesn't keep top-secret data on a mobile device." He glances in his rear-view mirror, then looks over his shoulder as he backs out of the parking spot.

While he drives us out of the mall, I shuffle through his apps, searching for a game. "We really need to get you better entertainment options on this thing."

He turns onto the main road and heads toward the freeway entrance. "Download whatever you want."

"I planned to do that before you told me to." I navigate to the app store. "So, what's happening with Leon?"

Ros's hands tighten on the wheel. "He apparently brought my father over last night to look at the body."

"Shouldn't he have cleared that with you as his team leader?" I demand, offended on his behalf, both that his asshole dad would ask someone besides his own son to go with him and because it circumvents Ros's authority.

"If anyone else had made the request, then yes." Ros wrings the steering wheel like he wants to break it. "But my dad is my superior. Still, he should have at least let me know he was leaving the base."

"If he's supposed to be acting as your dad's chauffeur, why's he at the mall?"

Ros forces his grip to relax. "An hour ago, he received a report of rogue wolves in the area and came to check it out."

My fingers hesitate in their app scrolling. "Rogue wolves?"

He nods grimly. "He tracked them here but then lost them."

I think of Venessa and her two friends. While they're certainly bitchy and overly entitled about who they get to

grope, I don't think they're murderers. And they hadn't looked overly concerned, though I have no idea what they came to the magic store for. Maybe some sort of protection? What are the possibilities that Leon was here looking for different wolves?

I resume scrolling. "What about the whole sunlight thing?"

"The clinic has a serum on hand for emergencies," he explains. "It's basically diluted witch's blood and only provides a few hours of protection from the sun."

I press the download button for a card game and drop the phone into my lap. "Where did they get witch's blood for this serum? Is it some kind of mandatory donation from the witches in your organization?"

"It's completely voluntary." He reaches across the console and grips my knee in reassurance. "Don't worry. No one's sticking a needle in you."

"Again," I mumble.

He glances over at me in confusion.

"No one's sticking a needle in me *again*." I arch my brows at him. "Or are you forgetting our whirlwind romance when you had your guys shove a needle into my neck at the cabin?"

His fingers tightened on my leg. "That was extenuating circumstances."

"Are you sure that's not just how you deal with all hysterical women?" I accuse.

He abandons my knee to clasp my hand. "It won't happen again. I promise."

"See that it doesn't. I probably have Stockholm syndrome from the whole incident." The phone in my lap dings, and I lift it. "I'm going to organize some cards now. Your Rowe will be out of commission for a while."

He returns both hands to the wheel. "Oh, I see how it is. Give you a game to play and suddenly I'm chopped liver."

"Is that bad?" I ask distractedly as I open Solitaire. "I've never had chopped liver."

A beat of silence follows before Ros admits, "Me, neither."

"We should get some." I don't catch his response as the cards deal and my focus zeros in on the game.

 $\sim$ 

The drive passes in the blink of an eye, and I only realize we've arrived when Ros shuts off the engine.

I lift my head to look around at the underground parking garage. "We're here already?"

"Someone has game addiction issue," he teases.

Diamonds and spades dance through my head. "Are you sure it's a game addiction issue and not a free babysitter?"

"It's only a free babysitter until it runs out of battery." He unbuckles his belt but makes no move to get out of the car. "Once the phone dies, we're in trouble again."

"There's a charger in the console," I remind him.

Ros shakes his head. "I should bring you on the next mission that requires searching. You'll find whatever we're looking for in under ten minutes."

"In under nine minutes and thirty seconds." I turn off the phone and shove it into my pocket. "Ready?"

"Yeah." Despite the claim, he still makes no move to leave the car, his eyes fixed on the nearby elevator.

I unlock my seat belt and crawl across the console, plopping myself into his lap. "Don't worry, your Rowe-shaped safety blanket is here. "

Ros's arms wrap around me. "Tell me it's not bad that I hope it's my sister's body."

I rub his firm chest. "It's not bad to want closure."

I should know as someone who hasn't had it in my life. But we can get it for Ros, and I'll be with him every step of the way.

## HERE FOR YOU

A s we step off the elevator and into the clinic, my hand tightens around Ros's as memories of the last time I was here flash in front of my eyes.

Ros leans down. "Will you be okay?"

I pat his hand in reassurance. "I'm here for you, Rosebud."

"I really appreciate that." His nose nudges my ear. "Just remember, you're a gun-toting mama with bling."

"Damn right I am." My hold on him eases, and I glance around. "So, they keep the dead bodies where they treat the living ones?"

He straightens with a smile. "No. The elevator down to the coroner's office is on this floor, though. It can't be accessed from anywhere else in the building."

"Sure, sure." I nod as I search for the death-vator. "You don't want the civilians stumbling onto the corpses. Got it."

He leads me down a hallway that looks exactly like the one I've been in before. I don't look at the closed doors we pass and avoid wondering who might be on the other side and whether they want to be here.

It's really not the clinic's fault that it gives me the gut reaction to scream and run away. That lies at Bryant's feet. But irrational fears are irrational for a reason, and this place is linked to my attack.

The hallway splits at the end, and Ros leads me to the left where we stop in front of an elevator, and he pushes the button to go down

My eyes fix on the light above the door. "Shouldn't there be some kind of security for this or something?"

The elevator dings, the door sliding open, and he gently tugs me into the metal death box. A black security panel is mounted on the wall next to the buttons, and he nods toward it. "I have to wave my security badge before it'll take us down to basement three."

I glance from the panel to our interlocked fingers. "Is that your way of asking for your hand back?"

"Only for a second," he promises.

I force my fingers to peel away from his long enough for him to pull his badge from his wallet and wave it over the scanner before he presses the button for basement level three.

As soon as his badge is back in his wallet, I snatch his hand once more.

Chuckling, he squeezes my fingers.

I jut out my chin. "Just remember, I'm here to comfort you."

"I feel very comforted." He lifts our joined hands and kisses my knuckles. "Brace yourself."

My stomach drops as the elevator plummets at high velocity, and Ros remains stoic as I try my best to break his fingers in my death grip.

When the elevator slows, I nearly choke on my heart as it slams into my throat.

"Nothing gradual about that," I wheeze.

"Nope."

A ding sounds, and the doors slide open, revealing a white hallway with plastic screwed to the bottom half of the walls and a concrete floor. Industrial, fluorescent lights line the ceiling, making it impossible to pretend that we're anywhere but in a part of the medical building that only the dead see. We walk down the hall to a door labeled *Coroner's Office* and Ros taps on it.

A harried-looking woman yanks it open and glares out at us. "The sun hasn't even set yet. We're not—" She stops as her eyes land on Ros, and she straightens to attention. "My apologies, sir. I wasn't expecting you for a few more hours."

"I heard my father was already here, so figured you would be as well. Dr. Tambrin," Ros says in a polite tone that leaves no room for doubt about who's in charge. "Has he already been in to see the body?"

The doctor nods as she steps back, opening the door wider. "Yes, what there is of it. We're at odds at the moment. I hope that you'll be able to weigh in with your opinion and resolve this matter once and for all."

"I'll do my best." He releases my hand to press it against the small of my back and ushers me through the door first. "Dr. Tambrin, this is Rowe."

I raise my hand in a salute.

Dr. Tambrin blinks at me a few times before she shakes her head. "Are you intending to perform some spells to verify the remains?"

Is that an option?

I give Ros an uncertain look, but he shakes his head. "No, Rowe is my companion. She's not here on official business."

"Ah." The doctor's expression clears. "All right. This way, please. I already have the remains out for viewing."

We trail after her through another door that leads into an industrial, white room with stainless steel counters and sinks, and a wall of refrigerator doors that vaguely resemble something I've seen on TV. A table sits at the center with an overhead, bright light that makes the white sheet draped over the top glow.

The doctor strides around to the far side, and we stop to face her, the table between us.

Ros swallows hard. Now, it's his turn to try to break my fingers as he stares down at the sheet. "Go ahead, doctor."

She hesitates for only a moment before she reaches out and grips the top edges of the sheet, peeling it downward.

I stiffen my spine, promising myself I won't puke at the sight of a dead body, then relax when only bones are revealed. Bones aren't scary or grotesque. And they certainly don't smell.

Ros's hand doesn't loosen on mine, though, which means this is probably what he expected.

When I peer up at his face, his attention remains fixed on the bones, as if he can see the person they once held together.

Dr. Tambrin lifts a long bone and holds it under the light. "This is the radius bone. As you can see, there are clear signs of a break and pins that were inserted to hold it back together. It matches the same injury your sister sustained in her youth."

Ros nods tightly.

The doctor sets the bone back on the table before she lifts another long bone. "And here is the ulna of the same arm. As you can see, it also has a break and repair from the same accident."

Ros lets out a shaky sigh. "It really is Delilah."

"That's my assessment as well," the doctor agrees.

Ros slumps against me, and I brace my feet to keep us upright. "Thank you, doctor."

She sets the bone back down on the table. "Would you like a moment alone?"

"No, thank you." Ros straightens and squares his shoulders like a man preparing for battle. "Where's my father?"

She pulls the sheet back over the bones. "He's in his office."

Ros nods jerkily. "Thanks."

He turns and directs me out of the room, leading me deeper into the building. "Do you mind giving me a few minutes? I'd like to speak with my father before we head out."

"No problem." I lean against his side as we walk. "Anything you need."

He leans down and presses a hard kiss to my temple. "I really appreciate you being here."

I don't feel like I did much, but I wrap an arm around his waist and give him a side hug. "Like I said, I'm here for you."

He stops at an unmarked door and opens it, revealing a small sitting room, and directs me toward the chairs. "You have my phone, so no wandering off this time."

I pat my pocket. "Digital babysitter, ready and waiting."

"Okay, I'll be back." With another kiss, he leaves me in the waiting room and uses his badge at another door at the back.

I sit on one of the padded seats and pull out the cell phone, but sorting cards can't hold my attention this time. My thoughts are too full of childhood injuries, bones, and what my skeleton would look like if it were stripped of flesh.

Do I have any marks on my body that would let people identify me even if my face was gone?

That thought leads me to imagine what I'd look like without a face, which obviously would look like nothing and yet be terrifying at the same time.

From there, I spiral into nightmarish images of faceless people wandering around trying to figure out who each other are.

And how long does it take for a body to decompose? If a zombie apocalypse happened, would it really take that long for the zombies to decompose? Or would eating brains regenerate dead flesh?

Are zombies real? Could *I* create a zombie? And would it have a face?

The door opening on my right startles me out of my thoughts, and a man in black military gear strides through the room. He spares me only a brief glance before he badges through the security door on the other end and slips through.

The door swings closed behind him, but the latch catches on the outside, leaving the door cracked.

I stare at the gap. Should I go close it? Will touching the door get me in trouble? What are they hiding behind the locked door? Why does Ros's dad have an office stashed here? Does he really need to spend that much time around people who are being healed or dead?

Standing, I wander closer to the door, my gaze fixed on the narrow opening. I should shut it. It's behind a security lock for a reason. Such as keeping people like me from entering.

My fingers brush the knob, but just as I'm about to do the right thing, I hear a whisper that sounds like my name being called from the other side.

Is that Ros? But why would he call me when he told me to wait?

Slowly, I pull the door open and peer into the dim hallway beyond, straining to hear the sound again.

After several heartbeats, I decide my mind is playing tricks on me and step back, determined to be a good Rowe and wait where I was left.

Just as I release the door, I hear the whisper again.

I fling out my hand to grab the door before it closes.

That really sounded like my name. Could Ros be in trouble? Did he get into some vampiric fight with his dad over whether those bones belong to his sister? I *did* promise to be there for him.

Even if he can't stand up to his dad, I certainly can, and I'll enjoy doing it.

With no further hesitation, I step into the hall and look both ways before heading left in the direction the voice came from. I pass several closed, unmarked doors before I hear the whisper again.

I freeze and turn to the door I was about to pass. The sound definitely came from in there. There's a security panel on the door, which I'm not prepared for, but I pull my super-secret badge from my pocket and hold it over the black square.

The lock on the door clicks, and I turn the knob, shocked when it opens. What the hell kind of all-access pass did Ros give me?

Slowly, I push the door open and step into what looks like a filing room. I don't see Ros inside, but there's another door, and the call was faint. He might be back there.

Walking to it, I grasp the handle and push it open.

This room holds more filing shelves, these as tall as my shoulders. A scent fills the space that reminds me of meat left too long on the counter during the summer, cloyingly sweet and slightly rancid.

I lift a hand to my nose as I step inside. "Ros? Are you in here?"

If his dad hurt him, I will hunt him down and shoot him.

A groan comes from deeper in the room, and I rush around the long row of filing cabinets. I freeze when I round them and find a table very similar to the one in the coroner's office. Only instead of neatly draped bones, this one holds a man.

Bands of silver crisscross his body, binding him to the table, and three IV stands loom next to the man, the tubes pumping red liquid into his body.

After a frantic heartbeat, I realize it's not Ros, and relief sweeps through me.

Then, the groan comes again, the body on the table moving as much as the bands allow, and my pulse leaps with renewed panic.

"I thought I smelled you, Rowe," a voice gurgles from the table.

The man's head turns, revealing a deformed face with thick, red scars. The lips stretch into a grotesque smile, the movement splitting the scars on his cheeks open, and pink fluid seeps out. "There's my girl. I see you finally found your way here."

My hands cover my mouth as I shake my head in horror.

"What's wrong?" Bryant laughs wetly, blood dribbling out of his mouth. "Did you think I was really dead?"

### THE BAD GUY

I stare at Bryant as the horror of what he put me through floods my mind.

Even strapped down to a table with bands of silver doesn't feel like enough. Not when he survived a stake through the heart and a silver bullet in the head.

Blood mists out of his mouth as he addresses me like we've just met in the park and not in the secure offices of a secret organization. "I see they're treating you better than me. Good for you, Rowe."

When I grip the filing cabinet next to me, it feels real, but this has to be my mind playing tricks on me. "No, you can't be alive. Leon shot you with silver."

"Was I?" he asks, coughing wetly. "Or was that just what Leon wanted everyone to think?"

I shake my head. "Leon works for Ros, and he ordered you to be killed."

"And yet, here I am." Pink drool slips from the corner of Bryant's mouth. "Are you sure Leon actually takes orders from Ambrose? Do you know the people you've fallen in with, Rowe? You should have let me save you."

"I *saw* Leon shoot you in the head with a silver bullet." I grasp the front of my shirt over my racing heart. "You were right on top of me. Your brains were on my face."

"Obviously, what you saw was fake," Bryant reasons. "Those weren't silver bullets. Ambrose may have wanted me put down, but Leon had orders to keep me alive. If you can even call this living."

My hand trembles as I reach for the gun under my arm and pull it out.

Bryant laughs wetly. "Are you going to finish the job now?"

I ignore him as I eject the magazine and stare at the shiny bullets within. When I scrape a nail over the silver tip of the top bullet, it flakes away to reveal dull led beneath.

"Oh, is that Leon's gun?" Bryant coughs, and blood splatters on his lips. "Good for you, Rowe. Your ability to survive continues to amaze me."

I snap the clip back into place and holster the gun. "This is about the facility, isn't it? Everything Ros's dad does is about the facility." I take a step closer to Bryant. "Did you really kidnap Ros's sister? Do you have her stashed away somewhere?"

"Kidnap?" He barks out a laugh that turns into a hacking cough.

Quickly, I step out of range of spraying blood and eye the tubes going into his body. I guess growing a new head takes a lot of blood, and it doesn't look to be going well for Bryant.

When he calms down enough to speak, his words bring with them bubbles of blood. "I never kidnapped anyone. My loyalty was to the huntsmen. When I imprisoned Delilah, I was following orders. It was only supposed to be until she came around, but she just never got over it." He turns his head to stare up at the ceiling. "She was so full of rage. But she deserved her anger. What we did wasn't right. But I was following orders."

I take a step closer, no longer sure he's talking to me.

"Everyone could see they were in love. Who cares if he was a wolf shifter?" He trails off for a moment, his eyes going blank.

Worried he just kicked the bucket mid-story, I lean over him, trying to see if he's still breathing.

Bryant's eyes shoot to me, and he bares his fangs, snapping at me as he strains to get off the bed.

I stumble backward into the cabinet, my hand over my chest, where it feels like my heart is trying to punch its way out of my body.

Bryant falls back to the table, cackling like a madman even as blood trickles down his chin. Bryant was already crazy, but literally losing his mind had clearly pushed him over the edge.

"I was loyal to the cause!" he screams at the ceiling. "Do I regret some of the things I did? Yes, of course. But I was *loyal*! I followed orders!"

Acid rolls in my stomach. No one deserves this misery. Not even Bryant. This is torture, and I can't stay here and witness it.

As I back toward the door, Bryant's head whips toward me. "Don't leave me, Rowe! I was good to you, remember? You owe me!"

"You tormented me after killing my lover." I turn my back on him. "I don't owe you anything."

His yell chases after me, "I killed your father!"

I freeze, my eyes on the door, before slowly turning back. "What?"

Bryant settles back on the table. "I thought that would get your attention."

"You're lying." I narrow my eyes at him. "My dad died in a car accident."

"Your dad was a vampire," he scoffs. "Use your brain, Rowe."

I think back to when I went to view his body. There had been head trauma, they said, from going through the windshield.

"Poor, Rowe," Bryant coos. "Only seeing half-truths."

My legs quake, and I grip the edge of the cabinet to stay on my feet. "Why?"

"He wasn't loyal," Bryant says simply, as if that makes everything clear. "But he was good at keeping secrets." His eyes fix on me with voracious intensity. "He kept *you* a secret. His special little secret. His little Wendall Witch."

"Who ordered you to kill my father?" I demand.

Bryant's head rolls from side to side. "You're really not smart, but you're spunky, and that makes up for it."

"Who?" I demand.

"Hoo, hoo. You sound like an owl," he mocks. "Ambrose's dad. Who else? Hoo, hoo, hoo. You little owl."

I shake my head. "No, you're lying."

"There's a file." He tilts his head back. "Look under B for Branning."

I stumble to the filing draws, find the right one, and yank it open.

"Don't worry, Rowe, I kept you a secret," Bryant croons from behind me. "I knew you were special. Like all the other witches I keep in secret."

Shaking, I search through the file cabinet until I find my father's halfway back. The manila envelope contains a thick folder with his name at the top and a stamp that says *Closed* in red on the front.

I don't have time to read through it here, so I shove it under my shirt, using my waistband to hold it against my body.

"I was good, right?" Bryant demands. "Now, you be good to Uncle Bryant."

"You're not my uncle." I slam the filing drawer shut. "You're the man who destroyed my life."

"I was just the gun, Rowe," he yells as I stride back toward the door. "You can't blame the gun when someone else pulls the trigger!" I yank open the door.

"Don't leave me here!" he screams, the sound of desperation ripping at me. "Don't you want revenge? Kill me!"

"Revenge isn't about giving you what you want. This is the path you chose, so see it to the end." I shut the door before he can try to pull me back and stride through the office to the door on the other side.

There, I crack the door just far enough to peer out into the hall and make sure it's empty before I rush back to the waiting room.

My breaths come quickly and my heart races as I fall into my abandoned seat. I clench my hands on my thighs, the ridged edges of the folder cutting into my thighs, and force myself to take slow, even breaths, willing my heart to calm.

As the adrenaline finally dies down, it leaves me feeling like I just ran a marathon. My hand shakes as I pull Ros's phone from my pocket and open the game, sorting cards without really seeing them.

When the security door opens, I ignore it, my eyes fixed on the screen.

Booted footsteps come toward me, and Ros touches my cheek. "Are you ready to go?"

I tip my head back to look up at him. "Everything okay?"

He gives me a strained smile. "Yeah, as good as it can be."

I shove the phone into my pocket and stand. "Your dad didn't agree with you?"

Expression sad, he shakes his head. "I'll give him more time."

As we turn to leave, the security door opens again, and an icy voice calls out, "Ambrose, we're not done here."

Ros ignores the other man, his focus on me. "Come on, let's go."

I let him pull me along as I glance back over my shoulder.

His father's chilly gaze takes me in before he looks back at his son. "Just remember what I said."

Ros doesn't acknowledge him as he opens the door and tugs me out into the hall, his expression hard.

When we're far enough away not to be overheard, I ask, "What did your dad say?"

He shakes his head. "It's nothing."

I tug on his hand. "It's clearly something."

His shoulders slump. "He told me to have fun with you but to remember that my loyalty is to the organization."

My spine stiffens. "Why do I feel like that's not him giving us his blessing?"

"Because it's not." We stop in front of the elevator, and he stabs the button harder than necessary. "My dad's not a good man. Losing my mom and my sister killed something inside him."

The doors swish open, and Ros pulls me inside, pressing the button for the clinic level.

When the doors close, he continues, "He thinks finding your mate makes you weak, and that I need to keep my focus on furthering the organization's agenda, which involves producing pureblood vampires to continue the cause."

My eyes widen. "You told your dad we're mates?"

He glances down at me. "Not in those exact words. He didn't let me get that far before he started in about my responsibility."

I frown. "So, your dad is telling you to keep me as your mistress while you go procreate baby fangies with a pureblood?"

He lets out a laugh. "Yeah, basically."

"But why can't the vampire be your mistress?" I demand.

Ros glances down at me in shock before his expression clears. "I forgot you're okay with polyamory, but that's not really the point."

Lifting a hand, I place it over Ros's heart. "You're a wonderful man with deep feelings, and anyone you choose to be with must be equally amazing. However." I poke him under the chin. "If you're just getting freaky for fangie babies, that's not okay."

He laughs and hugs me to his chest. "I regret the way we met. But I'm so happy you're in my life now. No fangie babies without feeling." He releases me as the elevator slides to a stop. "But I won't be forced into a political union either way. I've found my mate and have no interest in anyone else."

