

A
KISS
SO
CURSED

CM TILLMAN

CM Tillman

A Kiss So Cursed

Copyright © 2023 by CM Tillman

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

CM Tillman asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

CM Tillman has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet Websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such Websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Designations used by companies to distinguish their products are often claimed as trademarks. All brand names and product names used in this book and on its cover are trade names, service marks, trademarks and registered trademarks of their respective owners. The publishers and the book are not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book.

None of the companies referenced within the book have endorsed the book.

First edition

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy

Find out more at reedsy.com

*To all the girls who grew up with crushes on Casper the
ghost, here's some ghost smut for you*

Preface

Please read for Trigger Warnings.

This is a gothic romance novel, so it has many themes of gore and violence. There is murder and death, along with creepy themes of being haunted, and hunted.

This novel has very detailed sex scenes. All parties involved consent, but there are themes of breath play and domination.

There are also themes of control, emotional manipulation, and toxic relationships.

If any of the above is not your cup of tea, you might not want to continue with the story.

Chapter 1

“Jesus, you’ve lost every game today. Did Edgar keep you up with his ghost dicking?”

I nearly dropped my controller in shock. It was enough of a fumble for Alexa to land a killing blow on my character, chopping their head off.

My brows knotted as the unseen cartoon crowd cheered for her victory, her fifth win in a row.

I sighed, tossing the controller on the couch as she leapt up, dancing on top of the coffee table.

“That was unnecessary.” I grumbled, “You were going to win anyway.”

“Yeah, but it was worth the look on your face.” She blew me a kiss and jumped back onto the couch, draping her long, toned arms over the back.

“If you sucked at sex in life, that shit follows you into death.” Alexa threw me a coy look. “I was a very giving lover in life.”

Alexa wagged her eyebrows at me and I rolled my eyes.

“No comment,” I said.

“On my skills, or Edgar’s?” She teased.

I was spared answering by a knock on my door. Alexa disappeared from the couch to reappear at the door, an act that would have surprised me a month ago, but now seemed as natural as breathing.

The moment she opened the door, my skin began to itch. Grandmother's doctor, a short turnip of a man, stood waiting in the hall.

His small, beady eyes glistened wetly as his gaze swung to me.

"You should be in bed." He wheezed. I fought the urge to tell him to go fuck himself. Hostile? Maybe, but the man had been a thorn in my side ever since the vampire attack.

My grandmother demanded that only her most trusted personal physician take care of me, and I had no choice but to agree. Following the vampire attack, I was placed on house arrest.

Alexa was my jailer and Dr. Turks was my judge. I couldn't leave my room without his approval and, after two weeks, I started to fear I'd spend New Year's locked up.

Dr. Turks approached me, huffing and puffing the whole twenty feet to my couch. I swallowed back any hope I had of being cleared today. The man was as stubborn as my grandmother, and I was beginning to think they were working together to keep me here.

I wouldn't put it past her. Since arriving in Harrowgrove, my mother's family estate, she'd been hell-bent on getting me

to agree to stay and continue my mother's work, breaking the family curse that trapped their souls to the estate.

Only grandmother had been less than upfront with the family history, and the lies and half-truths had gotten so out of hand lately that she and I had come to a final arrangement.

I'd agreed to make my choice, stay or leave, by New Year, as long as she answered my questions.

Only I couldn't make a real decision on whether I wanted to stay or leave, not while trapped in my room. With less than two weeks left before Christmas, I was beginning to think grandmother had played her final card. Trapping me like she had my mother when she was my age.

Dr. Turks began his checks. First my vitals, which he added to his chart, licking his lips. I averted my gaze, trying hard not to focus on the ever-growing clumps of white gunk that formed on the sides of his mouth as he worked. By the end of the session, after he would surely tell me once again I had to stay put, there would be an undeniable amount of it that he would wipe away with the back of his hand.

"Hold still." He ordered in his wheezy voice.

I focused on Alexa, standing behind him. She narrowed her eyes as he tore off the bandage on my neck and shoulder. I winced, feeling the tape tearing at my healing skin.

He leaned down, so close I could feel his breath coasting over the stitched-up flesh. Seeing Alexa tense up, the scars on her arms from years of hunting monsters grow taunt as she

crossed her arms. I gave her a pointed look before spitting my tongue at her.

“This is healing up nicely.” My tongue hung in surprise as he stood back up, nodding to himself. “I would think some fresh air and a nice walk would be in order.” I blinked at him with a blank expression, my tongue still out.

“Are you saying she’s cleared to go outside?” Alexa asked.

He nodded, wiping the formation of white foam from his mouth. “As long as you feel up to it, that is.”

I leapt up, surprising him. “Yes, I am up for it!” I said, breathless.

“In moderation, of course.” He wheezed. “If you should feel faint or weak, you are to come right back here and go to bed.” He wagged a plump finger at me before shooting Alexa a look.