Tingles rush through me. No matter what Ros's dad might be up to, I can't believe Ros has anything to do with what's going on with Bryant, my dad's death, or his kidnapped sister.

I don't know how to bring it up to him, though, and Haut's words continue to run through my mind, bringing with them anxious worry. I can't ignore the possibility that Tris is alive and hurt.

As we walk through the clinic, I take Ros's hand. "Did you get what you needed out of this? Did it give you closure?"

"It did." He squeezes my fingers. "Even if my father refuses to believe, I'm glad to know Delilah isn't locked up somewhere, afraid and in pain."

"That's good. I'm happy for you." I fall silent as we head to the garage, my thoughts whirling.

Ours is the only car when we step out into the garage. "Were you there when the whole cover-up thing happened at the hotel?"

He glances down at me in surprise before he shakes his head. "No, I was on the team tracking Bryant. We didn't want to lose him."

I lick my lips. "How did they cover up the body? I don't remember you saying anything about that."

He frowns in confusion. "There wasn't a body. That would have been a lot harder to explain."

I search his face for any sign of subterfuge, but Ros looks honestly confused and concerned.

I shake my head. "Can I get something out of my suitcase before we get back on the road?"

"Sure," he says slowly. "What do you mean—"

"We can talk about it once we're in the car." I glance around the garage significantly before I look back at him. "Unless the car's not private, either?"

"No, it's private," he assures me. "No one can listen in on us in there. It's not tracked, either. It's a personal vehicle."

I gave him a look of disgust. "You personally own that car? I have lost so much respect for you."

He grins. "Mark my word, you will fall in love with the grandpa mobile."

I shake my head. "Don't hold your breath on that one. I'm going to start a petition to get rid of the grandpa mobile."

"Bite your tongue." Ros releases my hand to pull the keys from his pocket, popping the trunk.

He walks ahead of me to lift the lid and heave my heavy suitcase out. "I have to admit, I'm curious what this treasure chest holds."

I step up behind him and press my gun into his back.

He freezes. "Rowe?"

"Get into the trunk," I demand.

Ros's head turns toward me, trying to look at me from the corner of his eye. "What's this about?"

I press the gun harder against his back. "Unless you want silver bullets in your kidneys, get into the trunk."

"One." He holds up a finger. "My kidneys are higher and closer to my sides. And two." He holds up another finger. "You know I can take that gun away from you, right?"

"I know." I take a step back to put distance between us. "But you trust me, so you're going to get into the trunk." Ros hesitates a moment longer before he slowly grips the edge of the trunk and steps into the small space, lowering himself inside.

I step closer and grab his travel bag out, then keep my gun pointed at him as I take his weapon.

His eyes stay on my face as he lies down. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because there's something we both need to see, but you need to be in the trunk for it to happen." I shove his gun into my holster, not willing to risk it going off and accidentally shooting Ros with actual silver.

As I reach for the lid to close it, Ros tries one more time. "We can talk about this, and whatever you need to do, we can figure it out together without you taking this route. I trust you, Rowe. You're a good person."

"No, I told you from the beginning that I was a villain." I slam the trunk closed.

## ROAD GAMES

T he tires cross the line in the road, making the car jitter before I pull it straight once more.

I wince and call back toward the trunk, "Sorry, I didn't mean to do that!"

"Are you getting tired?" Rose calls back. "We've been on the road for a while now. Maybe you should pull over?"

We've been on the road for over three hours, to be precise. "No, I'm good. We're almost there."

After the first hour, Ros seemed to resign himself to his fate in the trunk. Or he's just quietly plotting. I'd be okay with quiet plotting, so long as he doesn't make a mad escape before we reach Hartford Cove.

I desperately want to tell him what's going on, and he had begged me to in that first hour. The problem is his father. Ros may believe the car isn't bugged, but I don't buy it. Not after seeing firsthand how his dad lies to him. I can't risk telling him about Hartford Cove, or even that I held him at gunpoint, hoping that any security cameras will clearly show that Ros had no choice but to get into the trunk and leave with me. I don't want to ruin his place in his super-secret organization if he wants to escape later and go back to them.

Hopefully, Ros will understand once we're someplace we can talk.

A sign for a rest area comes up on the right, and I bite my lip. My uncomfortable bladder reminds me that we last stopped at a rest area right before going to the clinic, and while I have had nothing to eat or drink since then, my body is producing liquid from somewhere, which stands to reason Ros's is doing the same. Because, as I learned much to my disappointment, vampires still need the bathroom.

"How's your bladder doing?" I yell. "Do you need to pee?"

A beat of silence follows before Ros says, "Yes?"

I glance in the rear-view mirror. "Are you lying?"

"Yes," he groans. "You know, there's a lever back here for me to pull if I want to escape."

"Pretend to be a less informed kidnap victim," I instruct him as we cruise past the rest stop.

I've been keeping to four miles above the speed limit the entire way. Much as I want to speed, I can't afford to be pulled over and have Ros kick up a fuss. As it is, the needle of the gas meter is getting dangerously near empty.

"My legs are cramping," he whines. "Can you just put down the smaller portion of the back seat so I can stretch them?"

Feeling guilty, I glance in the rear-view mirror once more and shake my head, even though he can't see the motion. "You'll be too tempted to peek."

"I promise I won't peek," he says. "I will be a peekless kidnap victim."

"We both know that your training will kick in, and you'll be unable to resist looking," I counter. "We'll be there soon, and then you can do all the yoga you want."

"What's stopping me from pinpointing our location with my super-secret agent skills?" he demands. "Did you ever think of that?"

It had crossed my mind that he'd be able to tell when I took turns and how long we've been heading straight. As soon as I let him out of the trunk, he'll be able to know which direction we drove by the sun. He's that level of boy scout preparedness. But I'm hoping that, once I get him to Hartford

Cove, I'll be able to convince him of the wisdom of my diabolical plan.

"Can you just pretend that you're not a special agent?" I beg. "I don't know if I can stomach knocking you out."

"I am a very un-special agent," he instantly responds. "Absolutely no tracking skills back here."

"I choose to accept this as truth." I take the exit for the Peninsula. "You want to play a game?"

"What kind of game?" he asks tentatively.

"How about twenty questions?" I suggest.

"Sure," he agrees. "I'll go first. Why did you put me in the truck?"

"That's not how the game works." I glance around the car for inspiration. "I'm looking at something brown."

"Is it the grandpa mobile?" he asks in an aggrieved tone.

I pat the steering wheel. "Look at you winning on the first try. Good job!"

He's quiet for a moment before he calls out, "I see something black."

I bounce with excitement. "Is it the trunk?"

"Are you sure this is twenty questions and not I Spy?" he demands.

I nibble my bottom lip. "Not really. I've never played the game."

"What kid hasn't played twenty questions?" he demands in disbelief.

My shoulders hunch, though I keep my hands firmly on the steering wheel. "The kind who didn't go on a lot of road trips?"

"What did your family do during the summer?" he asks.

"When I was young, we went to see my grandma during the summer." My hands tighten on the steering wheel. "But my mom died when I was nine, and we fell out of contact with her side of the family. And I guess my dad didn't get along with his side, because I never met them."

Though, I know the reason for that now. Anyone my dad was related to was probably also a huntsman, or at least part of the organization. When he ran off with my mom, he would've had to cut all ties.

"I don't have any family, either." Ros's voice barely reaches me from the trunk. "It's just my dad, and you know how he is."

"Can vampires have babies with humans?" I ask.

"Yes?" Uncertainty fills his voice, like he's wondering at the change in topic, which I totally understand, but I go where the noodles lead me. "But they'd be human."

"So, you only get the fangie babies with other Draculas?" I asked for clarification.

"I already told you I have no interest in making fangie babies," Ros reminds me. "Is that why I'm in the trunk? Should I have kept that discussion a secret?"

"No, I was just wondering if I'd been human how that would have played out," I explain. "I don't really feel like a witch most of the time. Or pretty much ever, unless there's somebody reminding me of it. But I guess, if I were human, we never would have met."

Ros stays silent.

"Are you finally reconsidering how happy you are that we met?" Worry fills me, and I glance over my shoulder, the tires crossing the center line again and rattling the car.

"Please keep your focus on the road." He sighs, which must be a big one to be heard through the seats. "No, despite the trunk incident, I'm still happy we met. Besides, this is kind of like karma coming back at me, right? If we had moved on Bryant sooner, he never would have gotten you to the cabin and tortured you for days. It's fair that I experience this as well." "I'll be sure to keep soup cans away from you," I tease before the amusement fades. "I could have just stolen the car. Or vanished at the mall. Would that have been better?"

"No!" Ros shouts. "I'd rather be in the trunk than wondering what happened to you."

My mood brightens. "See? I knew that's what you'd say. You're a happy little trunk man."

"I don't know that I'd go that far," he grumbles.

A mile marker zips by, and my pulse picks up speed as I look ahead for the next one on the two-lane highway. "I spy with my little eye something green."

"Trees?" he guesses.

I shake my head. "You're just too good at this."

"I spy with my little eye something black," he calls out.

"Is it the truck again?" I laugh.

"When I said I needed to pee, I might not have been completely lying," he calls out.

I slow as I spot the turn ahead and flip on my blinker. "Then this next part of the journey is going to really suck for both of us. Just try not to wet yourself."

Distress fills Ros's voice. "What does that mean?"

Staying silent, I take the turn onto the gravel road, and the thick trees on either side block out the moonlight, leaving only my headlights to guide the way.

"Rowe?" Ros calls out. "What does that mean?"

The front tire catches in a pothole, bouncing the entire car.

"Oh, God," Ros wails. "Please say we're not on a back road!"

The tire slams into another pothole. "We're not on a back road?"

"Liar!" he yells.

"Just try to brace yourself!" I suggest.

I grip the steering wheel tighter and try to steer around the deep grooves in the road, but it's impossible, and the car bounces and rocks from side to side as we continue to creep forward.

Ros's grunts and curses fill the car, and I yell my admiration when he gets especially creative.

Then the trees open, the road smooths, and we arrive in Hartford Cove.

Despite the late hour, I spot familiar faces on the sidewalk as I drive down Main Street. My gut tightens when I pass the wolf statue next to Nesse's diner and catch a flash of Abony through the window.

Word must spread ahead of me, because people step out onto the sidewalk to stare as I drive past.

As the weight of their expectation settles back over me, guilt fills me that I had abandoned them. I hunch lower in the seat, fixing my eyes straight ahead.

At the end of Main Street, I turn right and drive up the hill that overlooks the cove. Water glistens under a nearly full moon, and I glance away from the terrifying depths. I had nearly walked right into the water and drowned not too long ago, and it no longer fills me with sweet memories of childhood.

Instead, I focus on the top of the hill where my grandmother's house sits, the windows of the three-story mansion flooded with light. A wrap-around porch leads to a large, screened-in sunroom on one end and a covered deck on the other. A railing lines the uppermost part of the house. The widow's walk, empty and waiting.

As I pull into the driveway, the door opens, and Barron steps out onto the porch.

My eyes sting at the sight of the slender man. I haven't been gone long, nor have I let myself focus on how much I missed my friends. But the sight of him now threatens to tear down all the walls I built to hold myself together. Barron glances back into the house before he runs down the stairs.

I throw the car into park and thrust open the driver's side door without turning off the vehicle in my hurry to meet him halfway.

His slender arms wrap around me, filling my nose with the scent of ink and books. "Dammit, Ruh Roh, I'm so glad you came back."

My arms squeeze as tightly as possible. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"You had us scared." Emotion thickens his voice. "But you were scared, too. We should have spent more time telling you about our people. Preparing you."

Movement on the porch draws my attention, and when I look over Barron's shoulder, my heart stops.

Owen stands at the base of the stairs, moonlight glinting in his dark-brown hair and turning it nearly black. Like Haut, he looks like he's lost weight since I last saw him, but he's whole and walking among the living.

I shove out of Barron's arms, and he releases me, pointing me toward my mate.

My legs shake so hard that I stumble, almost falling. I catch myself, barely registering the scrape of cement against my palms, before I'm running forward again, tears blinding me.

Owen meets me in the middle, wrapping me in his arms. The lips that cover mine taste like tears. Whether they're his or mine doesn't matter. All that matters is that Owen is alive and in my embrace again.

When we separate, he pushes the hair back from my face, his blue eyes taking me in with the same desperate joy that sings through me.

"Rowe," he breathes. "You came back."

"I came back," I agree. "I'm so glad you're alive."

"Me, too." He chuckles, the sound made throaty by his tears. "Haut found you?"

"He did." My eyes shift to the house. "He said that Tris

I can't force myself to complete the sentence, but Owen understands. "He's up in your room."

I choke on another sob, my hand raising to my mouth. "How long?"

"Almost a month." Owen grips my arms. "I'll take you to him." He starts to pull me toward the house, then turns back and glances at the car. "Where's Haut?"

I shake my head. "I don't know. I came here without him."

Owen frowns. "Then whose heartbeat do I hear?"

A loud knock comes from the trunk, followed by Ros's voice. "Rowe? Are we there yet?"

## WHOSE MATE IS WHOSE?

B arron leaps away from the car, his eyes wide with shock. "Rowe, why is there a person in your trunk?"

"Because I didn't want to leave Ros behind." I disentangle myself from Owen and hurry back to the car. "Sorry, Rosebud, I'll let you out now!"

Before I reached the driver's side door, the trunk pops open. "I already told you there's a lever back here to prevent kidnapping..." Ros trails off as his eyes fix on Barron, then shift to Owen, before finally settling on me. "Okay, what's going on? And I need actual answers this time, Rowe."

Still worried there could be a listening device, I walk back toward the trunk. "Let's go—"

Barron moves quickly, grabbing my hand and pulling be away from the car at the same time.

At the same time, Owen steps in front of me with a growl. "What are you doing with my mate, vampire?"

"I'm clearly the one in the trunk." Ros's lips pull back to reveal his fangs, and he hops out of the trunk with fluid grace. "And I think you have things backward, fleabag." He beckons to me without taking his eyes off the other men. "Rowe, baby, come back over here."

Owen pushes me behind him. "Rowe, go into the house."

"Get your hands off my mate," Ros snarls as he takes a step forward, his hand dropping toward his pocket.

Afraid I missed a hidden weapon—because Ros is a fangy boy scout, and I didn't search him—I dart forward to put myself between the growling men, spreading my arms wide. "Okay, everyone, just calm down. This is a big misunderstanding."

"Damn right it is." Owen's fists clench, and he glances at Barron. "Call the pack."

"Down, boy!" I shout, pointing at Barron. "No howling!"

"Rowe, get inside," Owen growls, his eyes fixed on Ros.

"Rowe, get back in the car," Ros counters. "We're leaving."

"Will all of you just shut up?" I yell. "I'm trying to speak!"

Owen turns to give me a pitying look. "I don't know what lies this man told you, but he's a vampire."

Barron nods in agreement, his eyes wide as he stares at Ros like he's the boogeyman.

"Yeah, I know," I snap, my hands dropping to my hips. "Hence him riding in the trunk. But he's not a *bad* vampire. He's one of the good guys."

"You can't know that for sure," Barron protests, slowly inching toward me with his hand out, ready to pull me to safety. "He could be a huntsman."

"Oh, he is." I sidle out of reach and pull back my flannel to display the butt of the silver gun in my holster. "But I disarmed him, so you can relax."

Barron flinches back with a sharp breath of fear.

Swallowing hard, Owen reaches out his hand. "Why don't you give that to me, Rowe, before you hurt yourself."

With a frown, I snap my flannel close once more. "Why? Have you been trained in how to handle a gun, Mr. Mayor?"

"Have you?" he asks in disbelief.

"Yes, she has," Ros snaps, making me straighten with pride. "She's quite deadly, and that gun is loaded with silver,

so you better stay back. Rowe, baby, get over here before one of those beasts hurts you."

"Excuse me? Beasts?" Barron demands. "I run a bookstore."

"A very nice bookstore." I glance at him. "I really need to get your number. When I tried to look it up online, nothing in this stupid town was listed."

"That's kind of the point." He casts Ros an apprehensive glance. "If you know what he is, why would you ever bring him here? You know what huntsmen have done to our people."

"And why does he keep claiming to be your mate?" Owen demands with a little possessive rumble that makes my toes curl in my unicorn sneakers.

I was hoping to figure out a less abrupt way to do this, but inspiration hasn't struck in the handful of minutes that have passed since realizing Owen isn't really dead.

Stepping closer to him, I grasp his arm, and in my gentlest tone, say, "Because he is." As Owen shakes his head in denial, I turn to Ros. "And this is also my mate, who I thought was dead until we arrived here."

Bewilderment fills Ros's gaze as he looks from me to Owen. "This is Tris?"

At his name, gravity drops out from under me. How can I be out here arguing with them when Owen said Tris was hurt inside the house?

Spinning on my heel, I race up the porch steps and into the house, calling Tris's name.

"Rowe, wait!" Owen yells after me. "Don't go in there!"

I ignore him as I race up the steep stairs, still yelling for Tris. My heart pounds painfully, and I almost trip before I grab the railing and keep going. Feet pound into the house behind me, but I don't look back. All I can see is the closed bedroom door at the top, where I used to spend my summers when I visited my grandma.

Why isn't Tris answering me? He always answers.

Reaching the top of the stairs, I throw open the bedroom door just as Barron catches up to me.

"Don't look, lass," he says gruffly as he swings me away.

His protection comes too late, though, as the image of Tris's still body on the bed burns itself into my retinas.

"Let me go!" I fight against Barron's hold, wiggling and thrashing. "Let me go! Tris!"

"Get your hands off her!" Ros shouts from the stairs as he and Owen race to be the next to reach the top.

"Shh, it will be okay." Barron's arms tighten around me in a hug, trying to offer comfort.

But I don't want comfort. I want Tris.

Snarling, I reach back and grab Barron's hair, yanking for all I'm worth.

With a shout of pain, his hold on me loosens, and I wiggle free, falling to the floor. On hands and knees, I scramble past his legs and into my room.

Tris lays still in my bed, his eyes closed. The backs of his eyelids look fragile, the blue veins in them making them look bruised, and his lashes form dark shadows on cheekbones put into sharp relief from the weight he's lost.

An IV hangs from a stand next to the bed, tubes running into his arm. Another, thicker, tube disappears past his chapped lips, and an oxygen tube curls from his nose up around his ears. Machines work next to him, filling the room with quiet beeps that should only exist in a hospital.

"Tris?" I crawl to the edge of the bed and take his cold, limp hand. I squeeze it, desperate for a response. "Tris, please wake up."

A gentle hand falls on my shoulders, and Owen says, "He can't hear you, honey. He's been in this condition since Haut brought him back."

I shake my head as tears stream down my face. "How'd this happen? I saw him go over the balcony at our hotel."

"Haut found him on one of the balconies several stories below your room," Owen explains, pain in his voice. "You were already long gone by then, so Haut stole a car and brought Tris back here for Dr. Lopez to take care of. Then he set out to find you once more."

I choke on a sob. There had been so many chances to stop Bryant. If Haut had tracked us faster, or if Ros's men had just apprehended Bryant before he stepped into the hotel, Tris would still be awake making jokes, instead of in this vegetative state.

"Why isn't he waking up?" I twist around to look up at Owen. "He's a wolf shifter. You guys are supposed to heal quickly. You've survived death *twice*. Why isn't Tris recovering?"

Owen shakes his head. "He hasn't regained consciousness long enough to make the shift. He's been like this since the fall."

I sniff back my tears and wipe my eyes. "But Haut can force the change. I've seen him do it."

Pity and regret fill Owen's eyes. "Only the Alpha can do that."

"Then get him back here!" I yell, shaking with helpless fear and anger. "How could he leave Tris like this?"

"Haut's not the Alpha anymore," Barron says quietly from the door.

"Then who..." My eyes shift to Owen, and the guilt in his face takes on new meaning. "*You're* Alpha now?"

"I'm so sorry, Rowe," he whispers.

"Stop apologizing and force Tris to change!" I demand. "Fix him, if you're the Alpha!"

"He can't." Ros steps past Barron and into the room, his hazel eyes settling on Owen. "He's one of the cursed. He can't command wolf shifters, anymore."

My eyes narrow on Owen. "Then let someone else be Alpha."

He stares back at me bleakly. "It doesn't work like that."

"He's tried, lass," Barron adds. "Even with the curse, there's no one in town strong enough to take the Alpha position away from him."

"But Haut—"

"Is broken," Owen whispers. "When you left, he lost control of his wolf. To be Alpha, man and beast have to be one."

Desperate, I grab Ros's hand. "Use your magic vampire spit. Fix Tris."

His gaze moves from me to the bed before he kneels next to me. "If his wounds were on the surface—"

"No!" I lunge at Ros, grabbing the collar of his shirt. "Please! Fix him!"

"I'm so sorry, baby." His arms wrap around me as he falls back on the floor, sitting cross-legged and pulling me into his lap. "I'd fix this for you if I could. I swear I would. But there's nothing I can do."

Trembling, I stare at Tris's still form, my world falling apart all over again. How many times can I lose the people I love before it breaks me? Losing Tris once nearly drove me to follow him into the next life. But this is almost worse. Seeing him slowly waste away to nothing isn't how Tris would want to go.

"No." I shake my head. "Not like this."

Scrambling off Ros's lap, I use the edge of the bed to pull myself to my feet.

Leaning over Tris, I search his face for any sign of life. "I turned you into a goose, once, I can do it again. You are going to wake up."

I spin to look down at Ros, who stares up at me in confusion. "Do you speak German?"

He shakes his head. "What?"

"German!" I fling a hand out toward Owen and Barron. "You all come from the same place. Do you speak German?"

"A little." His head tilts to the side. "Why?"

I straighten to my full height. "Because I'm the Great Wendall Witch, and we have a goose to make."

### ONE MATE FOR ANOTHER

R os's eyes widen. "What did you to say?" I flap a hand at him. "Not now, Rosebud. We have more important things to do, but I promise we'll circle back to this." I rush out of the room, yelling over my shoulder, "Are the journals in Haut's room or the sanctuary?"

"The sanctuary." Owen scrambles to catch up with me on the stairs. "Rowe, you can't seriously be thinking about turning Tris back into a goose?"

"Wait, Tris was previously a goose?" Ros demands as he comes up on my other side. "That's kind of an important part that you left out of your story."

"Yes, yes. Tris was cursed to be a wolfdog, then I turned him into a goose, but then we fixed that, and he became a wolf shifter. It's all very exciting." As I hurry down the stairs, I notice that the front door stands open, and the grandpa mobile still idles in the driveway. "Barron!"

"Yes, Ruh Roh?" he pipes up from right behind me.

"Can you please grab mine and Ros's stuff from the car? Make sure you check the trunk, back seat, and front seat. Our stuff is kind of scattered around," I instruct. "Then, when you're done, drive the car into the ocean."

"Now, wait a second," Ros blustered.

"I know you love the grandpa mobile, Rosebud, but it has to go." I reach out to grasp his hand. "I'll buy you a brand-new shit-colored car, I promise." "*You'll* buy *me* a new car?" he asked in disbelief. "With what money?"

"Yeah, about that..." I reach the bottom of the stairs and turn right toward the kitchen. "I'm loaded. Surprise!"

"Can we just pause for a second?" Ros catches my arm, pulling me to a stop.

Instantly, Owen steps forward, a growl rumbling in his chest.

Ros pulls me closer, his lips peeling back to reveal sharp fangs, and he hisses in response.

I point at Owen. "Stop growling." My finger swings to Ros. "And put those away before I get out the mini erasers."

Ros hides his fangs, but his wary gaze remains fixed on Owen even as he addresses me. "I know you're worried about Tris, but I put a lot of faith in you when I climbed into the trunk and let you bring me here. So, can you please just take a breath and at least give me the bare minimum explanation, so I know you weren't just playing me this entire time?"

"You're right, and I'm sorry. I definitely wasn't playing you. When we met, I thought Owen and Tris were both dead. I left out that they were wolf shifters because I know the huntsmen aren't exactly pro-furry, and I didn't think it mattered." I turn to look at Owen. "When I left Hartford Cove, I sincerely thought I had just seen Haut kill you. If I thought there was any way that you would survive that maiming, I never would have stayed away. I was just so terrified that, after Haut killed you, he was going to kill Tris, too."

Owen's expression softens, and he reaches out to cup my cheek. "Put more faith in my resilience. If that werewolf couldn't kill me fifteen years ago, there's no way Haut could, either."

Tears sting my eyes, and I nod, wanting to embrace Owen again, but aware of the tension thrumming through Ros's body at even this limited contact.

I turn back to my vampire lover and take a deep breath. "While I didn't think that my presumably-dead, wolf-shifter mates were necessary information, it *is* true that I purposely kept important information from you. As soon as I saw Leon's gun, I knew you were part of the huntsmen, a group of people I was told were evil. But you also saved me from Bryant, so I was willing to give you a chance to prove you weren't the boogeymen I was led to believe. However, that didn't mean I was willing to tell you all my secrets until I was sure I could trust you."

I squeeze Ros's fingers. "And I *do* trust you, if not the people you work for." I pull back my shoulders and straighten my spine. "My name is Rowe Wendell Branning. My ancestor was the witch who your ancestor courted. And my father was a huntsman in your organization, who your father ordered Bryant to kill."

Ros's lips part on a sharp intake of breath, but I hold up a hand to stall his questions. "There's more, including that Bryant is still alive, and that your dad is keeping secrets from you." I reach into my flannel and pull out the gun, handing it to him. "Leon's loyalty isn't to you, and this gun isn't loaded with silver. Which is why I didn't feel safe talking to you about any of this until we were here in Hartford Cove, and why Barron is currently driving the grandpa mobile into the ocean. Because I don't trust your dad not to have put some tracking or listening device on the car, even if you say it's safe. After all this is over, if you want to leave, I won't stop you. I'll even buy the car you drive out of here." I give him a wobbly smile. "But I'm hoping that you'll stay."

Ignoring Owen's growls, Ros slowly ejects the gun's magazine. For a long moment, he studies the bullet on top where I scraped the silver polish off. Just as slowly, he deposits the magazine into his pocket and slips the gun into the holster beneath his arm.

"I'm willing to hear you out after Tris is no longer in danger." His gaze sweeps over the brightly lit kitchen. "But this house isn't exactly habitable for me."

"There's a basement without any windows, and I can close the shutters and hang sheets over the ones up here." I take his hand once more, and a pang goes through me when he doesn't immediately lace his fingers through mine. "And there's always my super-special witch's blood, right?"

Ros doesn't smile, but he doesn't pull his hand from mine, either.

"I'm not sure this is a good idea," Owen cautions as he claims my other hand. "The town won't like having a vampire around."

"My grandma convinced them to accept my dad," I say, with a hard note in my voice. "And if they want their Wendall witch, they'll learn to accept Ros, if he chooses to stay. I love you, Owen Hartford, and I want to be with you, too, but if the town council makes me choose between keeping my mates and staying here... *I* don't need Hartford Cove. *Hartford Cove* needs me, and I *will* remind them of that."

Owen's stricken gaze moves from me to Ros. "Just like that? For him?"

I shake my head. "For *me*. I can't live in a place that refuses to accept all of me. You said once that, if I didn't want to stay, you'd help me leave, even though you'd be going against the Alpha. Has that changed, now that *you're* in charge?"

"You know it hasn't," he says gruffly. "But I've lost you twice, now. I don't know if I can do it again."

"Then it's a good thing you're on my side, Mr. Mayor." I squeeze his fingers. "You can back me in front of the council and remind the town who actually owns this place."

A thump comes from the entryway as Barron sets down our luggage. "If you're kicking Mrs. Smith out of town, Jesse and I would like her house. Her kitchen is far superior to ours."

Owen pinches the bridge of his nose. "No one is getting kicked out of their house."

"Not without reason." I glance at Ros. "There's a pie feud between Barron's mate and this crotchety old hag named Mrs. Smith." He nods in understanding.

Tightening my hold on Ros's and Owen's hands, I drag them down the hall. "Now, Ros, this is going to look like a murder box, but I've been assured it's completely safe."

"I don't know that I'd go that far," Owen mutters.

I freeze in the hall outside the elevator door. "You guys told me it was safe. "

"I don't recall ever saying that." Owen opens the door, then pulls back the metal grate before his hand moves to the small of my back. "But it *is* the only way to get down to the sanctuary from here, so in you go."

As he shoves me into the metal box, I shriek, "Owen Hartford, you black-hearted liar!"

Ignoring me, Owen turns to Ros and sweeps his arm toward the elevator. "After you."

Ros's eyes narrow on him. "No, I insist, you go first."

"Both of you, get your asses in here!" I yell, bending to snatch the battery-operated lantern off the floor and clicking it on. "If this thing falls, I'm not going down alone!"

Ros turns to the side and slips past Owen, his eyes staying on the other man. "I'm virtually indestructible. How about you?"

"I've survived death more times than I can count." Owen grits out through clenched teeth. "Nothing's killed me yet."

I gape at him. "How many times have you almost died?"

Owen slides the grate closed on the elevator and presses the button to go down. "Every month through the end of my teenage years, when I tried to reclaim the Alpha position from Haut after he took over."

"I thought he was kidding about that." I smash myself against the metal wall as the elevator shakes and rumbles down toward the sanctuary.

Owen cuts me a sharp glance as the light from the hall vanishes, leaving only the lantern for illumination. "No one

jokes about dominance challenges."

"Was this before or after you became cursed?" Ros asks, his assessing gaze sweeping over Owen as if re-evaluating his threat level.

"After," Owen snaps.

"Owen was bitten by a rogue werewolf back when we were nine," I supply helpfully.

"That young?" Ros shakes his head. "And they let you live?"

Owen glares at him. "Of course, they let me live. I was a nine-year-old *child*."

Ros stares at him in disbelief. "But the curse—"

"The only werewolves who go mad are those without a pack." The elevator grinds to a stop, and Owen yanks back the grate. "Stay here. I'll turn on the lights."

He vanishes into the dark sanctuary, leaving Ros and me alone.

Cradling the lantern, I creep closer to Ros.

He glances down, the hard glint in his eyes stopping me in my tracks. "I'm angry with you."

"Irreversibly angry?" I ask in a small voice.

He shakes his head, more as if his level of exasperation with me has hit a new height, rather than in answer. "I thought I understood you, that we had this mental link where we just... got each other. But now, I don't know."

"It's pretty amazing how you were able to keep up with my brain for as long as you did," I assure him in a soft voice. "Most people just write me off as crazy."

"When did you decide to kidnap me?" he asks.

I lick my lips. "When did the decision solidify in my mind? At the clinic, after speaking to Bryant."

"When did the thoughts first start percolating in the back of your mind?" he asks with suspicion. "Last night," I admit.

His arms cross over his chest, closing himself off from me. "Before or after you took me to bed?"

"It's complicated," I whisper.

"Not that complicated. You slept with me, knowing it would lull me into trusting you even more than I already had any reason to." The lights flare to life in the sanctuary, and he stomps out of the elevator.

That hadn't been my reason, though I can't say my real reason is any better. I had been in need, my body demanding I connect with my mate, and Ros had been the nearest one to me. Tears sting my eyes, but I bite the insides of my cheeks until the urge to cry passes. I don't deserve to be sad. I knew that my desperation to return to one mate might ruin my relationship with another.

But that doesn't stop my heart from aching as I turn off the lantern, set it back on the floor, and follow Ros into the sanctuary.

# NO STRINGS ATTACHED

O wen gives me a sympathetic look when I step off the elevator, reminding me that he has super hearing and is a giant eavesdropper.

With Ros's back turned to us, I point at Owen, then mime zipping my lips.

He just rolls his eyes in response, which I guess is the best I can expect. Though, it makes me wonder...

I raise my voice to Ros. "Do vampires have super hearing? Or is it more about the nose with you?"

"I'm not playing twenty vampire questions with you in front of the cursed one," Ros says without looking back.

"I have a name," Owen says tightly.

"That's right. Ros, this is Owen Hartford, the mayor of Hartford Cove." I gesture to Ros. "Owen, this is Ambrose Shultz, he's a super-ninja, spy-captain, boy scout."

Ros glances back at that. "Alpha Team Lead is fine."

"Oh!" I grip Owen's arm with excitement. "Do you hear that? Two Alphas. You guys have so much in common!"

Owen's sigh sounds like it comes from the grave where his patience is buried.

Ros turns back to take in the cold, concrete floor and metal racks filled with ingredients. "This doesn't look like much of a sanctuary to me. More like the underground lab of a mad scientist." Releasing Owen, I clasp my hands behind my back and skip ahead to Ros's side, ducking in front of him so that he can't avoid looking at me. "As an expert on underground dwellings, your opinion is important. This isn't what I expected, either, when I first found out my grandma was a witch and had a magic workspace. Super disappointing, right? So sterile. Not at all what the movies said it would be."

Ros finally looks at me, but only so I can fully admire his frown. "What do you mean? Didn't you grow up here?"

I shake my head. "Up until two months ago, I didn't know the paranormal even existed. I wasn't lying when I said I didn't have a teacher and was learning things on the go. When I came to Hartford Cove, I thought I'd be visiting my grandma, who baked pies and told fairy tales." I glance around the sanctuary, my eyes settling on the plastic partition that separates one side from the other. "Bryant said I was going crazy because no one was training me on how to use my magic."

Ros stops in his tracks. "You weren't joking when you said you were crazy?"

"Nope." I tap the side of my head. "Lots of screws loose up here."

"You're not crazy, Rowe." Owen comes up alongside me, his hand on my arm urging some distance between Ros and me. "Bryant had you taking a slurry of medication to make you *think* you were."

Ros's focus snaps to Owen. "We didn't find any drugs in her system. And how do you know about Bryant?"

Owen releases me to step closer to Ros. "Of course, you didn't find drugs in her system. We'd just weaned her off of that crap he had her on."

Ros holds up a hand. "I feel like I'm missing part of this story."

I step around Owen so I can speak to Ros with an unobstructed view. "After Bryant killed my dad, I lived with him for a few months." I frown at Owen. "But I was already on medication for being crazy. Hallucinations, specifically. Bryant just upped the crazy when he took control of my medication."

What little color in Ros's face drains away. "You mean, when he took you to the cabin, that wasn't the first time you met him?"

I smile brightly. "That was our family reunion."

Ros lunges forward to catch my arms and shake me gently. "How can you smile about this? That man *tortured* you!"

Owen grabs one of Ros's wrists as a low growl echoes through the sanctuary. "Have a little care for my mate."

"She's not a delicate flower." Ros releases me to square off with Owen. "She can take care of herself."

Owen steps up to him until the two men are almost chest to chest. "That doesn't mean you need to test her resilience. She's been through enough."

"What do you know about what she's been through?" he hisses into Owen's face. "I was there for her after she was tortured. I nurtured her back to health. If you're her mate, why weren't you there?"

"Because I was here caring for Tris!" Owen yells. "As much as I love her, if I let Tris die, that would have been the end. If you're planning to stick around, you better get used to the idea that Tris comes first."

"Guys!" I shove between them. "This isn't a contest of who's helped me through more trauma. There's plenty of that pie for everyone to have a slice."

"You're right." Owen takes a step back. "I'm sorry, Rowe. Let's get those journals."

Owen turns his back on Ros and strides through the plastic curtain, smacking the heavy flaps aside.

I stay close to Ros. "So, this isn't a normal witch's sanctuary?"

His silence drags out for a beat before he says, "It's not like anything I've seen before. In my experience, they're usually cozier, but they emulate the practitioner." Ros pushes aside a piece of the heavy plastic and holds it out of the way for me to go through first. "Was your grandmother a stern woman?"

"She was always soft hugs, sweet pies, and story time for me." My eyes shift to Owen, who stands next to the desk. "But my experience comes from the eyes of a nine-year-old doted on by a grandmother who prized me as her future heir, so I realize I received special treatment. I'm not so sure everyone experienced her the same way."

Owen's head turns toward me. "She was a fine woman. Don't question your memories of her."

"If she was so fine, then she would have given you a room here, too." I hurry ahead of Ros to join Owen. "Don't pretend what happened after our parents died was okay."

Owen leans over to rub his cheek on top of my head before he pulls a pair of keys from his pocket to unlock the desk.

I hold my breath as he pushes back the roll top. The last time we did this, the journals were gone. This time, though, the journals are exactly where they're supposed to be.

I run a finger down their ancient spines and pull out the one marked as the oldest. The original journal that started this all.

Pulling it free, I hold it out to Ros. "Here."

His brows pinch together as he takes it. "This is where you want me to start translating? I'm warning you, I'm not very fluent in German."

"It's the oldest of the journals," I explain. "Whether the witch in the woods gave it to my ancestors, or whether my ancestors stole it during the fight that began this feud, it doesn't matter. It's yours now. That journal should have the spell your people have been searching for."

His hands tighten on the journal. "And you'll just give it to me? With no strings attached?"

I narrow my eyes at him. "I'm not promising to become your new witch in the woods, if that's what you're asking. That's way too much responsibility. I don't even want to be the Wendall witch. You guys put way too much burden on just one person. Share the love, spread the spells around. This isn't a monopoly on species survival here."

Ros still looks at me with confused suspicion.

"Just consider it a peace offering. If there's a way to end this feud between the huntsmen and the wolf shifters, then have it and be free to dance around in the sun to your heart's content." I give him a wry smile. "As much as I enjoyed donating blood to you, if you have an alternative that keeps you from a slow and painful death, I'm okay with that." I turn back to the desk. "And it means you're not bound to me if you want to leave and go make fang babies with a nice pureblood."

"Rowe, are you sure you want to do that?" Caution fills Owen's voice.

"No, I don't want Ros making loveless, fang babies, but it's his choice," I snap as I gather up the journals.

Owen closes the desk back up. "I meant about giving him the journal."

I glare at him. "Not all vampires are evil. Just threequarters of the ones I've met." When I turn around, I find Ros's gaze on me. "But, if you find a transformation spell in there that will help Tris, I would appreciate a translated copy of it."

"Of course." He uses the tip of one finger to open the cover. "I can't believe, after all these years..."

"Yeah," I agree. "When you told me your founder's story, I was pretty shaken up about it. I guess this is the universe's way of righting a wrong." Juggling the journals in my arms, I head toward the elevator. "I wonder if the original Wendall witch was mated to a vampire and a werewolf, too, and this whole thing started because they couldn't agree to share."

Ros closes the book. "It wouldn't be the first time a war started over love."

I bump my shoulder against his arm as I skip past. "Don't go soft on me, now. You still have every right to be upset. Me giving you a present doesn't cancel that out. Even if it *is* a super-special, one-of-a-kind present."

"Oh, I'm still angry," he calls after me. "But I was also raised to be a strategist and, as convoluted as your plan was, it also had a certain diabolical cleverness I can appreciate."

"That's the supervillain in me." I turn to the side to push through the plastic curtain.

As the plastic slaps me in the back, my eyes are drawn to the shadowed alcove next to one of the racks, where the second entrance to the sanctuary hides, and the ghost of a whisper fills my mind.

"Rowe's always had the most complicated adventure campaigns," Owen says as he steps through the curtain, his focus on Ros. "They inevitably failed fifty percent of the time, but it was always one hell of an adventure..." His voice trails off as he comes up alongside me. "Rowe? Everything okay?"

Shaking my head, I force my gaze away from the shadows. "Nothing but rainbows and unicorns."

Owen peers toward the shadows, too. "Are you hearing voices again?"

"Nope." I start forward once more, focus fixed on the elevator. "My toaster is in full working order."

"These voices are part of the hallucinations?" Ros asks quietly, and I pretend not to hear as I step into the elevator.

Still looking troubled, Owen shakes his head. "No, someone has been trying to lure Rowe out of Hartford Cove by magical means." Suspicion fills his face as he looks at Ros. "You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

Ros shakes his head. "There aren't many witches who work for our group, and I didn't have any direct contact with the few who do." He gives me a shrewd look. "Is that what the Maze of Misdirection is for?" "Ding, ding, ding." I grin at him. "Such a nice brain you have. So good at linking pieces together."

"What's a Maze of Misdirection?" Owen asks as he steps onto the elevator and waits for Ros to join us.

"A super-ugly amulet she feeds blood to." Ros joins us and puts his back against the wall so he can keep his focus on Owen. "I take it she didn't have it when she was here before?"

"I was productive in my brief escape from Hartford Cove." I hug the journals tighter. "Just not productive enough to avoid everyone after me."

## GIVE ME MY GUN

A s we exit the elevator, a noise comes from the kitchen, followed by Barron's voice. "I wasn't sure where you wanted me to put everything, so the bags are in the entryway for now. This file looks pretty important, though, so I brought it to the kitchen."

Ros looks at me with suspicion. "Important file? I don't remember packing one of those."

I shrug helplessly. "It's something I picked up on the way."

"Picked up from *where*, exactly?" he demands. "And please don't say the clinic."

Since any other answer would be a lie, I choose silence.

"Rowe! *Please* tell me you didn't use our trip to see my sister's body as a way to steal important documents from my organization!" Ros begs. "I might be able to move past the kidnapping thing, but espionage?"

"If it helps, I didn't volunteer to go with you with any ulterior motive beyond emotional support," I say in a quiet voice. "The espionage just happened."

Throwing up his hands with a frustrated hiss, Ros storms ahead of me into the kitchen. "Where's the file?"

I thrust the journals into Owen's arms before I rush after him. "Wait! I haven't read it yet!"

"And you're not going to!" Ros snatches the thick folder off the table. "This isn't a game, Rowe! You can't just go around stealing classified documents! Did you think it would be okay, just because you're my mate and I'll forgive you for it? And when did you have the chance? The only time you were alone at the clinic was when I spoke to my father."

"Your security sucks!" I grab the folder, but Ros refuses to let it go. "And I have every right to this file!"

He yanks it out of my grasp, holding it over his head. "Being my mate does not give you the right to—"

"It's about my dad!" I scramble up onto a chair and leap onto his back. "I have more right to it than anyone else!"

Ros holds the folder out of reach and reads the name at the top. "Your father was a rogue huntsman?"

"That's what I've been saying!" I yank on his luscious curls. "Milo Branning was my father, who *your* father ordered Bryant to murder! All the information is in that file!"

"Okay, timeout!" Ros reaches back to grab one of my fists, completely enfolding it in his hand. "Get down."

I tighten my legs around him. "No! I obviously have the advantageous position here, so I'm the one making demands. And my first demand is that you—"

I yelp as Ros turns to rubber, his body contorting unnaturally, and he snatches me off his back to dangle me onehanded in the air, his fist clenched in the front of my shirt.

He gives me a toothy grin. "Who has the advantageous position?"

Gripping his wrists, I slam both feet into his stomach, making the unicorns on my sneakers light up.

Air rushes out of his lungs, and his hold on me loosens.

With a wiggle, I slide out of my shirt and snatch the folder from his slack fingers before racing around the kitchen island and using it as a barrier between us.

Barron chuckles. "I could have warned you about that one."

"Weren't you just telling me not to underestimate Rowe?" Owen adds as he drops the journals onto the counter. "Even I would've known that was a bad idea."

Barron thunks jars of peanut butter and honey onto the counter beside me. "Is this how vampires mate? It's really not that different from what shifters do, huh?"

"Enough from the peanut gallery." I clutch the folder closer to my chest and glare at Ros. "I may be falling in love with you, but don't think I won't kick your ass again if you try to take this folder before I read it."