“Of course. We will keep an eye on her and call you if that happens.” She said, nodding.

“Good. Now I must speak with the lady of the house before I go.” He handed me a slip. “This is for the pain, as well as a muscle relaxers, to help you sleep in case your neck gives you any issues.”

I nodded, taking the slip. “I’ll have Edgar fill this.” We watched him huff and puff his way out of my room, waiting until the door was shut before squealing in glee.

“Freedom, finally!” I cried, throwing my arms around her.

“Thank all that is holy! I was beginning to worry I’d have to start letting you win just to keep your spirits up.” Alexa chuckled. “But I’m sure Edgar dear is doing a fantastic job at that. What are you going to do first?” She asked, holding me away from her.

“Please tell me you’re inviting those delicious friends of yours over for Christmas.”

I beamed back at her. “Yes! I’m going to have Edgar book their flight and a private cabin in town right away!” I’d been holding off on making plans until I knew for sure I’d be able to leave the manor.

“Perfect.” She gave me a sly look and sauntered to her jacket hanging over the couch. “Now, you remember the deal, right?”

I fought back the urge to groan. Alexa and I had grown closer over the past few weeks, but she was still very much in league with my grandmother. Before she’d died, she’d been a monster hunter, and in death, tethered to our estate, she continued to perform her same duties. Lately that meant being more of a bodyguard and babysitter for me, but now that I had the freedom to leave the grounds, it meant she couldn’t follow.

“Yes, if I leave the grounds, I need to have someone with me,” I grumbled. My options were slim since the majority of the people who worked for or with my family were dead and unable to leave with me. Which meant I needed someone living and breathing to help me.

Alexa slipped into her jacket, smiling. “I am sure you have some Christmas shopping you need to do.”

The truth was I didn’t have shopping on my mind. “Simon mentioned my mom and the swamp.” I blurted. Alexa froze at the mention of Simon. My entire life I’d thought he was my dad until Halloween, when Edgar showed up and turned my world upside down.

“What did he say?” Her face might have been stern, but I could see the knowledge in her eyes.

“Did grandma tell you everything about our deal?” I asked. Alexa’s lips thinned into a straight line, but she nodded. A tinge of regret ran through me, but I pushed it away. I didn’t want to hurt her feelings by assuming she’d lie to me, but the track record with everyone here wasn’t exactly stellar.

“If you ask me something I cannot answer, I will let you know.” I saw the flash in her eyes, and I instantly regretted agreeing to that clause. Grandma had used it to keep my real father’s identity from me, from what I assumed was pure spite.

“Simon mentioned she started taking trips to the swamp, that she thought there was some link between that place and our curse. Then one day she came out and said she had one year to live.” Alexa nodded, but her lips remained pressed. “So,” I continued, only slightly annoyed she wasn’t responding, “Does anyone here know why?”

She considered the question, and I knew I was on the right track. I couldn’t just ask what I wanted outright. I had to be smart.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity of thinking, she said, “No one knows for sure, but we all have our assumptions.”

“What was she doing in the swamp?”

Alexa bit her lip. “She never told me exactly what she was doing.” Anger and frustration swelled inside me. She must have seen it rising. “Don’t get snippy with me.” She snapped, “Look, all I know is this: Your mom went into a tombworld one day. She never told me who it was, and when she came out, she got it in her head to go into the swamp. Once a week for nearly a year, she went in there until that last time. She refused to tell me what happened or why she thought she had a year to live. She never told anyone as far as I know.”

“But why go into the swamps at all? If she thought it had something to do with the curse, then surely she told someone?”

Alexa shook her head. “No. If she told your grandmother, I never heard of it.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.” I groaned, throwing myself back into my pillows and instantly regretting it as pain shot through my arm.

“Maybe Simon knows something I don’t.” She said, shrugging. “You could always ask your grandmother, too.” I shot her a withering look, and she snorted.

“Yeah, never mind, terrible idea.” She said, disappearing.

Chapter 2

My frustration heightened after Alexa left for the afternoon. Edgar appeared in my room shortly after, and I was so overwhelmed by my thoughts I blurted out, “I need to see Simon!”

He raised a brow, a sly smirk tugging at his lips. “That’s not the greeting I expected.” He pulled at his silk button-up shirt, trying to look disappointed.

“I’m sorry, but I need to ask him about my mom.” Edgar climbed into bed with me, wrapping his arms around me.

“I can ask him to come tomorrow.” He said, softly breathing in the scent of my hair.

“Thank you.” I sighed, relaxing a little against him. Alexa’s questions rolled over in my mind, and I grimaced. Edgar and I were more than friends, but less than a couple. For one, he was dead. There was no chance of us living happily ever after together, especially if I ended up breaking the curse on my family. If I did, I assumed his spirit would cross over and rest, which would mean a future together just wasn’t viable.

If that wasn’t enough to muddy the waters of our relationship, he also worked with my grandmother. “How was

your day with the old goat?" I asked.