Dropping my abandoned shirts to the floor, Ros rubs a hand over his chiseled abs. "Does calling a timeout mean nothing to you?"

"Nope." I lift my chemise and shove the file into my pants, where I should have left it to begin with, before dropping my shirt back in place to conceal it. "The only time I accept truce is when I'm at a disadvantage, and that was clearly not the case."

"Clearly." Ros eyes the front of my shirt. "Is that how you snuck the file out in the first place?"

I pat the solid mass, which feels a bit like armor. "Honestly, with shitty security like that, you guys are just begging to be robbed."

Barron whistles between his teeth. "Maybe not the best time to remind him of that."

I nod in understanding. "Scratch that. I clearly possess advanced, witchy, cloaking technology that allowed me to escape with the file."

Barron holds his fist out. "Well done."

I bump my knuckles against his. "Thanks."

Ros shakes his head and drops into one of the kitchen chairs. "Are you *all* crazy here?"

"No, only Ruh Roh here gets to claim that title." Barron ruffles my hair before grabbing a bag of bread off the counter behind him. "Do vampires eat solid food? I'm making peanut butter and honey sandwiches." Ros scrapes a hand over his face. "Yes, vampires eat solid food."

"Ros is actually an amazing chef." I risk leaving the safety of the kitchen island to walk to the fridge and fetch a pitcher of lemonade. "He makes the best waffles I've ever eaten."

"The best, you say?" Barron glances at Ros. "Don't let Jesse hear you saying that."

"Do I smell a waffle cookoff in our future?" My stomach rumbles greedily. "Is Jesse coming over tonight? We could have waffles for dinner."

"I thought we'd order pizza," Barron counters. "We have a lot of translating to do tonight."

"Maybe for breakfast then." My eyes drift toward the stairs. "Tris would be sad to wake up and find out he missed out on judging a waffle contest."

Barron gives my shoulder a sympathetic squeeze. "That he would."

Owen sets four glasses on the counter and takes the heavy pitcher of lemonade from me. "How about you get the plates instead?"

I return to the cabinets and lift down four regular-size plates, as well as a serving platter, because it looks like Barron plans to turn all the bread in the bag into sandwiches.

Ros watches us work together to prep lunch before his focus settles on Barron. "Are you another mate?"

That makes Barron laugh so hard that he sets the butter knife down to clutch at his sides.

I thump him on the shoulder. "It's not that funny. I'm a catch."

"You're a handful, and not one I need in my home life." Barron wipes tears from the corners of his eyes. "No, my mate will be here later tonight. As well as Abony. The five of us called ourselves the brigade. We used to pal around with Rowe when her parents brought her to visit on summer break, back before..." "Before my mom was killed in the woods out back by a rogue werewolf," I fill in when he trails off. "I thought it killed Owen, too." I pause in the process of gathering napkins. "That was the first time I saw the paranormal. But I didn't know what it was at the time. After that, I started seeing crazy things everywhere I looked, so I was put on medication to help with hallucinations, and dad stopped letting me go outside. We stopped coming here to visit my grandma. I didn't return until after my dad died."

Silence fills the kitchen before Ros clears his throat. "I don't understand. If Tris is your mate, then how did you not know about the paranormal until only two months ago?"

I grab the napkins and walk to the table, keeping it between me and Ros in case he gets any funny ideas about trying to take the folder back. "You know how I told you I met Tris at the pound?"

He nods slowly, the glimmer of realization in his eyes.

"I adopted him as a dog to be my service animal. You see, Tris was a very bad boy and made some questionable relationship decisions that resulted in a witch cursing him by turning him into a dog." I take the chair across from Ros. "I didn't know until the first quarter moon that he was really a human trapped in a dog's body. The first time he shifted, I thought it was just more of my crazy hallucinations. It took a lot of convincing on his side before I believed him. But he was the only hallucination that ever turned out to be real, as far as I was aware. And he had never met any paranormals, either. Well, aside from the witch who cursed him. So, while I was pretty sure magic existed in some capacity, it still didn't occur to me that shapeshifters, werewolves, and vampires also lived among us. And it certainly never occurred to me that I was a paranormal."

Ros leans forward on his elbows, his mind working. "So, Tris wasn't a wolf shifter before he was cursed?"

I shake my head. "No, just an unlucky, two-timing, manwhore who cheated on the wrong person." "Then how did he become a wolf shifter?" Ros asks, trying to put the puzzle pieces together.

"Well, that's an interesting story, actually." Eagerly, I lean forward on my elbows, mirroring Ros's pose. "First, I accidentally turned him into a goose when we found the Wendall journals under Haut's bed."

"Haut, who used to be the Alpha?" Ros asks for clarification.

I nod. "Yeah, Tris and I were following this riddle my grandma left me, and we found the journals. I was flipping through one and tried to read a spell out loud, and *poof*, Tris turned into a goose. Which apparently annoyed Haut so much that he finally gave in and agreed to show me some advanced magic, and we broke the curse. Unfortunately, Tris reverted to being a dog. But then on *human night*, Owen came over and helped me find the spell to fix Tris's curse. And that's how he became a wolf shifter."

Ros leans back in his chair, his arms dropping to dangle at his sides. "That's a lot to take in."

"You learn to just roll with it." Barron sets a platter piled high with sandwiches in the middle of the table. "Otherwise, it will just drive you crazy. This is how I'm so calm right now, even though there's a vampire within the protected borders of Hartford Cove. And not just a vampire, but one of the huntsmen who have terrorized our people for decades."

Ros scowls at him. "We don't terrorize wolf shifters. We only hunt down rogue paranormals who have become a danger to society."

"Is that right?" Owen thunks down a glass of lemonade in front of Ros. "Then how do you explain the three terrified women who sought sanctuary here a few hours ago, after being chased by a huntsman?"

"Wait a second." Slamming my hands onto the table, I thrust to my feet. "Is one of them named Venessa?"

It could be anyone really, but it would be a huge coincidence that Leon was hunting three she-wolves, and three

*different* she-wolves were now in town seeking sanctuary.

Owen turns to me in surprise. "How did you know?"

"Where are they staying?" I demand.

"We didn't have a house available, so they're staying at my place," Owen says slowly. "Why?"

"The fuck they are! Give me back my gun, Ros," I demand. "I'm going to kill those bitches."

#### KNOW YOUR ROWE

O wen catches me before I can rush around the table and snatch my gun from Ros's holster. "Whoa there, spunky. Take a couple of deep breaths before you go off trying to kill people."

Turning my anger on him, I jab my finger against his chest. "And you, Owen Hartford, how *dare* you let those conniving she-wolves into your home? I'm not even gone for a month, and you're already shacking up with the first longlegged blond with triple D boobs who struts into town shaking her ass?"

"Oh, I wish I had made popcorn," Barron breathes.

"Hartford Cove is a sanctuary for wolf shifters." Owen tries to calm me. "And how do you know Venessa?"

My chin snaps back. "Oh, so you're on a first-name basis with her?"

"I'm on a first-name basis with *everyone* in the town," Owen reminds me in a reasonable tone.

Too bad for him, I'm not in a mood to be reasoned with where Venessa and her skanky friends are concerned.

I grab the front of Owen's shirt. "Tell me now, did any of them touch you in the no-no place?"

Ros, eating a sandwich, chokes on it and pounds a fist against his chest.

"The only one who gets to touch me in the no-no place is you, Rowe." Owen rubs my arms. "My *mate*, the love of my life, and the crazy woman I adore."

"That string of words may have moved me before you let those hos move into your house!" I give Owen a hard shake. "Mark my word, they're going to try to mount you, and there are three of them, and you're not that strong. They will hold you down and have their wicked way—"

The peanut butter and honey sandwich cuts me off as Ros shoves it into my mouth. "Eat some food, Rowe. You're sounding a little hangry."

"This would be your opening to tell her you don't currently live at your house," Barron adds. "And say your piece quickly, because she's a fast chewer."

I glare furiously at Owen, jaw working at a speed fueled by my anger and only hindered slightly when the peanut butter sticks to the roof of my mouth, making it difficult to swallow.

Owen leans down to press his forehead against mine. "I took the room next to Tris. I've been living here since you and Haut left. It didn't feel right to leave the old house abandoned, especially with the sanctuary downstairs."

I finally choke down my sandwich. "Fine, I forgive you."

"Not that I did anything wrong that requires forgiveness," Owen says sternly. "But I'm glad you're seeing reason now."

"Definitely seeing reason." I wipe crumbs from my lips. "So much reason I'm seeing right now."

"Good." Owen cautiously releases me, the fool.

I launch myself at Ros. "Now, give me that gun."

In a deft move, Ros catches my arm, spins me around, and plops me onto his lap, one leg curling around mine to lock me in place while one arm traps both of mine to my side. "I could have told you letting her go was a mistake. Guess you're not as good at handling Rowe as you thought."

"No one needs to handle Rowe," I say, trying to wiggle my way free. "Rowe can handle herself. And if Ros won't give Rowe back her gun, Rowe will just go get the one loaded with real silver that's down at the sheriff's office." "It's good to know that your murder instincts were real," Ros murmurs into my ear as he lifts a sandwich and presses it to my lips. "Now, have another bite of yum yum food."

"I don't need yum yum food, I need—" The rest of my words are muffled by the sandwich Ros shoves into my mouth.

"That's a good girl." He pets my head. "Such a good Rowe."

Barron slaps the table as he bursts out into laughter. "I see now why Rowe has all these mates. There's no way one person could contain her."

The comment earns him a death glare as I angrily munch on my sandwich.

With a wary eye on me, Owen settles back into his chair. "As the pack Alpha, I'm sure you're aware I can't just let you go around trying to kill people under my protection, Rowe. But if you calmly tell me your grievances, I'll take it under consideration."

I wiggle an arm free and snatch up Ros's lemonade, washing down the gummy bite of peanut butter sandwich. "Venessa and her gal pals tried to molest Tris. Then they tried to beat me up when I ran into them again earlier today, just because I defended my territory and kicked Venessa between the legs. She obviously can't discipline her nether region on her own."

Ros stills beneath me. "Wait, earlier today? Are these the same wolf shifters Leon was tracking at the mall?"

"Seems likely." I angrily rip apart the rest of Ros's sandwich before he gets any more ideas about feeding me. "They probably hit on somebody else's mate, too. Those girls don't know how to listen when a man says no."

Ros pop to his feet, lifting me with him, since he still has an arm wrapped around my waist. "Those are rogue wolves. There's a bounty on their heads for attacking humans."

"Yeah," I agree, sneaking my hand toward the gun only to have Ros slap it away. "They're obviously serial molesters." Owen rises to his feet as well. "I'll need to see proof that they've harmed someone before *any* action is taken within Hartford Cove."

I point two fingers at my eyes. "I saw the proof. The proof is me."

Owen let out a heavy sigh as he looks at me. "Female wolf shifters hitting on male wolf shifters is not grounds for murder." His brows lift. "Unless they actually attacked Tris?"

I cross my arms over my chest. "They shoved me."

Owen looks at Ros. "And what's your proof?"

"Leon said he had a call about them." I feel Ros's eyes shift to me. "But Leon is apparently an unreliable source of information."

"No!" I protest as Ros sits back down, settling me back on his lap. "They're evil. I'm telling you, at the very least, we should throw them in the clink."

"If we put every she-wolf who hit on a male-wolf in jail, half the town would be serving time." Owen sits back down as well. "Our species has a voracious appetite, one that's usually indulged in until they find their mates."

"Ugh!" I throw my head back against Ros's shoulder. "Stop going on about your town's orgy festival."

"Orgy festival?" Ros questions, curiosity in his voice.

Snatching a sandwich off the platter, I twist and shove it into his mouth. "No orgy festival for you."

"It's a yearly gathering of the nomadic wolf shifters," Barron explains helpfully. "They come to Hartford Cove to rest, rejuvenate, and yes, there's some rowdiness and a few matings always come of it. Some choose to stay in town after the festival, but most leave, sometimes taking with them a few of the young ones who want more adventure in their lives than what they'll get from this small town."

Swallowing, Ros reaches around me to grab the half-empty glass of lemonade and takes a sip. "So, wait, this entire town is wolf shifters?"

"Oh, probably shouldn't have told you that." Barron cringes. "At least, not if you're planning to leave."

Ros shakes his head. "I've never heard of anything like this before."

Owen's expression hardens. "Don't lie. We're well aware of the huntsmen's efforts to locate our town."

"No, I swear." Ros sets the glass down. "There's been no mention of a wolf shifter town."

"Since Rowe's father was sent to hunt down Hartford Cove and Rowe's family, I find that hard to believe." Owen's hands clench into fists. "The only reason he didn't report our location is that he fell in love with Rowe's mother and gave up the cause."

My lips part on an indrawn breath. I assumed that was the case but was never sure. "How do you know that?"

Owen's gaze jumps to me. "It's in the town council records. After we found your father's weapon hidden here, I looked up the meeting notes from that time. They were mates, which is the only reason the council allowed his presence within the borders. He willingly swore an oath to your grandmother to keep the town location a secret, and while it doesn't say for a fact, I believe there was also a spell involved that ensured his silence."

"So, you're saying that Wendall women have been trying to create mate bonds with vampires since at least my mother's time." I pat Ros's thigh. "Or possibly for multiple generations? And they just didn't know because they never left town?"

"It would be rather sad if the same story kept trying to play out over and over again." Ros leans in to nuzzle my cheek. "Though, if every Wendall woman was as aggravating as you, I agree with Barron that there's a reason you would need multiple mates. If you only had one, he might smother you in your sleep for a little peace."

"Hey!" I smack him on the shoulder, then turn toward Barron and throw a wadded-up piece of sandwich at him. "Stop laughing! You're finding way too much amusement in this situation!"

A tug comes at my waistband before Ros lifts the folder into the air. "Maybe this will have some answers in it."

"Thief!" I leap up, reaching for the folder.

Ros stands, using his superior height to keep it out of reach. "Just let me look at it first, Rowe. I promise not to hide anything important from you, but these files usually have photos in them."

I freeze, my arm still in the air. "What kind of photos?"

"Proof of death," he says gently.

Slowly, I pull my hand away. "I've seen my dad's dead body before."

"You know the only way to kill a vampire," he says in that same gentle tone. "I don't want that image burned into your mind."

"Promise you won't hide anything important from me?" I ask with a tremble in my voice.

He holds out a hand with his pinky poking into the air. "I promise."

Slowly, I curl my pinky around his, sealing the bargain.

Ros may be angry with me, and he may still leave, but I know in my heart that once he gives his word, he won't break it.

After all, he's a better person than me.

## ANY WITCH WOULD DO

••• V ou know, when we were forced to take German in school, I never thought I'd use it to translate old spell books," Abony says from where she sits with Barron, Jesse, and Owen at the kitchen table.

"Right?" Jesse shakes his head. "Never thought I'd use it for more than recipes."

"You could read some of the books I bring home," Barron grumbles.

"Not everyone is a nerd like you, love," Jesse says without looking up from the journal he's translating.

We divided the journals between Owen, Barron, Jesse, and Abony. To go through them as quickly as possible, they're first creating a glossary of the spells in each one and numbering the pages to get a broader idea of what generations of Wendall witches had created.

They started with the newer ones that are already translated, but cross-referencing revealed that they weren't complete. Whoever started the process picked-and-chose what they wanted. An hour into working, it became apparent that many of the journals have crossover spells and different translations that don't always overlap. With that discovery, I wanted to dismantle the books and create stacks of likeminded spellwork, but my suggestion was universally vetoed.

Apparently, destroying ancient heirlooms is a big no-no. But the current method screams disorganization, which says something if even I think it's too chaotic. Ros sits slightly away from the wolf shifters. While Barron and Owen had gotten used to him, there had been more growling and hissing when the others arrived. I had uncovered one of the sitting chairs from the formal living room and a TV tray for him to use, so he's still part of the team, but with a little space.

While the others work to create glossaries of the Wendall journals, he attempts to use his smattering of German to track down the sunlight spell. Owen offered his laptop to help in the matter, which Ros uses to look up words he doesn't understand. It doesn't help that a lot of that book is in an older style of German than what he learned in school, so it's slow going on his side.

Since I don't speak any foreign languages, I've been relegated to making sure the lemonade keeps flowing and ordering more pizzas when the ones initially delivered run out.

I walk over to Ros and lift the fresh pitcher of lemonade I made. "Would you care for a top-off?"

He gives a distracted shake of his head. "I've had more than enough lemonade."

I cradle the heavy pitcher against my stomach. "Should I make something different? Maybe something with less sugar?"

His hazel eyes lift to mine. "I'm sorry, Rowe, but you're distracting me right now."

Shoulders hunching, I back away. "Sorry, I'll leave you alone."

I turn and shuffle over to the table, holding up my lemonade. "Who's thirsty?"

Murmurs in the negative go around the table, no one looking up from their work.

I try not to let it bother me, but it's hard feeling completely useless in this situation. If no one wants my lemonade, then I have nothing left to offer. Haut made it sound like my returning to Hartford Cove would fix everything. That Tris needed *me*. But all Tris needed was a witch. Anyone magical would do, and they'd even be a better choice. I try to shake off the depression settling over me. I don't care who helps Tris as long as he wakes up. Hell, if Venessa could cure Tris by rubbing her triple Ds on his face, I'd let her. I just want to hear him laughing and see him smiling again.

Tears sting my eyes, and I set down the useless pitcher of lemonade before leaving the kitchen.

My steps feel heavy and slow as I walk up the stairs to Tris's room.

He lies deathly still, the machines and tubes attached to him the only thing keeping him alive. I sit on the edge of his bed and take his hand, worried at how frail it feels in mine. Tris had always been larger-than-life. Not even being trapped in a dog's body slowed him down. He would hate knowing that a silly fall off the top of a hotel did him in.

I lift his hand to my lips and kiss his knuckles. "You need to hurry and wake up. You're being a very bad boy right now. Don't think I won't follow through with turning you into a goose."

A soft chuckle comes from the door as Owen steps into the room. "I'm not sure that's the threat you think it is. I got the impression that Tris liked his time as a goose."

Laughing thickly, I set Tris's hand back on the bed and wipe the tears off my cheeks. "That's because he was as silly as a goose."

"That he was." Owen walks over to sit on the edge of the bed and takes my hand. "We're going to figure this out, Rowe."

Sniffling, I nod, though I don't have the same level of confidence. "Yeah, we have a great team working on it."

He squeezes my fingers. "You're part of that, too."

"Am I, though?" I shake my head and scrub my hand over my face once more. "Just ignore me. I'm being stupid."

"You're not being stupid, so stop thinking that." He touches the ring on my finger. "Tris has one just like this."

I give him a wobbly smile. "Yeah, we got them right before—" The words choke off on a sob. "This is all my fault. If we had just stayed here, or had come back when Tris suggested it, none of this would have happened. I keep trying to blame Haut, but it was my choice to run away. I abandoned you guys. I abandoned Hartford Cove and that pregnant woman who just wanted to have a baby." Stricken, I look up at Owen. "Is she still alive? Is her baby okay?"

"Oh, honey, yes, her baby is fine. You blessed her, remember?" Owen pulls me into his arms. "Yes, you made some rash decisions, but none of this is your fault, you hear me? My issues with Haut were always going to come to a head, and it's not your fault that seeing him go after Tris, then attack me, sent you running. How you found out about wolf shifters and your heritage was the worst possible way, and keeping you in the dark about everything didn't help. You've been doing the best you could with the limited knowledge you were given. *No.* You've done *better* than could be expected of anyone thrust so suddenly into this world. I'm surprised you didn't run sooner."

I laugh against his shoulder. "I was broke, and my car was running on fumes. There was no way for me to run."

"That's partly my fault." Owen presses a kiss to my temple. "I should have told you about your inheritance sooner and made sure you had cash and your car back the same day you arrived. I played a huge part in making you feel like you didn't have any options. While I'd also like to blame Haut, selfishly, I wanted you to stay with me. Not because Hartford Cove needs you, but because *I* need you."

"I don't blame you." I rub my dripping nose against his shoulder. "I wouldn't want to lose me, either."

"Brat." He kisses my temple once more before he sets me back from him. "Now, come downstairs. I saw some empty glasses that need filling."

I glare at him through the water in my eyes. "Are you enjoying treating me like your lemonade wench?"

"I'm not *not* enjoying it," he admits, then laughs when I slap him on the arm. Standing, he holds out his hand. "Come on, wench. Your break is over."

When we go back downstairs, I discover that there are, indeed, some empty glasses to be filled. *All* the glasses, in fact. And the pitcher sits suspiciously empty on the counter. The effort to make me feel useful brings a smile to my lips as I bustle about the kitchen, preparing a new pitcher, then go around the table, refilling glasses.

"Finally," Jesse groans. "I've been dying of thirst."

"Sure, you have." I tweak his beard before moving on to Barron and Abony.

"Rowe, are you sure you got the goose transformation spell from one of these journals?" Abony asks when I stop next to her.

"Yeah, but Haut said it wasn't actually meant to turn Tris into a goose." I hug the pitcher as I think back. "There was a tiny translation of it that said something about setting someone trapped free."

Barron's head lifts. "To Set Free A Trapped Spirit?"

I nod eagerly and hurry over to peer down at his notebook. "Yeah, that sounds right."

Frowning, Barron flips back a few pages and skims over the spell. "This is one of the spells that was already translated, but the person made some questionable language choices. German has evolved a bit since the original was written. Both spells, though, say this is supposed to release lost souls to the afterlife." He glances up at me. "There's nothing in here about transformation or geese."

I rub the side of my nose. "Yeah, that's what Haut said. He said I could have killed Tris, but I didn't have the moon or any of the ingredients. I was just sounding out the spell. I didn't think it would actually do anything."

When I lean over to look at the spell, Barron quickly closes the book, leaving his finger inside to mark the page. "I don't think it's a good idea to try to re-create whatever you did

the first time. There's no saying what could happen if you don't sound it out exactly the same way that you did before."

My shoulders slump.

"It's not a goose," Ros calls out, "but I'm pretty sure this spell would turn Tris back into a wolf."

We all turn to look at him as he stands and joins us at the dining table, staying away from Jesse and Abony as he offers the open book to Owen.

As Owen reads the spell, I bounce on my toes with excitement. "It would make sense that the transformation spell would be in that book. The founder story says that the witch in the woods gave the people of the village the ability to shift in order to overcome sickness and the threat of death during winter. It was a boon offered by the first wolf shifter after my ancestor saved her and her cubs during a storm."

Hope blooms inside me as I wait for Owen's verdict, then plummets when his brows pinch and he shakes his head. "It *might* work."

My heart sinks. "But it might not?"

His lips purse as he reads over the spell again. "I don't know. The spell is specifically to transform a human into a wolf shifter, and Tris isn't human. It might be like pouring more lemonade into a pitcher that already has lemonade in it. Adding more doesn't change anything. It's still lemonade."

My bottom lip trembles, and I catch it between my teeth, biting hard to fight back the tears.

"But we can at least try, right?" Barron looks from Owen to me. "There's no harm in at least trying."

Owen meets my eyes. "Of course, we'll at least try. And if it doesn't work, we'll just keep looking for a different spell that will. We won't stop until Tris is up and walking around again."

I pull back my shoulders. "What do we need to do?"

"We'll need the hair of a wolf shifter, the blood of a witch, a few herbs and oils... I'm pretty sure we have everything in stock." Uncertainty fills his voice. "Tris will have to ingest the potion, but we can put it through his feeding tube."

"Alright, then." Jesse pushes up from the table. "Give Barron and me the list of herbs and oils. We'll go collect them from the sanctuary. Abony, find that pot we used last time. No sense in destroying another perfectly good stock pot. Owen, start translating the spell, so Rowe knows what to do."

Ros shifts from one foot to the other. "Is there anything I can do?"

Owen looks from Ros back to the spell, hesitating for a moment before he nods. "It says Rowe will have to be dressed in the purest linens. I'm sure Mrs. Wendall had something like that. Can you go guys go look?"

"Awe." Abony pouts. "And here I was hoping this was going to be another naked spell."

Ros's brows shoot up. "Naked spell?"

Abony nods eagerly. "We had to slather Tris and Rowe in the stinkiest gunk known to man, and then they had to dance around naked in the moonlight."

Barron shudders. "God, I hope this spell is less stinky."

Jesse pauses next to his mate. "There's no dancing in this one, is there?"

Owen shakes his head. "No, thank god."

Ros glances around the room. "Why? What's wrong with dancing?"

"Nothing," Barron tells him. "If you have any sense of coordination."

"Which our girl Rowe does not," Abony says.

"Complete disaster at dancing," Jesse adds.

I glare at Owen. "Anything you'd like to add?"

Wise man that he is, Owen shakes his head.

With a glare at the rest of them, I grab Ros's hand and head toward the stairs.

As soon as we're out of sight, I whisper, "I'm really a graceful butterfly."

"She's a stampeding rhino!" Jesse yells from the kitchen.

"Barron says your waffles suck!" I yell back.

Ros chuckles. "I'm pretty sure he didn't say that."

I pat his arm. "He will once he tries yours."

"It's lively here," Ros says. "Is it always like this?"

I shrug. "When I was little, I spent most of my time here running around town. Grandma would make sandwiches and desserts that we'd scarf down on the porch before heading back out on another adventure. When I returned a couple of months ago, grandma had already passed away. I missed seeing her again by nearly a year."

"Sorry to hear that," Ros murmurs.

I smile sadly. "The brigade welcomed me back with open arms, like no time had passed."

At the top of the stairs, I lead Ros down the hallway to my grandma's room, hesitating for only a moment before pushing the door open. Even after a year, it still smells like the memories I have of her, and none of the furniture has changed.

I lead Ros over to her closet, and we quietly rifle through the options.

Settling on a pale-yellow nightshirt, Ros holds it out in front of me, and it falls well past my knees. "I take it you didn't get your height from your grandmother?"

I roll my eyes at him. "I like to imagine my grandpa was a very short man, because neither of my parents were."

He drapes the nightshirt over his arm. "You never met your grandpa?"

"No, and I don't remember anyone ever talking about him. My mom might have been a byproduct of one of the summer orgy festivals." I reach for the hem of my chemise and pull it over my head, then laugh when Ros quickly turns his back to me. "Seriously? You had your face between my legs yesterday."

Without looking back, he holds out the nightshirt. "That was different."

I pause with my thumbs in my waistband. "Because my blood was too tempting? Is that the only reason you—"

"Because I thought you were *mine* last night," he cuts in, pain in his voice. "Because, last night, I thought it was the beginning of *our* story together. But now I find out you have other mates and an entire life with friends and family. That changes things. And I can't even say for sure that you were with me because you wanted to be or because you had ulterior motives." He shakes the nightshirt at me. "Just get dressed. I'm going back downstairs."

He barely waits for me to take the shirt before he strides out of the closet.

Feeling helpless, I pull the shirt over my head, then finish undressing, leaving only my cotton underwear on. Those stay in place. We may need a witch's blood, but I don't think Owen meant from my period.

Barefoot, I pad back downstairs.

Ros isn't in the kitchen when I enter, but I spot him through the window, sitting on the steps to the porch.

Abony and Owen carefully don't look at me when I walk in, Abony fussing with the giant stock pot on the stove while Owen focuses on translating the spell.

I drop into the chair beside Owen. "Can you all just pretend you didn't hear everything?"

"Don't know what you're talking about," Abony says.

"Your body is yours to do with as you please," Owen murmurs. "And if Ros really is your mate, I know how the draw is nearly impossible to resist."

I throw my head back. "Why are you always so understanding?"

His foot nudges mine under the table. "Probably because I've had my entire life to learn that, no matter how much I want something, circumstances can always dictate otherwise."

Leaning over, I rest my head on his shoulder. "You're too good for this world, Owen Hartford."

One corner of his lips tilts up. "Not too good for you, though, right?"

"Never." I turn my head and bite his shoulder gently. "Have I mentioned yet that I'm really glad you're not dead? Again?"

He sets his pen down and cups the back of my head, bringing my lips to his. "I'm glad I'm not dead, too."

He kisses me gently, like we have all the time in the world, which we do if I stay in Hartford Cove.

With Owen as Alpha again, everything is back to the way it should be. But I can't stop my heart from aching for Ros, nor the yearning that fills me for Haut, no matter how much I try to fight it. And then there's Tris, who I'd burn the world down to protect.

Owen pulls back to rest his forehead against mine. "You don't have to decide anything tonight. Or even tomorrow. Let's just focus on one thing at a time. Tris is our first priority."

I nod in agreement. "Let's wake Tris up."

# A STORY FOR A STORY

C ontrary to everyone's hopes, the potion we make smells horrid. Just not so bad that it drives us from the house.

The windows get opened, though, to allow some of the stink to escape. It's probably good that Tris isn't awake while he has to consume this, or he might not have been able to keep it down.

"I can't believe our ancestors willingly drank this." Jesse shudders. "I think I'd rather die in the middle of winter."

"You mentioned the founder's story," Ros says from his chair in the kitchen. He had rejoined us when Barron and Jesse returned from the sanctuary, loaded up with the ingredients. "Can I hear it?"

Everyone glances at Owen, who shrugs. "I can't see any harm in it. Rowe, would you like to do the honors?"

I tuck my feet up under my voluminous nightshirt, wrap my arms around my knees as I close my eyes, and recount the founder's story for Ros.

My grandma had told it to me so many times that I know it by heart, the cadence of the words drilled into my memory. When she told me the story every summer, I thought it was a fairytale, like Little Red Riding Hood, only cooler. I hadn't realized until coming back here as an adult that it was the story of the town's actual history.

Ros twitches a couple times during the telling at the parts that overlap the story he had told me, only from a different point of view. But he remains silent throughout, even during the point in the story where his ancestors slaughtered my ancestors.

When I get to the part about the first Wendall witch casting the barrier over Hartford Cove to hide it from the rest of the world, his eyes widen in shock.

At the end, I prop my chin on my knees. "If you like, I can take you to see Nesse's statue later. We passed it on the way in, but of course, you didn't see it."

"Hard to see anything from inside the trunk," he agrees, though the words lack sting.

Barron joins us, half a slice of cold pizza in his hand. "What about you? What's the story of how the huntsmen were founded?"

Ros's fingers stroke over the journal in his hands. "A lot like yours, but with some differences, of course. "

Barron dips his head. "Recountings of battles are rarely the same when told from both sides. Let us hear yours."

With his brows pinched together, Ros tells the story, ignoring the scoffs from Jesse and Abony at the parts where the Wendall witch had fallen for the huntsman.

Barron and Owen stay quiet, Barron because he loves books and understands that stories have deeper meanings than what the words say, and Owen because he's a true leader and the town historian.

When Ros finishes his version of the events, Abony shakes her head in denial. "That's just ridiculous. If any of that were true, we wouldn't be a town of wolf shifters."

"I don't know," Barron muses. "His story may hold merit."

Abony stares at him in shock. "How can you say that? The proof is in our town."

"It's odd, though, don't you think?" Barron frowns as he pulls his thoughts together. "Sure, a few people might want to become wolf shifters. But an entire village? Don't get me wrong, I wouldn't want to be anything else, but I was born this way. It's not like everyone who becomes a wolf shifter wants to be that way." He gives the potion on the stove a significant look. "Do you really think Tris wanted to be turned into a wolfdog?"

"I can guarantee he did *not*," I cut in before Abony can speak. "He had two years to adjust to being a canine before we met, but I can guarantee it's not something he would've voluntarily embraced."

Abony shakes her head. "That was different. Tris was cursed, and he could only be human twice a month. If he had had control—"

"He still wouldn't have chosen it," I tell her. "I wouldn't choose it, either. I could do with less of the crazy witch in my life. I was happier being human."

"You were never human," Abony snaps, making me flinch.

"No, I suppose I wasn't." I hug my knees tighter. "But I wish I was. Life would be a lot easier if I were just human. If werewolves didn't exist, my mom would be alive, Owen wouldn't be cursed, and you guys wouldn't be in hiding. Ros's people wouldn't have to live underground. There wouldn't be this stupid feud. People could choose who they wanted to be with instead of some mystical connection forcing them. Being human sounds peaceful."

With an angry glare, Abony throws the spoon into the stockpot and stomps out of the kitchen.

Silence fills the kitchen before Jesse clears his throat. "I think we're ready for the strainer."

I slide off my chair, the tiles of the kitchen floor cold beneath my bare feet and walk over to grab the sterilized beaker and mesh strainer they had brought up from the sanctuary. This is where my special Wendall magic comes into play. I'm supposed to speak the spell while putting the potion into the beaker. The original spell called for a vial, but we don't have one of those, and I don't think it matters except for the aesthetics.

Once I settle the strainer into place, Owen holds the translated spell in front of my face, and I read the words while

Jesse carefully dumps the boiling liquid into the beaker. I try not to flinch or be distracted by thoughts of getting scalded. Instead, I keep my eyes fixed on the paper as I repeat the spell over and over until the last bit of the potion has been transferred.

Carefully, I lift the strainer, removing the solid bits, and set it in the sink. The condensed liquid fills the beaker threequarters of the way. The perfect amount.

When Owen holds out a knife, Ros lurches to his feet. "Whoa there. What's with the knife?"

Owen grimaces. "We need a lot of blood."

I've been avoiding thinking about that part. The beaker needs to be filled to the top line, and my blood makes up the rest of the liquid.

Ros hurries over. "How much blood?"

"Why?" Jesse demands. "Are we going to have an issue with you vamping out on us?"

Ros gives him an irritated look. "No. I'm concerned because I fed on Rowe yesterday." He snatches the spell from Owen's hand and skims over it before he looks at me. "I'm not sure this is a good idea right now."

I take the knife. "Well, it's happening whether or not it's a good idea."

The knife vanishes from my hand and clicks onto the counter behind Ros. "This is a lot of blood. It could put a strain on your body."

"Being on those machines is putting a strain on Tris's body." I glare up at Ros. "There are no other witches in Hartford Cove, so my blood is going into this potion, even if you don't approve."

"Why are you always so eager to bleed?" Ros demands in a frustrated growl before he lifts my wrist to his mouth.

"What do you think you're doing?" Jesse demands, taking a step closer.

I hold up a hand to stop him. "Ros is safer than the knife. And I trust him."

Gaze locked on mine, Ros's mouth opens, revealing his fangs. My pulse leaps, the memory of him penetrating my body last night filling me with heat. His eyes hold mine, his pupils dilating as if he, too, remembers.

Slowly, his fangs sink into my wrist, and pleasure rushes through me. As my legs give out, he catches me around the waist and holds me upright against his body as he positions my bleeding wrist over the beaker.

Mind cloudy with desire, I watch my blood drip into the murky liquid. "That's the good stuff."

Cursing, Jesse steps away from me. "Can you tone down your hormones just a bit?"

A foolish grin spreads over my face. "No can do. Rowe be horny."

"Apologies," Ros murmurs, though the hard press of his cock against my lower back says he's not that sorry. "The bite only has two options, either pleasure or pain."

"Rowe no like pain." I wiggle my ass against him. "This is way better than the knife."

"Stop that," Ros growls against my ear, and I force myself to be still.

As soon as the liquid in the beaker rises to the line, Ros lifts my wrist in his mouth once more and drags his tongue over the puncture wounds, eliciting another thrill of pleasure.

When he holds my wrist out for inspection, the wound is completely gone. "She just needs a minute or two for the effects to wear off."

Owen leans closer to inspect my unblemished skin. "That's amazing. Is that why she was begging you to lick Tris?"

Ros drops my arm and wraps me in his embrace, holding me tight against his tempting body while he waits for me to cool down. "Yes. Unfortunately, it only works on surface wounds." I lean my head back against his chest and look at Owen with wide eyes. "He refused to lick my feet, too."

"Okay, I didn't want to know that about you guys." Throwing up his hands, Jesse strides over to join Barron at the table.

Not that the additional distance will take him out of hearing range, but at least he can pretend to ignore us.

Owen looks down at my bare feet with concern. "What was wrong with her feet?"

Clumsily, I slap a hand over his mouth. "Shh. Don't worry about it. I'm all better now."

Gently, but firmly, he pulls my hand down to give me a stern stare. "Once Tris is awake, you're going to sit down and tell me everything that happened."

"Me, too," Ros adds. "The full story this time. Not the redacted version."

"I'd rather be tortured all over again." My eyes shift to the beaker as the murky water turns pale blue, and the stink dissipates. "I think the potion's ready."

Turning away from me, Owen pulls a syringe from his pocket and rips open the package. Depressing the plunger, he sticks the long needle into the beaker and slowly draws a vial's worth of potion into the reservoir.

He lifts it into the air, studying the potion. "I guess this is it."

We head out of the kitchen, my hand on Ros's arm for support because my legs feel like Jell-O, though I don't know if it's from horniness or blood loss. When we pass the formal living room, Abony rejoins us, sticking to the back of our group and still looking upset.

I pause at the base of the stairs, head tilted back as I look up the steep incline. There's no way I can walk up them. My legs are still too shaky. But there's also no way I'm going to miss seeing Tris wake up. Releasing Ros's arm, I drop to my knees on the first step and begin to crawl up the stairs.

"What are you doing, lass?" Jesse reaches for me. "I can carry-"

Before he can touch me, Ros pushes his arm away and scoops me up into his arms. "I've got her."

I loop my arms around his neck. "Just like old times, huh, Rosebud?"

Ros lets out a long-suffering sigh. "I should have gotten the damn purse to carry you around in."

"I feel like I'm more of a backpack-sized girl." Pressing my face against his neck, I breathe in his scent. "Thank you for helping."

"You need to eat some iron-heavy food for the next week," he grumbles. "And no more bloodletting."

"I'll try my best," I mumble against his skin, then press my face tighter to him when I feel his glare on me.

Ros doesn't set me down when we reach the top of the stairs. Instead, he carries me into Tris's room and settles me on the bed, then remains at my side.

My fingers shake as I lift Tris's limp hand in mine, holding it in my lap.

Owen walks around the bed while Jesse and Barron stand at the foot and Abony hovers near the door, looking uncomfortable with all the hospital equipment.

Lifting one of the tubes that rests on Tris's chest, Owen inserts the needle into an open port and slowly pushes the potion into his feeding tube.

I hold my breath as I watch the pale blue liquid flow up around his ear, then across his cheek, before vanishing into his nose.

Tris remains still on the bed.

Pain tightens my chest, and I release the breath I held. "Maybe it just needs more time to work?" Owen glances at me, pity in his eyes. "We can keep waiting."

The clock on the nightstand ticks down the seconds, then the minutes.

"Maybe I just didn't make it right?" A quiver fills my voice. "I didn't feel tingly. And I forgot to take off my underwear. Maybe it's not a cotton blend."

"The potion changed color, Rowe," Barron reminds me in a gentle tone. "You did the spell correctly."

Abony backs out into the hall. "I'll go back to working on my journals."

Barron and Jesse follow her out of the room.

Owen sets the used syringe on top of the oxygen machine before settling on the edge of Tris's bed and folding his hands in his lap in a clear sign that he'll stay as long as I need him to.

Ros drags over the chair from the corner and settles into it, ready to stay for as long as it takes.

I keep my eyes fixed on Tris's face, his hand in mine, and we wait as the minutes turn into an hour, and Tris doesn't wake.

#### **BRAIN SPARKS AND IDEAS**

I wake up in a room filled with shadows, curled up on the mattress beside Tris. Someone had draped a blanket over me, and I still clasp Tris's hand in mine. I don't remember falling asleep or even laying down.

Quiet, electronic sounds from the machines fill the dark room, their lights casting an eerie glow. When my focus shifts to the window, rain pelts the glass in the darkness.

Groggily, I sit up, the blanket slipping down to my lap, and I shift my attention to Tris's still face. My eyes feel puffy, and I struggle to focus, but I don't need perfect vision to know nothing has changed. The potion didn't work. My special witch blood wasn't enough, and my best friend is still locked inside his body, out of my reach.

I release his hand and crawl higher on the bed, pulling off the Maze of Misdirection and setting it on the nightstand. If Tris is trying to reach out to me through our bond, the same way Haut has, then I'm open and ready to receive his communications. Even if he's weak, I'm right here. There's no longer any distance between us for him to overcome.

Reaching up, I cup his cool cheeks and close my eyes, desperately searching for the mate bond that lives inside me. If there was ever a time for that stupid mystical connection to make itself known, it would be now.

I hold my breath until my lungs hurt and squeeze my eyes shut so tightly that red paints my vision as I will the magic to come. But the bond that connects Tris and me remains quiet. The air rushes out of my lungs on a sob. Why does the mate bond only flare to life around Haut? Why can't it breach Tris's unconscious mind the same way that it allows Haut to invade mine? Does the stupid thing only care about creating the bond, and once it forms, considers the job done? Or is it because I'm not a wolf and can't feel the bond the same way? Or maybe it's because I'm just terrible at being a witch. The bond is working at a deficit with my lack of experience and noodles for brains.

Of course, it wouldn't work for me when I want to.

I rise onto my knees to press my lips against Tris's slack cheek. "Wake up, you bad dog. We have too many adventures to go on for you to keep sleeping."

Tears trickle from my eyes and onto his cheeks. I lean back to the nightstand to grab the Kleenex and dab them away. I should go back downstairs and see if I can be of any use to the others. It's not fair that I rested while they kept working.

I slip off the bed and pad out of the room, the old, wooden floors cold beneath my bare feet.

More shadows fill the hall, and I head for the stairs, where light blazes from below.

I grip the banister for balance as I head toward the ground floor, then pause when voices drift out of the family room.

Slipping from one side of the stairs to the other, I crouch to peer through the rails to where Owen and Ros sit on the couch facing each other, Ros with his back to me.

"It's best for now if we keep your presence here quiet," Owen murmurs. "The town council won't be happy when they find out about you, and there's no reason to start that fight if you don't plan to stay."

"It's not as easy as simply choosing to stay." Ros leans back on the couch to rest his head against the cushions. "If I go missing, someone will come looking for me. I have a life and people who rely on me back at home."

"I understand." Owen glances toward the kitchen. "I was raised to lead this town. It would be difficult to abandon it." "And if I take Rowe with me?" Ros asks, tension in his voice.

"If it's Rowe's choice, then I have to let her leave." Pain threads through the words. "But there's more here in Hartford Cove for her than if she goes with you. Besides, weren't you saying you don't trust her?"

Ros scrubs a hand over his face. "She's still my mate."

The way he says that makes it sound like he wishes it weren't true, and pain twists my guts.

"And she's still *my* mate. I've loved her my entire life. So, don't think I won't try to convince her to stay with me. And you're forgetting about Tris." Owen's eyes lift to the stairs where I hide. "Will your organization welcome a wolf shifter?"

As Ros twists around on the couch, I back away from the railing and scurry back up the stairs, my heart aching for the choice I know I'll have to make. The knowledge cuts through me, dicing my heart into pieces. No matter who I choose, I'll never be complete again.

I pass by Tris's room and continue farther down the hall, slipping into grandma's room. I want to run away but running is impossible. Running away has solved nothing in the past. Bryant still caught me, Tris still ended up hurt, and now I've put Ros in a tough spot. But the need for distance to think nips at my heels like an angry wolf. So, I do the next best thing and escape into the closet, where I grab my pants off the floor before stacking grandma's suitcases high enough to reach the hatch in the ceiling and pull down the stairs to the attic.