A deep laugh rumbled from his chest. "The usual." He replied.

"What is that usually, then? I've never asked what she does during the day with you."

He glanced down at me, mischief in his eyes. "She takes advantage of me."

I rolled my eyes, "Seriously."

He gave a shrug, causing my head to bob up and down with his shoulder. "She runs the business and I help her when I can. I've been doing the same thing for a lifetime, it feels like."

I propped myself up and met his gaze. "What do you mean? You've been working for my family since you died?"

He flinched at the word, and I felt remorse course through me. "Pretty much." He mumbled.

"Why not take a break, then?" I asked. "Does she really need your help all day?"

"She does." He replied and the finality in his tone told me the subject was over. I couldn't fathom his unwillingness to discuss the business, but I figured it was something to be discussed later.

I rolled over onto my back, staring at the gossamer canopy above. "I was cleared by the doctor today," I muttered.

He chuckled, “I heard. I’m just glad you’re alive, Willow. You should be too.” He grasped my hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. He was right, of course. My brushes with death were becoming all too familiar lately.

“What was that vampire even doing there?” I asked, frowning. “He seemed to be familiar with my family.” Then again, so was everyone else in town. My family had a long history of making enemies.

“In all the years I’ve been here, I never noticed him in there,” Edgar admitted.

“He mentioned someone named Violet?” I turned to see his face, his brows knotted in confusion.

“Violet? That can’t be right.” He muttered.

“Who is she?”

“Harrin’s great-granddaughter.” He cocked his head to the side, thinking aloud. “That had to be easily 150 years ago. I don’t remember Violet getting involved with vampires.”

I shrugged, “He sure seemed to know her.” Give Violet my regards, is what he’d hissed to me right before almost finishing me off. I’d say he was very well acquainted with her somehow.

“Do you think she put him in there?” I asked. He gave me a look, then howled with laughter.

“Violet? Entomb a vampire?” He gasped between words, holding his sides as he continued to laugh.

I gave him a bemused expression, “Then who stuck him in there and why would it just open now all of a sudden?”

He shook his head, taking a few breaths before saying, “Lucien is looking into it for us. Since he is the only one who can freely walk outside the manor boundaries.”

“Right.” I sighed, remembering what Alexa had told me a few days before the attack about the werewolves. After running into one in the swamp while searching for my ancestor’s bones, Alexa found their prints circling the property. My family’s capacity to irritate virtually everyone they came across meant there was a possibility that they were attempting to resolve an old grudge.

I wasn’t completely convinced that they were after me. While encountering the werewolf, I also came across a young man named Grayson. It was possible he was one as well, but neither he nor the werewolf seemed interested in ripping me to pieces. They actually assisted me by providing the bones I needed.

Granted, they probably had no idea who I was, or whose bones they were giving me. So it wasn’t a stretch to think once they realized who I was that they decided to prowl around the manor in hopes of catching me.

“Even when I can leave, I’ll still be trapped here,” I murmured.

“You can still go into the tombworlds. You’ll just have to bring either myself or Alexa with you. It’s worth mentioning

that Lucien can show you around the grounds and, if needed, we can get someone to guide you out of the property.”

I raised a brow. “Who? Lucien?” I quipped, knowing my options were slim.

His eyes grew dark. “No, I wouldn’t trust that drunk out there alone with you. He might not be able to die, Willow, but you saw what happened with the vampire.” I didn’t need him to remind me. “No, it would be someone else.”

As long as that someone isn’t Wesley, I thought bitterly. The monster hunter, and Alexa’s nephew, was someone I planned to avoid at all costs now that I knew Grandma had him in her sights as a suitor. Or rather, stud, since all she wanted from me was a kid at this point.

A thought suddenly came to me, causing me to nearly jump out of bed. “Edgar!” I yelped, and he nearly fell off the bed in surprise.

“What in the seven hells!” He growled, composing himself.

“My mom said she had one year left to live, right?”

He gave a nod.

“She didn’t have me towards the end of that year, right?” He nodded again, slower this time. “Do you think she had me just so - you know?”

He raised a brow, a queer look in his eyes. “Willow, I thought you knew that already.”

I sat back into my pillows; my heart was heavy as the realization washed over me. At least one of the many questions I'd had since coming here a month ago was answered now. No wonder my mom sent me away to make my own choices since she only had me to continue the bloodline.

“Don't overthink it,” Edgar said gently, brushing his lips against my cheek. It still surprised me how warm his touch was, even though he was dead. “I have to go back to work. Try not to get into trouble until dinner?”

With Edgar being called away to tend to his daily duties with grandmother, and everyone else busy until dinner, I finally found the time to do something I'd been postponing.

I hobbled towards my vanity table, barely casting a glance at my gaunt reflection, and settled down on my chair before opening the top drawer. Instead of being full of makeup and jewels, a leather-bound journal sat in the center. A golden willow tree pendant hung from the necklace that was laced around it.