Pitch black fills the opening, and I dig around in my pants to pull out Ros's phone and turn on the flashlight before I venture up into the abyss.

The small spread of light from the phone creates monsters out of the sheet-draped furniture stored up here, and my pulse leaps more than once when I catch movement from the corner of my eye. Dust slips beneath my bare feet as I make my way to the stairs that lead up to the widow's walk.

I climb them, then stop and sit just below the hatch, listening to the rain beat against the roof. Setting the pants on my lap, I pull out the card Mal gave me from the new age store and dial her number.

Uncertainty fills her voice when she answers. "Hello?"

"Mal, it's me, Rowe," I breathe out. "Do you have a minute?"

"Oh!" Recognition replaces her initial suspicion. "Sure, what can I do for you? I haven't had time to talk to anyone about becoming your mentor, though, if that's what you're calling for. I only just got off work."

"No, I was calling for advice." I take a deep breath, then explain about Tris in a rush, ending with, "the wolf transformation spell didn't work."

Silence fills the line before she says, "No, it wouldn't, since he's already a wolf shifter. You can't double curse someone like that."

Relief and despair flood through me. "So, it's not because I did it wrong?"

"Even if you did it right, it wouldn't matter." More silence fills the line before she continues. "You're venturing into dark arts, Rowe. I'm not sure I can help you if that's the path you wish to follow."

"I don't want to," I rush to reassure her. "But I know nothing about magic. There aren't any labels on the books I have that say good or bad. I just need to help Tris."

A heavy sigh comes from the other side. "I should encourage you to break the curse he's under right now, but removing it may also take away the only thing keeping him alive. You need an Alpha to help you, not more magic."

"But the Alpha here is cursed, too," I whisper. "He was turned into a werewolf when we were kids." "That's too bad." Sympathy fills the words. "I've never heard of a way to cure that curse. What I *do* know is that a new curse is not the answer, so stop searching for a way to make things worse."

"Is there a magical way to heal him?" I ask in desperation.

"Healing is a rare gift. I don't know any witches who have it," she says. "I'm sorry I can't be of more help in this."

"You've already helped so much." I force brightness into my voice. "Once I have my laptop set up, I'll reach out again."

"Okay." She hesitates for a moment before adding, "No more curses."

"No more curses," I agree. "I'm putting together a list of the spells I have. Maybe you can help me identify which ones are the bad ones that should be locked up?"

"I can certainly help with that. Here, I'll give you my email." She rattles it off before I can tell her I don't have an email. "Send it over and I'll flag the ones I know. Now, I have to get going. I'm meeting friends, and I'm already late."

"Sorry to have kept you so long." I tuck her card back into my pants. "Have a good night."

"You, too," she says. "Good luck, Rowe."

The line goes silent, and I turn off the flashlight, pitching myself into darkness.

There went my last hope of finding help. If turning Tris into a goose won't work, then I'm out of ideas.

Setting the phone and my pants on the steps, I turn and push open the hatch to the roof.

Wind and rain blast me, telling me to go back inside. But the storm has nothing on the tempest roiling inside of me, and I step out onto the slick platform of the widow's walk, letting the hatch slam shut behind me.

Cold rain soaks through my cotton nightshirt, plastering it to my body, as I lift my face to the elements. Lightning flashes, leaving zigzags of light across my vision, followed by the clap of thunder. Through my blurred vision, I see the fractals of the barrier around Hartford Cove.

How could I be strong enough to renew such a vast spell, but not strong enough to help Tris?

Of course, Tris had been here with me for the spell, moving me through the steps.

I stretch my leg out in front of me, then swing it to the left, remembering the first step of the spell. But I can't recall the one that comes after, or the dozen that follow.

I'm no good without Tris.

Lightning flashes again, followed by the boom of thunder, and I tip my head back to scream at the sky. I want to become a storm, to cast these feelings of helplessness into the sky and have the winds sweep them away.

The dark clouds part overhead, revealing a bulbous moon, nearly full. Owen's curse will force him to leave tomorrow, but who will keep him and the other werewolves in town from causing harm when Haut isn't here to keep them in line?

If only there were a way to protect Owen from the full moon, the way my blood protects Ros from the sun.

I freeze, raindrops pelting my face and filling my open mouth as sparks ignite in my brain, forming an idea.

Lightning strikes a tree in the woods nearby, filling the air with the smell of ozone, and the next boom of thunder shakes the boards beneath my feet.

It jars me into motion. I spin on my heel, the rough boards harsh against my bare feet, and yank open the hatch. I grab my pants on the way down the stairs, pain flaring from the bottom of my right foot with every step, but I ignore it as I bang into boxes and furniture, in too much of a rush to find the phone for the flashlight.

Tripping out of the attic and half falling down the ladder, I regain my footing in the closet and rush out of grandma's room. I force myself to slow at the steep staircase, keeping a

death grip on the banister when my feet threaten to slip out from under me. Rain plus dust equals bad traction.

Thankfully, I make it to the bottom without killing myself and run into the kitchen. "I have O-negative blood!"

Four pairs of eyes turn toward me, followed by a shocked gasp from Abony, Barron's brows shooting up, and Jesse breaking out in full belly laughs.

Ros lurches to his feet and hurries over to me. "Rowe, what on earth..."

Excited, I grasp the front of his shirt. "I have O-negative blood! Magical O-negative blood."

"Yes, I know." His gaze sweeps over me. "Were you out in the rain?"

Water drips from the ends of my hair as I nod. "I tried to become the storm."

"Didn't I say I heard a crazy woman on the roof?" Jesse guffaws.

Ros untangles my hands from his shirt before he pulls it off and shoves it over my head.

Warmth envelops me, but I'm too distracted by his bare chest to appreciate the gesture.

"Damn," Abony breathes. "Okay, I get the appeal."

"Can't say there's anything wrong with that," Jesse agrees, followed by a slap and a yelp.

Anger surges through me, and I lean around Ros to glare at my friends. "Eyes off my mate." I turn my glare on Ros. "Why did you strip in front of these thirsty beasts?"

"Because you ran in here practically naked!" he hisses.

I reach down to pull his shirt off. "I'm wearing a nightshirt."

"That everyone can see through!" Ros catches my hands between his as his nostrils flare. "And why do I smell blood?" Embarrassed heat fills my cheeks, and I lean closer to whisper, "I'm still on my period."

"Not that!" Ros's focus drops to my feet, and his lips peel back to show fangs. "Where's the first aid kit?"

Surprised, I balance on my left foot and lift my right to inspect my sole, where blood slowly seeps out of a gash on my heel. I must have cut it on the rough boards of the widow walk. "It's not that bad—"

I yelp in surprise as Ros scoops me up in his arms. "Owen! Get back down here and tell me where the bandages are in this place!"

"I have a new reason why Rowe needs so many mates," Jesse whispers loudly. "It's the only way she'll survive herself."

Snickers follow us as Ros carries me away.

## **BE MY GUINEA PIG**

••• V ou know they've all seen me naked already," I say as Ros sets me on the counter in the hall bathroom. "It's a whole shifter thing. Nudity doesn't bother them."

"Well, you're not a shifter." Ros gives me a stern stare. "So, why are you constantly getting naked?"

"It's not *constantly*. But why is it bad when I do?" I tilt my head to the side. "Should I be embarrassed about my body?"

He plants his hands on the counter on either side of my hips and leans closer. "You know that's not what I mean."

I lift my shoulders. "I wasn't raised the way normal people are and didn't have that whole body-shame thing instilled in me from my first breath. Though, bigger boobs would be nice. Women's clothes just aren't made for tiny titties."

A laugh comes from the doorway as Owen joins us, a first aid kit in his hands. "You don't need bigger boobs. You just need someone who knows how to alter clothes."

"I never considered that." I perk up. "Is there a seamstress in town?"

I had long ago given up hope of ever having clothes that fit my frame without buying them in the kids' section. Which I'm not against except for when I want to look like a proper adult.

"There are a few people in town who know how to do it." Owen sets the first aid kit on the counter as his gaze sweeps over me. "Where are you hurt?" "It's her feet again," Ros snaps before I can answer. "They only just healed, so the skin is still fragile."

Owen's lips press into an unhappy line. "This is part of what happened to Rowe after Bryant captured her again?"

Ros nods as he kneels in front of me. "They were infected, and she couldn't walk for three weeks. One of our doctors had to cut open partially healed wounds to pull out the glass that was trapped inside."

Horror twists Owen's expression. "How did that happen?"

Ros lifts my injured foot to inspect this new wound. "As far as I could tell, she walked barefoot through the shattered remains of a hotel slider where Bryant captured her. Her wounds hadn't been seen to during the time he held her captive."

Regret fills Owen's eyes as he looks at me, but his words are for Ros when he says, "Thank you for being there and getting her out."

"I should have gotten her out sooner," Ros mutters as he prods at my wound, making me wince. "It looks like there are some slivers. I need tweezers."

"If she's going to spend time on the widow's walk, I should have it sanded down and refinished." Owen digs around in the first aid kit and pulls out a pair of tweezers, passing them to Ros. "I don't think it's been touched since the house was built."

"I've never seen a real-life widow's walk," Ros answers in a distracted tone.

Curious, I watch the two men work together, bonding over their mutual desire to patch me up. Or maybe they already came to an agreement to not fight until after Tris is healed?

A sharp tug comes from my foot, and I instinctively yank it out of Ros's grasp. "Owie!"

"Sit still." He grabs my foot once more and stabs it with the tweezers.

I push on his shoulder with my free foot. "Be gentle!"

He looks up at me with exasperation. "Stop injuring yourself."

"Stop injuring me more!" I press my toes against his cheek. "I don't know why you're fussing with tweezers when you could just heal it instantly."

He snaps his teeth at my foot, making me yank it back to safety. "Why are you so determined to get your feet into my mouth?"

"Don't make it sound kinky," I protest, then let out a loud wail as he returns to tormenting me. "You just like me to be injured so you can carry me around."

"It's not my fault you're pocket-sized." He passes the tweezers back to Owen and accepts an alcohol wipe. "I didn't buy you sneakers so that you'd still run around barefoot."

I feel the sting of the alcohol before he even touches my skin and try to yank my foot free again. But Ros holds on with superhuman strength—or at least more-super-than-Rowe strength—and ruthlessly scrubs my wound before slapping a Band-Aid over it.

The entire process of cleaning the wound hurt more than actually receiving it, but it also reminds me of my original mission, and I look at Owen and Ros with excitement. "I have O-negative blood."

They exchange glances before Owen ventures, "Why is that so exciting?"

"I'm a universal donor," I say patiently, because I think this should be obvious.

Ros leans his head against my shin. "I'm tired, Rowe. It's been a long day. Can you please just pretend we're all dumb and explain what you're going on about?"

Guilt strikes hard, and I lean down to stroke his auburn curls. "I'm sorry. I know you're not used to being up during the day."

"Or being stuffed into a trunk," he mutters.

"Or that. And you had a stressful time at the clinic, too." I gently scratch his head. "This hasn't been the vacation you hoped for, and I'm sorry for that."

He stays silent, his breaths even against my bare skin.

I reach out to Owen, and he takes my hand. "And you've had things rough, too, with having to take over Haut's stuff as well as continuing with your mayoral duties. And the full moon is coming up in a couple of days. What are you and the others doing for that?"

"There are cells under the sheriff's office." Pain tightens the skin around his eyes and mouth. "I'll have to gather the others and go tomorrow."

My heart aches at the idea of Owen locked up in a cage like some animal. "That's horrible."

Ros grips the counter and rises to his feet. "Is that not what you normally did?"

Guilt and despair clash in Owen's expression. "In the beginning, yes, that's why we have the cages in the first place."

That knowledge makes me ache all the more. I want to wrap myself around nine-year-old Owen and tell him life will get better. That he won't always be treated like a monster who needs to be locked up.

"After Haut took over as Alpha," Owen continues, "things got better. He would take us far out into the woods and keep us contained for the three days we were dangerous to be around. But I can't do that for the others, since I, too, will be a mindless monster."

"My idea might actually help with that, too." Reaching out, I grip the front of Ros's shirt and tug on it for his attention. "You said your people have a diluted serum that allows them to temporarily walk in the daylight. And you also said that a witch's blood allows you to walk in daylight because it cancels out the virus that makes you a vampire."

Understanding dawns, and Ros squints at me. "I don't recall saying vampirism is a virus, but yes."

I tug harder on his shirt with my excitement. "Then can't the same thing be used to temporarily cancel out the werewolf curse?"

"I've never heard of using a witch's blood in such a way." Ros's brows pinch together. "Vampire fangs direct the blood we ingest into our veins, and we have an entire immune system in place that allows us to avoid complications of any diseases. Not to mention that vampire systems are compatible with all blood types."

I release him to thump my fist against my chest. "I'm a universal donor. My blood is compatible with everyone."

"You're suggesting we take some of your blood and inject it into Owen?" Ros says slowly, looking at me like I'm crazy.

I nod eagerly. "Shoot him up with the good stuff, cancel out his curse so he has full use of his Alphaness. Then he can force Tris into a shift that will heal his body, and Tris will wake up!"

Ros doesn't look convinced by my brilliance. "There's a lot of supposition in your idea. Barring the danger of injecting one person's blood into another, it could also cancel out what makes him an Alpha. I'm not cursed, and your witch blood simply suppresses part of what makes me a vampire. For all we know, injecting Owen would allow the werewolf curse to gain a greater hold. You're asking him to take an enormous risk to be your guinea pig for something that's unlikely to work."

My shoulders slump beneath the weight of his logic. "You're right, it was a stupid idea."

"Not stupid." Ros rubs my arms in comfort. "Just a little reckless. Before we start getting out needles and turning into mad scientists, let's stick with the current plan of finding a different animal to transform Tris into."

"That won't work." I melt into a pile of dejected goo against Ros's chest. "I called my witch contact earlier, and she said that since Tris isn't a natural-born shifter, it means he's under a curse. Laying a new curse on top of the existing curse won't work."

Tears of frustration and hopelessness sting my eyes. I was so sure this was the way to go. But I'd only been thinking of myself and not the risk I'd be asking Owen to take.

"I'll do it," Owen announces.

"But the risks..." Ros protests.

"I'm not saying we go get a needle and try right now," Owen cuts in. "We'll talk to Dr. Lopez first and get her medical opinion on it. And if we proceed forward with this idea, she'll perform the procedure so that it's as safe as possible. I trust Rowe's instincts in this."

"But I wanted to double curse Tris," I remind him. "I have horrible instincts."

"Your witch contact said you can't double curse someone, right?" He waits for my nod before he grins. "But you *have* double cursed Tris before. You turned him from a wolfdog into a goose. You do the impossible by accident, so I trust in your ability to save Tris with intention."

The stinging in my eyes worsens, and I sniffle. "I love you so much, Owen Hartford."

"Don't cry." Dismayed, he reaches out to wipe the tears off my cheeks. "This is going to work. I believe in you completely."

His reassurances only make me cry harder, because I think this will work, too, and once Tris is awake, I'll have to choose.

Sobbing, I yank Owen closer to smoosh myself between Ros and Owen's bodies, mourning what I'll lose the moment I regain Tris.

## STAB ME FOR LOVE

flinch back from the light Dr. Lopez shines into my eyes.

"Good pupil dilation." She clicks off the penlight and peers at me. "Any more hallucinations?"

"I don't see people's other forms as often as I did before." I glance at Owen and Ros, who hover at the door.

The two men are now annoyingly cozy, which should make me happy, but it means double the nursemaids.

Dr. Lopez glances over at them, too, with a less than friendly look. She arrived ten minutes ago, summoned out of bed by Owen in the middle of the storm. When she saw Ros, her only reaction to being confronted by a vampire was a slight widening of her eyes and a demand to know if he was her patient because she'd have to go back to the clinic if she needed blood.

It makes me wonder what would phase the older woman.

She drops her penlight into her open doctor's bag and pulls out a stethoscope. "How about you take a few laps around the house, Alpha? Maybe show your new friend the garden."

Owen cocks his head to the side. "Are you ordering me out into the rain?"

She lifts a brow. "I wiped your ass as a baby. So, yes, I'm telling you to take a walk."

I stare at her with wide eyes. "You're my hero. I want to be you when I grow up."

She chuckles as she turns back to me and fits the stethoscope around her neck. "I seem to remember you calling the last Alpha Satan within his hearing. And he was far scarier than little Owen over there."

"A lot more growly," I whisper before I flap my hand at the men who haven't moved. "You heard the good doctor. Go for a walk. Admire how few leaks there are in the porch roof. Take Abony, Barron, and Jesse with you. Everyone should stretch their legs."

"I think I should stay," Ros begins, then cuts off with an annoyed huff when I raise my crossed fingers at him. "You know that's a complete myth. I'm not scared of your finger cross."

"Get thee back, Dracula." I turn my crossed fingers toward Owen. "And take your hell beast with you."

Ros looks at Owen. "Do you ever just want to grab the pillow off the bed and smother her?"

"Fifty percent of the time she's awake." Owen steps away from the door and turns toward the stairs. "Come on, I'll show you the garden at night. It's actually pretty impressive. Though, it was even more amazing back when Mrs. Wendell was alive. It's gotten a little overgrown over the last year."

Dr. Lopez checks my heart rate and directs me to take half a dozen deep breaths that leave me dizzy and ready to pass out as we wait for the front door to open and close.

Once all the wolf shifters are out of super-hearing range, she puts away her medical tools and studies me. "What did you not want to say around the boys?"

"I'm not sure it's actually a hallucination, so much as an invasion of my mind by outside forces." I purse my lips for a moment in thought, then revise, "Or possibly inside forces."

She clasps her hands in her lap. "Tell me what's going on."

"While I was away, I dreamed of Haut often. Sometimes, he was running through the woods in his wolf form, and sometimes he was in his human form. In the most recent one, we were having sex, but it was weird because it wasn't really us, but it was, if that makes any sense?" Blushing at admitting this to her, I meet Dr. Lopez's soft brown eyes. "He said it was the mate bond trying to force our connection. Or, at least, that's the reason my imagination provided."

"No, it's likely it was the mate bond as Haut said in your dream," she assures me. "It's rare for someone to reject their mate, though it happens occasionally. With wolves, it's a painful break, and the bond closes. That you're a witch may confuse your bond, and it doesn't understand exactly what your intention is, so it's still trying to bring you and Haut to a level of understanding where you can become one."

"Yeah, in the most literal sense of the word," I grumble, remembering the way we nearly jumped each other behind the mall. "I don't blame the bond for being confused, though. Haut confuses me."

"So you're not rejecting him?" she asks, and when I shake my head, then shrug, she sighs. "Talking would help, I'm sure. Communication usually does. Of course, that requires that both parties are willing to make themselves vulnerable. Unfortunately, that's not something you or Haut are very good at."

My brows sweep together. "What do you mean? I'm an open book. Everyone knows what I'm thinking."

"You and I both know that's not true. Not where it's meaningful." She leans forward and gently takes my hand between hers. "I think you are a young woman who has been forced to rely on multiple types of coping mechanisms, and none of them are healthy for you."

Unease ripples through me, and I try to pull my hand away, but she holds on with a strength that far belies her age.

"You grew up in virtual solitude, locked within your home, for most of your life. Then, you lost your father, your grandmother, and thought you lost two of your mates. Then you were tortured and imprisoned once more, all in a very short amount of time. By all accounts, you should be a mess, and yet you're smiling and joking like none of this even happened to you." She squeezes my hand. "I'm going to help you do whatever it takes to fix Tris. I'll even go along with this questionable method of injecting your blood into Owen. But after this, no matter the outcome, I want you to come to see me twice a week. I'm afraid you're dissociating, and the longer we let this go on, the harder it will be to undo the damage. Trauma like yours has a way of making itself known, whether or not you want to let it out, and screaming at storms is not the way to do it. We need to get ahead of this, or it will cause a real mental break."

The corners of my lips twitch, though I don't feel particularly amused by anything she just said. "I thought you were a doctor of the body, not a doctor of the mind."

"Many people in Hartford Cove serve dual functions." She pats the back of my hand before she releases me and straightens. "Now, your blood pressure is a little low, but not to the point that I'm worried about drawing a vial of blood. However, I need to take precautions."

Thankful that she's not pressing the issue of my inner workings, I pull my legs up onto the bed and cross them. "I'm fine doing the experiment wherever you think is safest."

"Good." She reaches over and closes her bag, then stands. "I believe there's a cage in the basement."

I stare at her in confusion. "There's what now?"

"Your grandmother needed to restrain wolf shifters occasionally," she says like that explains everything.

Anxiety twists in my stomach. "You want to lock Owen up?"

"We don't know what will happen once your blood is in his system," she explains. "If it has an adverse effect, and the werewolf curse gains more control than it currently has, then we need Owen to be in a safe, contained environment where he can't hurt anyone. Unless you'd prefer we move to the sheriff's station? The cages there are far superior, but I assumed you wouldn't want to be that far from Tris."

"No, we should do it here." Excitement and worry wiggle through me as I slide off the bed and grab my sneakers, putting them on. The puffy unicorns on the side fill me with confidence that the special magic in my blood that everyone puts so much faith in will save the day this time.

As prepared as I can be, I follow Dr. Lopez out to the hall and down the stairs, then out onto the porch.

We find everyone on the side of the house near the garden, exactly where Owen said they would be, which also happens to be the furthest point from my room without leaving the porch.

They stop talking as soon as we walk around the house into view, and Ros hurries over to me, Owen following at a slower pace.

I stay quiet as Dr. Lopez explains the plan to the others, hoping that hearing it from someone with medical knowledge will give Ros the reassurance that I can't.