Edgar had given them to me as gifts for my birthday. The necklace was meant as an anchor in the tombworld, I could focus on to pull me back home. The journal was self-explanatory, though I hadn't gotten around to writing anything in it yet.

I picked up the journal and necklace, but they weren't what I was looking for. Under the journal was a bronze key. Simple in design, and otherwise nondescript. It was, however, the key to my mom's rooms.

Edgar had given me the key as well, almost as a peacemaker between us in the beginning. That was weeks ago, and I had yet to use it, or even look at it. I'd put everything he'd given me in the drawer, thinking I would go back to them when I was ready.

Ready to admit I needed an anchor and journal because if I did, it would mean I had decided to stay. Ready to go looking through my mom's rooms, because if I did, it would mean she still hadn't appeared.

Part of my family's curse meant that their souls were trapped here on the manor grounds. Most of them preferred to stay in their tombworlds, a sort of afterlife that a spirit built around them. My mom was one of those, but she'd also shut the door to her world, so no one would be able to enter.

I picked up the key, knowing that she still hadn't opened the door. Not even for her daughter.

After the realization that her death was connected with the swamp, which was somehow connected with a spirit she met in the tombworlds, I decided now was the time to go snooping through her things.

Edgar mentioned they hadn't touched her rooms since she passed, so there was a good chance I could find something that might help me understand what happened to her.

I made my way to the south wing, a set of rooms by the massive library tucked away in the southern corner of the manor. It was easy enough finding the doors to her rooms, since all the others were unlocked.

The oak doors were much like my own, just a tad slimmer. The key went in, and I took a deep breath before turning it. The doors swung open effortlessly as if they were waiting for someone to come unlock them.

Her rooms were arranged the same as mine. A large main room with a bar and table, a sitting area around an empty slot where a TV should have been. A study adjacent to the main room, and a master bedroom across from that. Only slightly smaller than my own, with ivory white walls and golden accents, it didn't look much like the room of a young woman just out of her teens.

Then again, neither did mine.

Despite being closed up for twenty-one years, the place was immaculate. I decided to start in the study and work my way to the bedroom. I had no idea what I was looking for, but I figured I'd search every nook and cranny until I found something worthwhile.

The study was surprisingly empty. Only a few books lined the bookcase on the wall, all outdated textbooks from school. I skimmed through them still, wondering if my mom might have hidden something among their pages. When that came up with nothing, I checked the desk, finding every drawer empty. I checked for possible hidden drawers and when I found none, I moved on to the living area.

I came up with nothing there either, even after searching every little corner I could. I entered the bedroom with a heavy

heart, already prepared for the same. Surprisingly, I noticed all the drawers and closets were still packed.

I took a few moments to walk through her massive wardrobe. Much of the clothing was outdated, but still in great condition. She had mostly sun dresses, and very few pants. Her jewelry drawers had very little in them, other than a handful of rings and some bracelets. I wondered if she just didn't care for jewelry, or if Grandma had taken what she wanted.

Her vanity was bare, which struck me as odd. For someone who had multiple racks of fancy dresses, I expected her vanity to be packed with all sorts of creams and makeup. Again, it was possible Grandma had taken them. I opened a few drawers, finding them equally empty, until I slid out one of the middle drawers and heard a loud thud.

Something had fallen into the drawer below. I opened the bottom drawer and gaped at the journal sitting there. It was thick, bound in leather, and tied up with a thin piece of cord that barely held the pages together. My pulse raced as I picked it up.

Rotating it in my hands, I wondered if she had been hiding it, or if it had fallen between the drawers by chance. My gut told me it had to be the former. Why else would she have it in an empty vanity?

I pulled the cord, letting it fall to the ground as I sat down in the vanity chair. There was no writing or images on the covers, but once I opened it to the first page I was greeted with

a beautiful hand-drawn picture of the roses that grew in the front of the manor, mingling with the ivy that framed the wide windows.

Did my mom draw this? I thought, turning the page. My heart nearly stopped beating as I laid eyes on my mom's handwriting.

April 5th, Alexa caught me running away today. I was almost at the gates when she found me and dragged me back to mother. I'm afraid to look at her after what that monster did to her legs. I told her I was scared to go into those spirits' worlds, especially after what happened to her. She called me a coward and told me if I wanted to doom our entire family to the fate of the curse that I could, but I would have to go explain myself to each and every one of them. Edgar convinced her to give me some time, and she eventually agreed. He's going to bring me to the crypt in a week, and I have to help a spirit. Hopefully, I can escape before then.

Chapter 3

It was fortunate that I was seated, otherwise, I might have collapsed after reading the first passage. Everything I'd ever thought of my mom went out the window in that second. I'd been told she'd been devoted to the family, to helping spirits and finding out how to break the curse.

They all made it seem like she took up the mantle without hesitation, without a thought, but this told me that was all either an over exaggeration, or a bald-faced lie. I continued to read the next two entries, which were short thoughts about how she hoped to get away before the week was up.

The next date after that was nearly three weeks later.

March 4th, so much has happened. I feel like I need to write it all down before it drives me mad. I planned to run before they made me go into the crypt, but mother must have known what I was doing. Edgar came to me before the week was out and took me to the graveyard. I knew what he wanted me to do. I'd watched mother do it for years, but it still felt like a dream as he brought me to a grave. He had me dig up the bones of a five-year-old boy, William, and made sure I walked into the crypt with them. I prayed, harder than I had ever prayed before, that William would deny me entry. My prayers

went unanswered, and I found myself in William's world. He was just a little boy, playing on a riverbank, as happy and carefree as anyone his age. I watched as a dark shadow came down the bank, and dragged this little boy into the river to drown him. I watched this happen nearly a dozen times, repeatedly, until I couldn't take it anymore. I ran down to the bank, to William, and I picked him up. I don't know why I did it, but I ran with him, away from the shadow, until we found a hill where I let him go. I half expected the events to restart the moment I set him down, but instead, he grew little wings and flew away. Then I was back in the graveyard. Mother said it was an easy enough spirit to help, which is why Edgar chose him, but that I needed to get over myself and start helping those spirits and the family. I have to admit; it did feel great watching that little boy fly off, a peaceful feeling washing over me as I was released back home. But not all spirits are like him. Mother is proof of that. Edgar told me mother got too confident in her abilities, and that she should have been more cautious. But she's desperate to break this curse. She says it has to end with us, that it's gone on too long. How does she expect us to break it, when all the others have tried and failed for nearly 200 years? I let Edgar take me to the graveyard every Friday since then, and I've managed to help each spirit he gives me. He says he wants to start me off with the easier ones since I am only fourteen, but we can move on to harder ones as I get older. I will have to, anyway, if my mother's theory about the curse is true. But if it is, how am I supposed to know which spirits to help?

I shut the journal, feeling frustrated. It appeared that she had changed her mind. She went from desperately wanting to run away from home to being happy with helping spirits in a matter of days. So far, I had only managed to help one spirit, Rebecca. Perhaps there was more to it than what I grasped.

After taking the journal back to my room, I hid it in my vanity drawer alongside my own journal and made my way to dinner.

Grandma was sitting at the head of the table, her usual bowl of soup placed before her already. I took my seat next to Alexa, across from Edgar, who gave me a curt nod.

Alexa knew about Edgar and me and our nightly dalliances, but Grandma did not. According to Alexa, she would make Edgar dead all over again if she knew he and I were sleeping together.

While the others ate, I was served a dinner of a rack of lamb with potatoes and began eating.

“I am glad to see you up,” Grandma said, spooning some soup into her mouth.

“So am I,” I grumbled before shoveling some meat into my mouth. I gave Edgar a pointed look, and he raised a brow.

“I wanted to discuss Christmas with you,” Grandma said, and I nearly choked on my food.

“What?” I forced the meat down, swallowing hard.
“Why?”

“I want to have a Christmas ball.” Grandma sniffed.

I raised a brow. “Okay. Have at it?” I said, glancing at the others. Alexa was picking at her pasta, and Edgar had a blank look on his face. So helpful guys, I thought bitterly.

“I want you to plan it.” She mumbled. “Your mother usually did.”

I bristled at the mention of my mom. Grandma had made it very clear since I came here that she expected me to act like my mom, but I had made it equally clear that I wasn’t her. Besides, after reading her journal, I was starting to wonder if Grandma even knew who her daughter really was.

“It might be good for you.” Edgar chimed in, his eyes on his plate.

“The town loves a good party.” Alexa piped up, glancing at me quickly.

“You just want to bang the local town girls.” I retorted, and she smiled.

I rolled my eyes. “Fine. I guess I can do that. I don’t have much else to do besides go ghost hunting.”

Grandma sniffed, her eyes shifting to Edgar. “Are you sure that’s wise?” She inquired.

I bit my tongue and counted to ten before answering. “What else am I supposed to do until New Year?” I asked, my tone thankfully even.

“That’s for you to decide, Willow. Whatever it takes for you to come to a decision.”

“You’re not making it easy for me when you keep me trapped in here,” I grumbled, thinking about how they kept my mom trapped here.

I caught Grandma’s gaze as she looked at me with a distant expression. Alexa stiffened next to me, and I was reminded of how she dragged my mom back to the manor when she tried to escape.

“No one is keeping you here,” Alexa said, stiffly. “You can leave whenever you want. You’re an adult now.” *True*, I thought, the difference between my mom and I was she was fourteen when she tried to run, but I was twenty-one.

“I’ll plan a Christmas party.” I said shortly, “But I want to go into the tombworlds. I want to see what the worlds of the family members look like.”

“Edgar will see to it,” Grandma retorted, her tone telling me the subject was now done with.

I tore back into my dinner, wondering why this party was so important to her. We finished dinner in silence, before Grandma’s maid came to wheel her up to her rooms.