Ros still looks displeased, but he doesn't argue, and he remains silent as we head down to the sanctuary, where Owen reveals his superior knowledge of what my granny had been up to. He knows exactly where to pull the cage from.

The metal contraption looks like a reinforced kennel, and when Owen steps inside and closes the door, he can't stand up straight.

"Are you sure this is necessary?" I fret.

Dr. Lopez secures the chain and giant padlock on the door. "No, but I won't do this without the precautions in place."

Behind us, Jesse and Barron strip to take on their wolf forms as an added security measure, while Abony hovers next to the elevator, her hand on the gate. If Owen flips out, Jesse and Barron will distract him while Ros gets me to the elevator to escape.

All the added measures crush my confidence in this plan, and I crouch to press on my unicorns, needing their rainbow lights in all this doom and gloom.

Ros kneels next to me. "There's still an option to wait and continue to look for a spell that can help."

"If it were you unconscious upstairs, I'd already have your fangs in my jugular." I look up from my tennis shoes to smile at his startled expression. "Be happy it's only a little needle."

He reaches out to tuck a lock of hair behind my ear. "Do you even know where your jugular is?"

"No, so it would be a complete bloodbath." I catch his hand and hold it against my cheek. "You know, you keep questioning if I seduced you with ulterior motives, but you seem to forget that you're the one who showed up in my bedroom uninvited in your underwear. Which means, if anyone had ulterior motives last night, it was you."

"Rowe, we're ready," Dr. Lopez breaks in.

Looking away from Ros's bemused expression, I bounce to my feet, then cringe when I see the needle in her hand. "Holy crap. Did you upgrade since last time?"

"Only a little needle, huh?" Ros rises beside me and takes my hand. "Squeeze as tight as you need to."

Holding out my arm, I look away as Dr. Lopez approaches and lock eyes with Ros. "Just remember that when Dr. Lopez has to set all your broken fingers in a few minutes."

Something cold and stinging touches my inner elbow, and I let out a panicked whine, clutching Ros's hand for all I'm worth.

He winces in pain. "It's just the alcohol swab."

"That means it gets worse from here," I hiss.

"Just a small poke," Dr. Lopez murmurs.

Warning given, she stabs me in the arm, and I do my best to break Ros's fingers, all in the name of love.

## THE CURSE AND ME

A s Dr. Lopez approaches Owen's cage, he pulls up his sleeve and stretches his arm through the bar.

She cups his elbow but hesitates with the needle poised over his vein. "Are you sure about this, Alpha?"

"Years ago, I gave up hope that I'd ever be a wolf shifter again." His gaze moves past the doctor to lock on mine. "This isn't just about helping Tris. If there's a chance that I can be normal, even for a moment, I want that."

Tears sting my eyes, but I choke them back. Owen is being brave, and I can't do any less.

I force myself not to look away as the needle sinks into Owen's skin, and the doctor depresses the plunger, my blood vanishing into his veins.

For a moment, nothing happens. Then Owen's face twists with pain, and he stumbles back away from the bars, his hand pressed over his heart.

"His pulse is going crazy," Abony whispers. "But it's okay. Wolves can handle this kind of thing."

I clutch Ros's arm, my own heart jumping like crazy. I never should have suggested this. What if I was wrong, and I end up losing Owen, too?

With a shout that morphs into a howl of pain, darkness bursts from Owen's pores, rising to surround him, and eyes like coals stare at me, filled with pain as the curse fights for control of Owen's body. "Oh, no." I release Ros's arm and rush to the cage, reaching through the bars toward the werewolf part of Owen. "We didn't do this to hurt you. But Owen needs control of his body."

"What is that?" Abony whispers.

"The werewolf curse," Ros explains in a tight voice.

"But why does it look like that?" Abony hisses. "Isn't it supposed to be a wolf?"

"It's not in control of Owen's wolf right now. But that doesn't mean it's not dangerous." Ros shifts closer to me, though he doesn't pull me away.

I ignore them as the darkness stretches toward me, smoky tendrils curling around my fingers.

It's not the first time Owen's curse has reached out to me, but it's the first time that I can feel what it does.

Hunger drives it, a bottomless need to hunt and feed that can only be satiated at the full moon. For an entire month, it starves, so that when it's finally set free, it knows no reason, only the desperation to glut before it starves again. It doesn't understand that its actions hurt those around it, or that its existence has taken over a piece of who Owen is, warping his wolf to become its perfect killing machine.

The tendrils sink into me, searching out my thoughts. The mingling of my and Owen's blood created a connection between us that goes both ways.

Even as I feel what it feels, it delves into my memories of Owen as a child, my memories of Haut changing into a wolf, the love I showered on Tris despite his curse, and the confidence Ros helped me build by teaching me how to properly handle a weapon. It also finds a matching hunger within me, a bottomless desire to be loved and wanted, to be understood as I am and accepted, despite all of my craziness.

The tendrils curl around that last part, understanding ringing through me as it recognizes a kindred spirit. Then the shadows slip away, the tendrils curling around my fingers in a final caress before the darkness sinks back beneath Owen's skin and vanishes.

Owen bends over, his hands pressed against his knees, his gasps filling the silence of the sanctuary as we all wait to see what will happen next.

"There's so much hunger." Owen gasps out. "How can there be so much hunger and I never knew?"

I clutch the bars, straining toward him. "What do you need?"

"Meat." His fingers flex against his thighs with tension. "The bloodier the better."

I twist toward Abony. "You heard him. Bring all the raw meat we have in the fridge, and if that's not enough, call whoever owns the butcher shop to open up for us."

Gulping, she backs onto the elevator and closes the grate. The grind of the ancient machine shaking its way to the ground level fills the sanctuary.

Barron and Jesse pad forward in their wolf forms, soft whines filling their throats.

"Can you shift, Alpha?" Dr. Lopez asks.

Owen trembles, his fingers digging into his thighs, before he lets out a harsh breath and shakes his head. "No, but I can feel the thing inside me pulling back."

"What about a command?" Dr. Lopez urges.

Owen's head lifts, his blurry gaze roaming the sanctuary before it settles on Jesse's auburn-furred wolf form. "Sit."

Jesse remains standing, his legs stiff and his tail tucked close to his body.

Owen shakes his head and forces himself upright. "Sit."

This time, the command rings with authority, and Jesse's rump slams onto the concrete floor. He releases an excited yip, his tail thrashing against the floor. Owen sags forward, breathing heavily. "That took more out of me than it should. I don't know if I'll be strong enough..."

"Wait until you've eaten." I encourage, instilling my voice with confidence. "Once the darkness has been fed, it will get easier."

He nods and crumples to the floor in a haphazard sprawl of limbs. With effort, he folds his legs to sit cross-legged near the bars at the front.

Barron licks his mate's face before padding closer to the cage, his head down but his tail wagging.

Laughing, Owen reaches through the bars and rubs the silky black fur between his ears.

Happiness fills me to see Owen interacting with the wolves. I hadn't realized just how much he lost when his wolf was taken from him until now. Wolves are pack animals, but despite becoming Alpha once more, Owen hadn't been able to claim this level of connection without his wolf to back him up.

It's something that was also missing when Haut was Alpha. He kept distance between himself and the rest of the pack instead of embracing this close contact that his wolves obviously need.

The elevator returns, and Abony steps off with a stack of Styrofoam trays in her hands. "We had two pounds of ground beef and a four-pack of sirloin steaks."

Owen's nostrils flare, and he stops petting Barron as his eyes fix on the meat with hunger and trepidation. "I want the meat so bad, and yet my brain is telling me that eating raw, cold meat is disgusting."

"You get used to the flavor after a while," Ros tells him, then shrugs when all eyes turn to him. "Unless vampires have a willing donor, all of our blood comes in cold packs."

"Expired cold packs," I add, and give Owen an encouraging smile. "At least your raw meat is fresh."

"I'm so hungry, I don't even think I care right now." He reaches through the bars and takes the pack of steaks Abony offers first, ripping through the cellophane.

He lifts a steak in each hand and tears off a chunk, barely swallowing before ripping off more.

After he finishes the first two steaks, Barron and Jesse whine for his attention, and he tosses them a couple of scraps, which they gobble up with enthusiasm. I guess the aversion to raw, cold meat only applies to Owen's human brain, because the wolves have no issue with it.

When he empties the tray of steaks, Abony silently passes the ground beef through the bars.

He rips into that one with the same level of hunger, and I fear we really will have to call to have the butcher shop opened. But his frantic hunger slows as he nears the end of the package, and he tosses the remaining bites to Barron and Jesse without them having to beg for it.

The slaughter of the Styrofoam packages litter the floor as Owen sits, his head hanging and his bloody hands dangling off his bent knees, before he lifts his fingers to his mouth and licks them clean.

"How are you feeling now, Alpha?" Dr. Lopez asks when he finishes.

"Still hungry, but not so desperate." Owen lifts his head, licking the blood from his lips. "Stronger, too. More than I have ever been before."

"Do you feel in control?" Ros asks. "No desire to rip and maim?"

Owen takes the question seriously and gives it a few moments of consideration before he nods. "It's weird, but I can actually feel the curse the way I used to feel my wolf. For now, it's satisfied. But I'll need more meat soon. It's been starving for a month. I think, if I can eat enough so that it doesn't awaken crazed with hunger, we can come to an understanding." "Providing your communication with it stays open after Rowe's blood leaves your system," Ros points out.

Owen's head dips in acknowledgment. "There's that possibility. But, now that I have a better understanding of what it needs, I can take that into consideration and make sure that I'm eating significantly more and the right kinds of food." Owen pushes to his feet. "But you're right. Time is of the essence. Let me out, and we'll see if I'm strong enough to help Tris."

Dr. Lopez pulls the key from her pocket and undoes the padlock, pulling the chains free.

Heaviness fills the air as the cage door swings open. Everyone holds their breath, waiting to see if Owen's curse will suddenly assert itself.

But when Owen steps free, his blue eyes are sharp, with no sign of madness.

He strides to the elevator and turns back to stare at us with expectation. I'm the first to step into the death box with him, Barron and Jesse only a step behind. Ros quickly joins us, putting his body between me and Owen, unable to resist the urge to protect me.

With Barron and Jesse in their wolf forms, it's a tight fit for Abony and Dr. Lopez to squeeze in with us, and they stand with their back to the door, their focus on Owen.

He ignores their cautious stare, tension thrumming through his body as the elevator rises.

Is he still worried that he won't be able to help Tris? Or does he not have as much control as he wants us to believe?

When the elevator stops, we silently disembark and follow Owen up to Tris's room.

This time, only Dr. Lopez, Owen, and I enter, while every else waits out in the hall.

As Dr. Lopez disconnects the machines that keep Tris alive, I wrap my arms around myself. It hadn't occurred to me

that she would have to take away his life support before Owen commands Tris to transform.

If this doesn't work, will it be the end of Tris?

I can't bear to give voice to the question. I believe in Owen and his ability as an alpha, and he can't be weighed down by my doubt when it counts the most.

Owen steps up to the bed and holds his hand over Tris's head, much the way Haut had done. "*Shift*."

I hug myself tighter, my eyes fixed on Tris's still form.

A ripple goes through Tris's body.

At first, I think my eyes are playing tricks on me from straining so hard, but then the ripple happens again, and golden fur sprouts on Tris's cheeks. The transformation is slower than when Haut commanded Tris to shift, but little by little, his fur lengthens, Tris's ears grow into points, and his face elongates into a snout. From there, the rest happens quickly, his body rippling and morphing until a golden wolf lies on the bed, tangled in his pajamas.

I fall to my knees beside the bed. "Tris?"

Golden brown eyes open to fix on me, and Tris lets out a quiet chuff of greeting.

# SMALL THING LIKE DEATH

T ears of happiness slip down my cheeks, and Tris whines quietly, scooting forward on the bed to lick my face.

When the familiar act draws a wet chuckle from me, Tris takes the opportunity to stick his long canine tongue into my mouth.

Horrified, I shove his head away on instinct. "No frenching in dog form!"

Tris chuffs again, before he wobbles to his feet on the mattress, tips back his head, and lets out a quiet, "Awoo."

When he looks at me with expectation, I dutifully tip my head back and respond with a pathetic, "Awoo."

He digs at the bed in disapproval before howling louder.

The knot that formed in my chest when I thought I had lost Tris unravels, and I tip back my head, releasing my best wolf howl. Owen and Dr. Lopez join ours, followed by Jesse, Barron, and Ebony from out in the hall as we all sing our happiness at Tris's recovery.

When we fall quiet, more howls drift in from outside as the rest of the small town takes up the celebration.

Tris drops his head to stare at me, his mouth hanging open and his tongue lolling in a doggy grin.

Happiness turns my blood into bubbles, and I lunge forward to hug him before giving his furry shoulder a gentle shove. "How dare you let Bryant get the better of you! Do you have any idea what I went through thinking you were dead?" In response, he drops his front legs, his rump high in the air as his tail wags.

I narrow my eyes at him. "Don't you dare. I'm being serious right now."

With a bark, he launches himself off the bed right at me.

I roll out of the way and scramble to my feet, racing for the hall. "This isn't funny! I seriously thought you were dead. You can't make jokes about that!"

Tris barks happily and nips at my heels, chasing me in circles as I race around Ros, Barron, Jesse, and Abony, who watch us with varying degrees of amusement and incomprehension.

When Tris nips at my butt, I yelp and cover it with my hands. "Stop, or you're going to be in so much trouble, mister!"

Tris lets out an excited yip, and his soft, fluffy body tackles me to the less-than-soft floor. Slobbery licks cover my face and hands as I try to protect myself before Tris's weight flops down on top of me, and his furry jowls cover my head.

"Oh, no," Jesse chokes out around laughter. "Wherever did Rowe disappear to? Is this some sort of magic trick?"

I release a smothered shout from beneath Tris, flailing my arms out from his sides as his tail slaps against my feet.

"If you've had your fun," Owen calls from somewhere above us, "Dr. Lopez still needs to look you over, Tris."

Immediately, Tris rises to all fours, deposits one final slobbering kiss from chin to forehead, then turns and slaps me in the face with his tail before he trots over to join Owen.

I lay gasping on the carpet, sticky and rumpled. "I have so many emotions right now."

Ros appears above me and offers his hand. "All of them good, I hope?"

"The goodest." I slap my palm against his and let him pull me to my feet. Entwining our fingers, I tug him toward Tris's room. "Come on, I'll introduce you."

"Is now really the right time?" Ros protests, dragging his heels but allowing himself to be led, regardless. "He just woke up. I'm sure he doesn't want to meet anyone *new* right now?"

I catch on to what he's saying. He's worried that revealing I have another mate right after Tris regained consciousness is a bad idea. But Tris will have the same reaction now that he'll have tomorrow, so there's no point in waiting.

When we enter the room, Tris stands at the side of the bed, now in his human form and wearing a tight pair of purple sweatpants that he pulled from my dresser in the bedroom. His hip bones poke out over the top of the waistband, along with little curls of golden hair, and the bottoms of the legs stop at mid-calf.

Dr. Lopez stands in front of him, her stethoscope out and pressed to his bare chest.

As we enter, his golden eyes twinkle as they jump to me. "Who's the new face?"

I tug Ros closer, my hand tight on his to prevent him from being a gentleman and leaving. "This is Ambrose Shultz."

Tris's gaze jumps to Ros, gives him a thorough once over, and returns to me. "Do I smell a mate?"

I grin. "Yes."

Tris's hands move to his hips. "And did you pounce on him, as I would have wanted you to?"

"Yes." I tug on Ros's hand. "And guess what?"

"What?" Tris demands.

I widen my eyes at him. "Ros is a vampire."

"Oh my God." Tris's hips start shaking as if he still has a tail. "I have so many questions."

I wiggle with excitement. "Right? I did, too. Vampires!"

Tris turns to look for Owen, completely ignoring Dr. Lopez's efforts to check his vitals. "Owen, did you know that

vampires are real?"

Owen lets out a put-upon sigh. "Yes, I knew vampires were real."

Tris and I stare at him for a moment before we look at each other and shake our heads in disappointment.

"Where's the enthusiasm?" I demand.

"Where's the excitement?" Tris agrees.

Unable to help myself, I let out a squeal of happiness and release Ros to launch myself at Tris. He catches me against his chest, his hands on my ass, and loses his balance, falling back on the bed.

I land on his chest, straddling him. "You're never going to believe what Owen did."

Tris grins up at me. "What did Owen do?"

"Remember those skanky bitches from the nightclub?" I demand.

Tris's hands flex on my ass. "The ones who molested me?"

"Exactly those ones." I knead my fingers against his muscular chest. "Owen let them move into his house."

Gasping in affront, Tris twists to stare at Owen. "Didn't Rowe tell you they molested me?"

"I did!" I yell before Owen can defend himself. "So, I was going to go kick their asses again—"

"You were so hot when you kicked that one chick's ass," Tris growls with appreciation.

"The hottest, right?" I agree. "But then Ros took my gun away."

Tris's eyes widen. "You carry a gun now?"

"The biggest gun." I hold my hands up a foot apart to show its superior size. "And then he shoved sandwiches into my mouth."

"Only sandwiches?" Tris wiggles his eyebrows. "I can think of something that would keep you quiet longer."

Sparks light up in my mind, and I slap my hands to his cheeks. "Porn!"

Groaning, he gargles out. "Not this again."

"Yes, this again." I lean closer to press my nose against his so he can see how serious I am. "We had plans, and a brief stint of death isn't stopping them."

With a heave, he tumbles me off his chest. In the next moment, his body shimmers, and he turns back into a golden wolf. Launching himself back off the bed, he races out of the bedroom, not at all hindered by the purple sweatpants still around his back legs.

"Don't think that running away will spare you!" I yell after him. "You promised me porn, and we're going to watch porn!"

His awoo of refusal drifts back to me from the open door.

An aborted laugh draws my attention to Owen, where he stands with his hand clamped over his mouth and his blue eyes twinkling.

"Alpha, honey, baby," I coo as I crawl to the foot of the bed to be closer to him. "Use that sexy voice of yours to command Tris to watch porn with me."

Shaking his head, he flees the room like the coward he is.

My head swings to Ros, and I give him a speculative once over, assessing whether he, too, is a coward.

He gives me an assessing look right back. "I'll grab the laptop and show you all the good porn sites."

I straighten to my knees on the bed. "Oh, yeah?"

He takes a step closer. "All the plumbers."

With an excited gasp, I press my hands over my heart. "And water delivery men?"

"And pool boys." He continues forward until his knees bump up against the bed and he stands directly in front of me. "And schoolteachers." I swoon forward and press myself against him, my chin on his chest as I stare up at him with adoration. "I knew there was a reason we were meant for each other."

Smile dimming, he reaches up to stroke my hair. "Yeah. Definitely meant for each other."

A throat clears, reminding us that we're not alone in the room, and we turn to look at Dr. Lopez.

With her closed medical bag in one hand, she gives me a stern look. "Remember our agreement, Rowe."

The reminder dampens some of my happiness, though not even the threat of future prodding at my brain can steal away my happiness at having Tris back safe and awake.

"And I'll come back tomorrow to check on Tris and make sure there are no adverse effects from his extended unconsciousness," she continues as she heads for the door. She pauses there to peer back at Ros. "Should I bring you some blood? We have a few bags on hand, though we'll need to order more if you plan to stay?"

When Ros shakes his head, my heart drops with disappointment. "I'll be good for two weeks. I've already had my monthly fill, plus extra."

Nodding, Dr. Lopez leaves the room.

"You can have all the extra you want, if you decide to stay," I whisper, fighting back the tears that Tris had chased away.

He seems to deflate as he bends to press his lips to my forehead. "I have a lot to think about. Just give me a little time, okay?"

"Okay." I grip the front of his shirt, unwilling to let him go just yet. "Thank you for all your help with Tris. It means a lot to me that you stayed as long as you have."

"I think you're right about how Tris and I would have gotten along," he murmurs, stroking my cheeks as if he can't stand to separate yet, either. "He's a lot like you. And Owen seems like a good guy, too, the curse notwithstanding. It's clear you have people who love you here."

The need to reassure Ros that those same people will love him as well fills me, pushing for release. But I resist speaking the words. It's not a matter of what Ros will gain by staying. It's a matter of what he'll have to give up. As much as I don't trust his father or the organization he leads, giving up that life isn't a decision I can make for Ros.

I want him to choose to stay for me, but I know there's more to consider than just our feelings. If Ros remains in Hartford Cove, he'll be making the same decision my father did when he chose my mom over being a huntsman.

Staying with me means choosing to be labeled a rogue and hunted by his people. And only he can decide if a mate he's known for less than a month is worth that.

## LIFE OUTSIDE THE BOX

I find Tris back in his human form, sitting on the porch step, and settle down beside him.

We lean toward each other at the same time, pressing our arms together, and stare out over the dark driveway to the lights of the quiet town below.

His quiet voice breaks the silence. "I can't say this is how I wanted to return to Hartford Cove, but it's nice being back."

I rest my head against his shoulder. "We should have come back when you wanted to. It would've prevented so much."

"Or it would've made everything worse." Tris shifts to wrap an arm around my shoulders and rests his cheek on top of my head. "Bryant was tracking us from the moment we left Hartford Cove. Coming back at that point would have led him straight here. And who knows what he would've done then?"

I tilt my head back to look up at him. "How do you know all that?"

"I talked to the brigade while you were having your heartto-heart with Ros," Tris explains. "They filled me in on what they knew, and I pieced it together from what I saw. While I was unconscious, I kept getting flashes of what was happening to you. Just little blips, like I could see through your eyes and feel what you were feeling. I'm so damn sorry for what you went through."

I reach out to grab his hand. "No, *I'm* sorry for what *you* went through. If I had listened to dream Haut, I could have been back here days ago."

"You had absolutely no reason to trust anything he said." Tris snorts. "Hell, if I'd still been with you, I would've told you not to trust him." He straightens and glances around. "Where is that asshole with his over-inflated ego, by the way?"