Alexa wished me a goodnight, as Edgar and I made our way to my rooms.

“Why does she want me to do this?” I asked as we climbed the curved stairs to my floor.

“It’s her way of connecting with you, Willow. I know it might not seem like it, but she’s trying to reach out to you.”

I frowned. “She has a funny way of doing it.”

He chuckled, “You only just met each other. Give it some time. I think it’s harder for you two because you are so alike.”

I stopped in front of my bedroom, gaping at him. “You take that back!” I cried, affronted.

He laughed, then surprised me by gathering me up into his arms. “Let’s not talk about the old goat anymore,” he said, his voice thick as he brought me to bed. Within a few minutes, I’d forgotten what we’d been talking about.

Chapter 4

The next day, just before lunchtime, Simon came knocking on my door. It surprised me because usually the ghosts in the family would appear in my room, rarely would they knock.

The shock of seeing his face, so young, only a few years older than mine, still hadn't lessened.

“Hey - Simon.” I was still grappling with what to call him. I'd known him as dad my entire life, but he wasn't really my father and now that he had reverted to his death age, it made it even harder to call him dad.

“Good to see you, puppet.” He gave me a warm smile, and I saw hints of the older man I'd know. “Edgar said you needed to see me?”

He slightly shuffled his position while standing. Given that our previous conversation didn't end well, it was logical that he was nervous. I'd basically chewed him out for lying to me for all these years, but after the run in with the vampire, I'd decided to let my anger go.

“Yeah, come in.” I walked back to the TV where my game was paused.

He came in, staring at the screen. “How do you feel, puppet?”

“Sore, but better. I needed to ask you about mom.” He winced and the old feeling of guilt tickled at me. In the past, whenever I mentioned her, he would have the same reaction. I would drop the subject, thinking it was too painful for him to think about his life with mom before her death. His health had been declining towards the end, a result of his spirit being outside of the manor grounds due to an enchanted ring. I would always tiptoe around the subject of mom, thinking it would cause him pain and stress that might worsen his health.

But that was then.

“Don’t do that,” I said, and he lifted his eyes to me. “I deserve answers, Simon.”

He took a deep breath. “What do you want to know?” He asked quietly.

“You said mom went into the swamps for a while, that she thought it had something to do with the curse. Why?”

He cocked his head, looking thoughtful. “She was very secretive with that, but what I was able to gather from her was that a spirit led her there.”

“One from the crypt?” I asked.

“Yes. Whatever they told her, whatever happened in there, she came out with the idea the swamp held the key to our salvation.”

“What happened to her in there?” He knew I meant the fact that she came out one day saying she had a year left to live.

“She never said. Not even to her own mother. Whatever it was, it changed her.”

I bit my lip, thinking. I would have to rely on her journal then, though most of the entries I’d read were limited to spirits she had helped. There was very little in there about her everyday life. I could just jump to the end to see what her last entries were, but a part of me hoped she mentioned something about my birth dad.

“Where is my birth dad?” I asked. I’d asked him once before who my real father was, but Simon couldn’t answer me. But that didn’t mean he couldn’t tell me where my father was.

“Here, in the town, unless he’s moved,” Simon answered.

I nodded, not super helpful, but at least it was something.

“Thanks.”

“I hear you are planning the Christmas party.” He said, a small smile on his face. “I’m glad. I think it will be good for you to get involved with the town. Are you inviting your friends?”

I nodded. “They were supposed to come for New Year, but we changed their plans. I’ll fly them on for Christmas and they’ll stay until after the New Year.”

“Good. It’s good to have friends.” I tried not to roll my eyes. They were my best friends, but they didn’t know the truth about my family. They thought my dad was in a hospice for his declining health, not standing in front of me looking decades younger.

He left shortly after Alexa arrived, toting our lunch and talking about destroying me in a round of video games. I watched him walk away, and I couldn't help but feel the loss of the relationship we had. Even though it had been built on lies, he was still the only family I'd had for years. A part of me hoped we could get back to that place again, where being around each other wasn't so awkward.

Alexa started up the game, but I stopped her. "I need to show you something." I watched her face as I pulled my mom's journal out from under my blanket, where I'd hidden it earlier. She and my mom used to be close, so if anyone deserved to know about the journal, it was her. Besides, I trusted her not to report it back to my Grandma. I would like to think Edgar would keep it a secret, but in my heart I knew he would tell her if he thought she needed to know.

"What is that?" She asked, but by the look in her eyes, I knew she already had an idea.

"You've seen it before, haven't you?" She nodded. "It's my mom's journal. Well, her spirit journal. There's not much in here about her. It's like she was keeping a catalog of the spirits she helped over the years."

"That makes sense. The family has been keeping track of each spirit they encounter in the tombworlds. There are dozens of books in your grandmother's office."

"But why keep these for herself?" I asked.

Alexa shrugged. "I can only assume she wanted something that was hers, and hers alone. The books the family has are

very sterile. They list the most pertinent information, but nothing more.”

“These are definitely more.” I murmured, turning to the last page I’d been on. It was dated nearly a year after her first entry. I handed it over to Alexa, watching as she read the passage. I’d already memorized it, but I wanted to see her reaction to it.

“I remember this one.” She said softly, her lips curling slightly in a smile. “Anne Marie, the tailor.” She shook her head, handing the book back to me.

“She wrote the details of the tombworld, and how she managed to help the spirit. But she also writes about the difference between the worlds. Edgar would only let her see the ‘safe’ places.”

Alexa raised a brow. “Wouldn’t you? You saw what can happen if you stumble into the wrong world.” I had. Beau, the crazed spirit who cannibalized people in life and death. I’d managed to escape him with Edgar’s help, but my Grandma hadn’t been so lucky.

“I thought maybe there’d be something in here, about my dad, or maybe what happened to her.”

Alexa raised a brow. “Well, you’re a few years away from all that. What does the last passage say?”

“I haven’t read it yet,” Alexa scoffed, tossing her dark braids over her shoulder as she gave me a pointed look.

“Suck it up then and read it.”

I sighed, then flipped the book to the last passage. “Read it aloud,” Alexa grumbled, craning her neck over to see the words.

“January 15th. Since the incident with George’s spirit, I have been restless.” I sighed, “See, I knew I should have read before this.” Alexa rolled her eyes, motioning for me to continue.

“If I include him in my numbers, that makes fourteen spirits that have been condemned by the swamp. Though they all might have met different deaths there, they all met their fates there. Not only that, but each one shares similarities with the swamps in their tombworld, which I find fascinating.

“George’s tombworld had the swamp play a more prominent role, compared to the others, and the more I think about it the more I feel like I need to find out more. The dates of their deaths range over the past hundred years, but they all seem to happen in the same area of the swamp. And the tree, I keep seeing that crooked tree.”

My heart skipped a beat. Alexa glanced up at me, her eyes questioning. “I know what tree she is talking about,” I said quietly. “Griffith mentioned that’s where he was headed when he died out there in the swamp.” Alexa’s eyes widened.

“I never found the tree, but that werewolf must know where it is because I mentioned it,” I said excitedly. “What if that tree is connected with these deaths? What if that’s what my mom was looking for?”

Alexa shook her head. “If that is what she was looking for, then it’s no wonder she ran into trouble out there. Willow, I told you, that swamp is full of dangerous creatures and now that werewolf pack is setting up there again.”

I glanced back at the passage, skimming through her thoughts that the tree was connected to their deaths somehow. “This is the last thing she wrote, ‘The tree has appeared in every one of their tombworlds, but George has shown me a clear picture of what it looks like and the surrounding area. I’ve been looking in the wrong places. I think I know roughly where it is now.’”

I flipped the page, but that was the end of her writing. “That’s a month before she told us she had a year to live,” Alexa reflected.

I shut the book, my pulse racing as I said, “I need to talk to Griffith.”

Chapter 5

Edgar found me in the back gardens after dinner, contemplating how to find Griffith. Simon had been the only Rosenbay member to let me in his tombworld so far, and he did that by calling me. I was clueless about how to request access from Griffith.

“You were quiet tonight,” Edgar commented, sitting next to me on the stone bench where I’d stationed myself. The heat from his body never ceased to surprise me, since he was dead and all.

“I was just thinking,” I murmured, laying my head on his shoulder as he wrapped an arm around me, savoring his warmth. The nights were growing colder as Winter was starting to take grasp of the area. Soon enough we’d have snow.

“About your mom?” He asked quietly.

“No. Griffith. I’d like to visit him.” Again, I chose not to tell Edgar the entire truth. Not because I didn’t trust him, but because I knew my Grandma held some sway over him. Whatever it was, it led him to be fiercely loyal to her, which in turn meant anything I mentioned to him could be repeated back to her. I knew I would eventually have to speak to them

all about my plans, but I would wait until I knew for sure what I wanted to do before then.

“I can ask him to come see you.”

“No,” I sat up to look into his eyes, “I want to see his world.”

Edgar regarded me for a moment, his blue eyes trained on my face, almost as if he were searching for something. When he failed to find it, he broke out into a smile. “Alright, Willow. I can help you after dinner.”

“I’d rather do it before lunch,” I said quickly, and he frowned. “Lucien can be with me in the graveyard, right?” I sighed, remembering my Grandma’s rule that I had to be with someone from now on if I was walking the grounds.

“Yes, but-”

“Edgar, I will be fine,” I said, scooting closer to him, breathing in his scent. “I just need to know how to get in. It’s about time I go visit some family, right?” I asked, slowly brushing my fingertips against his silk shirt.

His frown dissipated as his eyes swung to where my fingers were headed. I tugged at his pants, the button popping off without hesitation.

“Willow.” He growled, looking around us.