"Still on his way back, I assume." I feel a little guilty now for leaving him at the mall. "I last saw him a few towns over, and he's traveling on four feet."

"Things are going to be tense when he gets back," Tris murmurs with a shiver. "He wasn't exactly in his right mind when we ditched him."

No, he'd been a jealous, seething monster of rage intent on killing Tris. I just hope we can talk him down when he makes his grand return.

I play with Tris's fingers as I struggle with my guilt. "When he caught up to me in person, he said you needed me. I was pretty sure he was telling the truth at that point, but I still couldn't come to you right away."

"You had a promise to uphold. I respect that." When I look at him in surprise, he taps his temple. "It was one of the blips. You promised Ros you'd be there when he went to look at his sister's body. That was more important. It's not like I was going anywhere. And I knew I'd be your next stop."

I shift to rest my head against his chest. "I don't deserve you."

"Hey, that's what I was going to say about *you*." He lifts our joined hands and kisses the ring on my finger. "You're still wearing it."

"Of course." I straight to give him an offended look. "Why would I ever take it off?"

He turns our hands so his matching band faces me. "Together forever, no matter what."

"No matter what." I pull his hand closer and kiss his ring the same way he kissed mine. "I wish I was a wolf shifter."

He barks out a laugh. "No, you don't."

"No, I don't," I agree. "But it would be nice to get a look into your guys's brains sometimes. It sucks that this bond thing only goes one way."

"Has Owen been peeking into your mind, too?" Tris asks, curiosity in his voice.

"Not on purpose," Owen calls from inside the house. "No visions, either, just a general sense of Rowe's location."

"Sometimes I wish I had super hearing, too," I grumble.

That pulls another chuckle from Tris. "No, you don't. The things I hear... *I* don't even want super hearing."

I shift on the hard wooden step. "Remember that witch we met at the mall?" I wait for his nod. "I kept in contact with her, and she says that, since you're not a natural-born wolf shifter, it means you're still under a curse. If you really don't want super hearing..."

"Are you saying you can make me human again?" Tris touches the pink collar around his neck. "I'll have to think about that. There are benefits to this curse, now that I have full control over it. But I also miss just being normal."

"It's not like I have the cure ready to go, so you have time," I assure him.

I'm not sure how I feel about Tris being fully human. I've always known him as wolfdog Tris, and more recently, as wolf-shifter Tris. Would breaking his curse break our bond in the process? Though, I don't think I love him because of some mystical woo woo. I'd miss wolf Tris, but Tris in any form makes me happy.

"So, what do you plan to do about Ros?" Tris nudges me. "Total hottie, by the way."

"I don't know." I twist the ring on Tris's finger. "He hasn't actually asked me to go with him. And there are a lot of reasons for me to stay here."

"A lot of reasons for you to go, too," Tris points out. "Staying here, you'll never be normal. You'll always have that mantle of the Wendall witch hanging over your head. Your family's legacy is a heavy burden."

"Yeah." My eyes drift back to the town and all the obligations that come with it before I return my attention to Tris. "What about you?"

He gives me a bemused look. "You know I go where you go. Now and always. Don't think that leaving Hartford Cove means abandoning it, either. If you want to buy a mansion somewhere else, we can come back and visit." He raises his voice. "And a certain mayor would have a reason to take a vacation every once in a while. Just because you're a Hartford doesn't mean you're shackled to this place, either."

"Noted," Owen responds.

"I wouldn't mind staying here for a couple of weeks, though. I need a little vacation of my own from my coma." Tris lifts a hand to stifle a yawn. "I don't know why I'm tired. I just spent nearly a month sleeping."

"Because you weren't really sleeping, silly." I stand and offer him my hand. "Come on. We should get you back to bed."

"Are you propositioning me?" He starts to leer before another yawn ruins it. "Maybe after a little nap."

As we walk into the house, the sight of Ros sitting in the formal living room draws my eye. He had dragged the chair out of the kitchen and put it back where it belongs. He looks lonely, sitting by himself, surrounded by sheet-draped furniture.

Tris follows the direction of my gaze and gives me a little push in Ros's direction.

I hesitate, the desire to follow Tris upstairs and watch him sleep warring with the desire to make the most of the time I have left with Ros.

Tris points at me, mimes walking, then points at Ros.

Rolling my eyes, I give Tris a hug, then leave him at the base of the stairs to walk toward the formal living room. The

window next to the porch lets in a cool night breeze, and I wonder if he'd been listening in on my conversation with Tris, too.

He glances up from the folder in his lap and quickly turns over a stack of black and white photos, hiding them from my view.

I turn away from my father's history with the huntsmen to glance around the room. "This is where my grandma used to tell me fairy tales. She'd sit in that chair and tell me such fanciful stories. Now, I wonder how many of them were true."

He sets the folder on top of a sheet-draped side table. "Is it covered for mourning? Should I not be in here?"

Helplessly, I lift my hands. "I don't know why it's shut off when the rest of the house isn't. But I don't see a reason to leave it like this. Technically, it's my house now, and I can remove the sheets if I want to."

His auburn brows lift. "Then, why haven't you?"

"Because it's still my grandma's house. If I change things, the memories I have from my time here will vanish." I take a deep breath. "And there's no reason to change anything, unless I plan to stay, which has always been up in the air. When Tris and I came here, it wasn't supposed to be a permanent solution. I just didn't have anywhere else to go when we ran away from Bryant. But now that I'm not destitute, I can pretty much afford to live anywhere."

"Why didn't you tell me about Bryant when we were still at the clinic?" Ros asks softly.

I shuffle in place before folding my legs beneath me and dropping to sit on the floor at his feet. This was always my place when stories were being told, and it makes me feel most at ease. "You're a knight in shining armor. *My* knight in shining armor. If I had told you about Bryant back at the clinic, there's no way I could've convinced you to get into the trunk, and I *needed* you to get in the trunk."

"Because there were surveillance cameras, and I needed plausible deniability," he states.

"Yes, but also because I needed to put distance between you and the other huntsmen to give you time to think through things with a clear head. I couldn't drop everything on you in the moments between discovering Bryant and us leaving the clinic." I take a deep breath. "You're like me, Rosebud. You grew up in a tiny box."

His lips part with a protest, but I lift a hand to ask him to wait.

"Your box was bigger than the apartments my dad moved me around in, but it was still a box. You were born and raised believing in the huntsmen, and there was never any reason for you to question it." I fiddle with the hem of my t-shirt. "Sometimes, you need someone who didn't grow up in your box to pull you out so you can see the bigger picture. If you'd gone back into the clinic to see Bryant for yourself, there's no way you would have gotten out of your box. Your dad would have given you a good excuse for why he instructed your men not to follow your orders, and why he wanted Bryant kept alive. And you probably would have accepted it, because outside the box is scary."

I take a breath, fearing how this next part will reveal my selfishness but needing all my cards on the table. "I also knew that Bryant would tell your father who I was after I refused to help him. Then, I would have been trapped in the box, too, and while I would have been with you, I wouldn't have been a willing prisoner. I've seen more of the world, and I can't go back into boxes. I know I didn't handle the situation well, but I'm not good at strategy. I wasn't raised to think multiple steps ahead. My first instinct was to get us out of there as quickly as possible, so that's what I did."

Ros's gaze drifts to the folder. "I don't like the way it happened, but I can't say that you're wrong, either."

When he falls silent, and the seconds stretch into a minute, I take the hint and rise, leaving Ros to his thoughts.

In the kitchen, Owen sits alone at the table, one of the journals open in front of him as he dutifully continues the project of translating the titles of the spells.

"Where did Barron and the others go?" I ask softly so I don't startle him, though he likely heard me coming.

"I told them to go home." He jots down another title. "They all have work tomorrow."

"I'll thank them later for all their help." I walk up behind him and wrap my arms around his shoulders, leaning forward to press my cheek against his. "Life is too complicated."

"It's better than the alternative." He leans back in the chair, his head against me. "I missed you."

"I missed you, too." I kiss the top of his mussed hair. "Stop stepping between me and monsters. I can't bear to watch you almost die again."

He turns his head to rub his cheek against my breast. "Never. I will always choose to protect you."

A lump forms in my throat. "You're a stubborn man, Owen Hartford."

"If you go, I'll still be here waiting," he whispers. "I'll never stop waiting for you, Rowe Branning Wendall."

My arms tighten around him, and we stay like that, listening to the silence in the house.

# BONUS OF BEING CURSED

T he blanket that covers me lifts, rousing me from sleep as a warm body settles over mine. A hard cock rocks against the valley of my thighs as soft lips trail down my throat.

Desire stirs through me, and I lift my hands to trace over a firm, muscular back. "Tris?"

He hums in acknowledgment as he drifts lower to lick along my collarbone.

"What are you doing?" I ask groggily, because I clearly remember going to bed with Owen and falling asleep cuddling with him.

Tris wiggles lower, his thigh pushing between mine to make room for his body, and his head disappears beneath the blanket. "I woke up, and I was lonely."

"But..." I trail off when his lips close around my breast. When I turn my head, I see Owen's sleeping face on the pillow next to mine. I tug fitfully on Tris his hair, hissing, "This isn't appropriate."

Tris releases my breast with a pop. "If he was going to object, he would have done so before I crawled into bed. And if he wants to stop pretending to sleep, I don't mind sharing. He's been holding back like a gentleman for way too long."

Owen's eyes slit open. "I was trying to give Rowe time to settle back in before pouncing on her."

"Rowe likes pouncing." Tris's hand slips beneath the tshirt I wore to bed and cups me between the thighs, drawing a soft moan from me. "And she doesn't need time, do you, you naughty girl?"

"You just woke up from a coma," I moan as his fingers tease my entrance through my underwear.

"Magical, wolf-shifter healing." He rakes his teeth over my taut nipple. "One point in favor of staying cursed."

"It's a good—" A moan of pleasure cuts off my words when he pushes aside my underwear to slide his fingers inside me.

Owen's hand brushes my cheek as he shifts onto his elbow to hover over me. "Is this okay? Or would you prefer I leave?"

"Stay," I gasp, reaching for him.

With a groan, he leans down to kiss me, swallowing my next moan when Tris sucks my nipple into his mouth while swirling his fingers inside me. Owen's tongue thrusts past my lips to stroke against mine with a possessive growl that sends vibrations down my throat. My inner muscles clench around Tris's fingers in response, the need to answer my mates' hunger rising within me. Heat suffuses my body, my heart racing with desire.

Owen's lips leave mine, and he licks down my throat to find the pounding pulse on the side of my neck and sucks hard. My hips buck, driving Tris's fingers deeper, and he rubs the heel of his hand against my clit to heighten my pleasure.

Lips parting, I tilt my head to the side to give Owen better access, and my eyes lock with Ros's heated gaze.

He sits in a chair in the corner of the room, his eyelids at half-mast as he watches us. The others have to know that he's there, had to have known before any of this even started. Of course, he would be here, too. He always came into my room at his house to watch me, as if he couldn't help the desire to be near.

Though he doesn't leave now, neither does he get up to join us. Instead, he bites his bottom lip, his fangs pressing into the tender flesh, and I feel an answering throb in my thighs where he drank from me last night.

I moan, tightening my legs around Tris's waist as lust pools between my thighs. Ros's gaze strokes over me with the same weight as Tris and Owen's hands, my pulse seeming to beat harder in all the places he touched me before.

Tris's fingers leave my body, and he moves lower on the bed, dragging my underwear down. He leaves them at midthigh, making it impossible for me to spread my legs.

Warm breaths puff over my damp curls as he parts my folds at the height of my sex to expose my clit. His tongue flicks out, and pleasure streaks through me. My hips buck, but his weight on my legs holds me in place as he tastes me again before leaning down to rub his nose against me. Then his tongue returns in a firm, flat swipe before his lips close around my clit, sucking greedily.

Owen's fingers on my chin direct my mouth back to his, licking up my moans of pleasure. He reaches down to drag my shirt up, exposing my breasts to the cool room. My aching nipples harden painfully, and I almost sob with relief when he covers one with his hot palm, massaging my tender flesh. Reaching up, I grip Owen's shoulders, needing to anchor myself as sensations rock through me.

Mind fuzzy with pleasure, I seek out Ros once more. He sits lower in the chair, his knees spread wide, and one hand languidly stroking his inner thigh below the hard bulge in his pants. The realization that seeing me like this turns him on sends me over the edge, and I come hard, my inner muscles pulsing as I moan against Owen's lips.

Tris's mouth leaves me, and he pushes the covers back as he sits up, licking his lips. He shifts my legs so they lay next to his hip, half turning me onto my side. The tip of his hard cock juts past the low waistband of his sweats, and he pushes the elastic down farther to free himself.

My body still pulses with my release when Tris positions himself at my entrance and slides into my slick heat. I clutch Owen tighter, my nails digging into his shoulders as my body tenses once more, the steady thrust of Tris's cock in and out of my body driving me toward release once more. I clench around Tris's cock, and he lets out a groan as his hips move faster, his pace turning frantic.

Owen lifts his head from his sweet assault on my lips, and looks at Tris, growling, "Don't you dare knot her."

Tris's golden eyes gleam with defiance, but his chin dips, submitting to his Alpha's command. Slowly, he pulls from my body and repositions so that his slick cock glides between my thighs, stroking against my swollen folds without entering, his tip rubbing against my clit.

The friction against my thighs sends phantom waves of pleasure through me, the places where Ros bit me flaring to life once more. Moaning as I come again, I reach out and grab Tris's hip, digging my fingernails into the swell of his ass.

Shouting, he grinds against me, hot cum drenching my thighs as the base of his cock swells between my thighs. He whines and rocks against me, the clench of my thighs not enough. Releasing him, I shove my hand between our bodies and wrap my hand around his base, marveling at how much he swelled. I can barely get my fingers halfway around him. No wonder I always pass out with this filling me up. Tris rocks within my grasp, shivers rocking his body before he slumps to the bed behind me.

Owen pulls my attention back to him, his lips hungry and demanding, reminding me we're not done yet. With quick efficiency, he yanks on my underwear, the fabric burning against my thighs as it snaps. His mouth leaves mine long enough to tug my shirt off with the same frantic need. Then he turns me and lifts me in a smooth move that wraps my legs around his waist, our fronts pressed together.

Over Owen's shoulder, my gaze locks with Ros's as he lowers his zipper, his cock springing free. He grips his shaft, pumping slowly as he watches me be pleasured by other men.

My taut nipples rub against Owen's chest as he grips my hips and directs me down onto his hard length. I groan at the sensation of being filled again, my channel overstimulated from coming so many times already. Wrapping my arms around him, I bite his shoulder as he rocks me on his cock with quick, hard thrusts. Ros's hand on his cock quickens in time, and the phantom sensation of him moving inside me joins Owen's thrusts, feeling as if the two men take me at the same time.

Gasping, I fill my lungs with the musky scent of desire that fills the room. It makes me dizzy, as if my entire body is being taken over by these men. My legs tighten around Owen, my body tingling, and my nerves jumping like firecrackers.

Owen's hands move over my body with desperation, and he whispers words against my skin that I can't hear through the crash of blood in my ears. Then his hands return to my hips, and he presses me down as his knot swells inside me, hot cum filling my channel.

Past his shoulder, I watch as Ros finds his own release, then pleasure swamps me, and I black out.

# THE WITCH IN MY HEAD

I run through the woods, the familiar scent of saltwater drawing me forward despite the exhaustion that makes my limbs shake and the hunger that gnaws at my empty stomach. Home tugs at my gut, along with the knowledge that she will be there.

My salvation. My forgiveness.

The words pound through my mind, muttered by the human that hides within me, but I don't know these words. All I know is mate. The promise of her small hands and soft lap won't allow me to rest. There will be no sleep until I'm back by her side.

### Rejection.

I push that thought away. My human does not understand, but he will learn. The bond still thrums, open and undamaged, so she is still mate.

A branch cracks behind me, and the wind shifts, bringing with it the scent of stale blood. My hackles rise, and I slow my pace. Another predator is in the woods tonight, an enemy of our people.

### Huntsmen.

*I slip deeper into the shadows, the dirt that covers my fur dulling the silver sheen and helping me to hide.* 

A moment later, a man races past, moving at a superhuman speed. His black clothes blend in better with the shadows than my fur, the black hood over his head masking his features. Only the silver gun under his arm reflects the moonlight, and his passage leaves behind the smell of death.

It can't be a coincidence that a huntsman made it this close to home. Turning away from the tug toward my mate, I slink after the intruder.

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I jolt awake, my heart pounding with adrenaline. I was running with wolf Haut again. Even as I realize that, the details of the dream slip away. But my pulse refuses to slow. Sleep won't be returning soon.

Gently, I disentangle myself from Owen's arms and swing my legs off the bed, narrowly avoiding stepping on Tris, who sleeps in wolf form on the floor. Silly man should have gone back to his own bed if there wasn't enough room on this one for all three of us.

When I glance toward the chair in the corner, it now sits empty. At least Ros had the good sense to sleep somewhere comfortable.

On tiptoes, I walk through the connected bathroom into my old room, where I grab the pants and camisole I wore when we returned to Hartford Cove from the floor. Pulling them on, I stumble out into the hall.

Shadows fill the house, but nightlights along the wall illuminate the way to the stairs.

I carefully walk down to the ground floor, one hand on the banister the entire way. My legs tremble slightly, and there's an ache between my thighs that I'll be feeling for a while.

A whisper draws my attention toward the formal living room. I turn, expecting to find Ros there, but it lies empty.

Frowning, I walk into the room and check the window, making sure it's closed and latched before I continue into the kitchen.

As I open the fridge for the carton of milk, the whisper comes again. *Rowe, come to me*.

"Ugh, right now?" I mutter to the witch in my head. "You couldn't have waited until morning?"

*Rowe, come to me*, the voice insists, though with none of the strength the call held the first time she tried to summon me out of the house. I don't feel a single twitch in my legs demanding I walk to her right now.

Sighing, I return the milk to the fridge. Hot cocoa can wait until I deal with this.

I slip my hand into my pocket and pull out the handful of papers I had squirreled away, setting the ones I don't need right now on the kitchen table as I unfold the spell.

It's a lot like the Maze of Misdirection, but the focus point is a bowl of water. Easy enough.

Going to the island, I open the junk drawer and rummage around until I find a box of candles. Unlike the manufactured birthday ones I've used before, these look hand-dipped, the wax slightly lumpy and crooked, though they're still little more than a few layers of wax over a wick. Clearly meant to be disposable.

I find a book of matches, too, and take them to the kitchen table, then grab a shallow pasta bowl and fill it with water. Setting it on the table, I move the journals to the opposite end of the table so I don't accidentally catch the family heirlooms on fire.

Taking a seat, I light the candles one by one, calling on the watch towers for protection, then dip my finger into the bowl, circling it clockwise, which is apparently called deosil. I'm glad there's a little footnote at the bottom that explains that, or I'd be up the creek without a paddle.

Or would that be in the air without a broom? Because I'm a witch. *Buh dum dum*. I should tell that one to Tris when he wakes up. He'd totally laugh.

Once the water is swirling on its own, I read the first half of the spell three times, then stick my finger back in the water and swirl it counterclockwise, or widdershins, saying the second half of the spell three times, casting my thoughts out toward the witch seeking me.

A light breeze makes the flames of the candles flicker, though it doesn't snuff them out. I sit quietly, trying to picture my mind opening and being receptive, which is difficult when I immediately start imagining chucking my literal brain at anyone who wants to have a conversation, which leads to remembering that starfish chuck their stomachs at their food, and how I read once about an octopus that throws its dick at female octopi and how startling it would be to have a detachable dick thrown at me.

By that point, I'm humming along to a half-remembered song about detachable dicks and wondering if I didn't widdershins fast enough when my ears start ringing, scaring the crap out of me.

"Um, hello?" I ask, glancing around the kitchen. "You've reached Rowe."

*At last!* the words blast through my mind, making me wince. *I was about ready to give up!* 

"Uh, sorry? And also, *excuse you*. You nearly killed me!" I reign in my annoyance and eye the quickly burning candles. Maybe I shouldn't have used ones quite this disposable. With a steadying breath, I try again. "I've never received a witch call before. What can I do for you?"

*You're breaking up.* Her voice flickers in and out like a bad radio connection. *I have little time. You need to find us—* 

"Hello?" I wiggle my earlobe to see if that will help. "Who is this?"

*Delilah*. Her voice blips out, then crackles back in. *Delilah Shult*—

The ringing in my ear cuts off, the candles sputtering out.

Stunned, I stare at the bowl of still water. Either Ros's sister has been harassing me from the afterlife or she's still very much alive and in need of saving.

The End...For Now.

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### A Feud to Bury

### Monsters Among Us: Hartford Cove Book 3

Hartford Cove is no stranger to hiding the truth, but this time, the secrets revealed are about Rowe's new mate, the vampire Ambrose.

When Rowe kidnapped Ros and hauled him back to Hartford Cove, she knew she was taking more than one risk. The small town of wolf shifters doesn't play friendly with vampires. But Rowe hopes that a peace offering will finally lay this centuries-old feud to rest.

Returning to Hartford Cove may have been a mistake, though. When Haut is wounded by a silver bullet, it becomes clear that the barrier that protects them may no longer be enough to keep the quiet town hidden.

Time is running out, but not just for the wolf shifters. The witch who's been invading Rowe's thoughts holds the answers to the secrets in Ros's past. Rowe must learn to embrace her heritage as the Wendall witch and track down Ros's missing sister, but with enemies at their borders, now is the worst time to leave Hartford Cove.

Can they figure out a way to bury the feud between wolf shifters and huntsmen before more innocent lives are lost?

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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 <u>newsletter</u>, visit her website, or follow her on social media!