“Everyone is asleep,” I whispered in his ear, my hand slipping down his waist, my fingers grazing his already hard length. I moaned in his ear, letting him know I was pleased

with what I found. His body shivered against me as I took him in my palm, slowly working his shaft as I nibbled on his ear.

“Fine,” he nearly gasped, “I’ll tell you how to get in.”

I chuckled against his neck, “Thank you.” Then I pulled my hand from him. He watched me, mouth gaping while I stood up. “What?” I asked, trying hard not to smile but failing.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he asked, his voice thick.

I shrugged, “Probably to bed. Why? Do you have something in mind?” I smiled, seeing how dark his eyes got. Fast, far faster than I had seen him move before, he moved to grab me. I was back on the bench, but this time I was on my back, and he was pulling my legs to the end of the bench where he stood.

His pants had pooled at his ankles, along with his boxers. I could see the full glory of him in the faint lights from the manor. The way his broad shoulders and chest met with his toned stomach, all coming to a straight V above his quivering member.

“I do have something in mind.” He growled, his eyes eating me up as I was spread out before him. I barely felt the chill in the air as he tore off my leggings, pulling off my slip-on shoes with it. He tossed them in a pile behind him, then grasped my legs. The bench was high enough I was just barely beneath his waist, but it was wide enough for him to place a knee next to me as he positioned himself above.

I threw out a foot just before he took hold of my ankles, pressing against his chest as I managed to roll myself to my knees.

He froze, watching as I bent down, arching my back. “I want to try this,” I said, looking over my shoulder as he gazed down at my back.

He seemed transfixed, almost confused by what I was doing. Then the heat returned to his eyes and he surprised me by grabbing ahold of my hips, twisting me until I was laid out on my back again. I frowned up at him, protests already on my lips until I felt his fingers toying with the wetness between my legs.

I tried not to moan, but dammit, he knew how to use his fingers.

He watched the way my face changed as he slipped two fingers inside me, rolling them around until they were slick, only to pull them out, dragging them against the most sensitive part. I gasped, my hips rocking with the movements of his fingers, feeling the wetness dripping out of me as he continued to rub.

I felt it building all too quickly, but I didn't want it to stop. The explosion of pleasure started, then stopped all of a sudden. I cried out, frustrated as he pulled his fingers away.

I glanced up at him, seeing the wicked smile on his face. Without a word he flipped me again, arching my back to him until I felt the length of him teasing me. I moaned, pressing

myself back, gently rubbing myself against his shaft until it was slick with my juices.

Edgar placed a hand on my hip, holding me steady, stopping me from bucking too much as he sheathed himself inside me. I gasped, savoring the way he filled me, and stretched me, before he began moving.

I arched my back further, wanting him deeper as he moved. His hands gripped my hips harder as he moved faster, my entire body shaking with the force of him. I tried to find his rhythm, tried to match it, but my efforts were thwarted when I felt a hand snake between my legs. I gasped, part of me wondering how he could manage to get a hand there while thrusting from behind, another part saying a silent prayer of thanks that he could.

Again, his fingers stroked me, compounded by his heavy thrusts. I moaned, pushing myself back, arching until my head was down on the cold bench and I was practically bent up like a pretzel.

“Willow.” he moaned, my name like a prayer on his lips. It sent me over the edge, crying out into the dark night as I felt the waves of release take over. My legs were shaking with the effort as he groaned against me, thrusting one last time deep into my core as my body spasmed around him.

We collapsed into the grass, a mass of arms and legs as he held me to him. He planted small kisses along my neck, pausing at my stitches.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

“Yeah, it didn’t hurt,” I said, grazing my fingertips over the wound.

He nuzzled his face into my neck, and I giggled, a feeling of euphoria taking over me as we breathed in the scent of the garden. We lay there until the chill in the night got to be too much. Gathering our clothes up, he walked me back to my room, where we climbed into the massive tub, washing the grass and sweat from our skin before curling up in bed together.

I gazed at his blue eyes as I felt myself drifting off to sleep, and I wondered to myself what this was. Just as my eyelids became too heavy to open again, I felt his lips brush against my cheek.

“Goodnight, my love.”

Chapter 6

When I woke up, there was a note waiting for me on my bedside table. Go into the crypt, find his plaque, and knock three times. I blinked at the writing, reading it again in case I missed something. Was it that easy? I nestled into my pillows and wiggled under the cozy blankets. The days were growing shorter, and colder, and I would have fewer opportunities to get out once the snow fell.

Goodnight, my love. Edgar's voice resounded in my head. I cringed and buried myself deeper beneath the covers. What did he mean by that? The man barely knew me, and we'd only been sleeping together for a few weeks now.

I was clueless about what we were doing or where it was headed. He was dead, for one, so the white picket fence future was already out the window. We started this on a whim when I was low and needed something, and he was willing. It was fun, and the more I thought about it, the more I wanted to keep doing it, but I knew deep down we would have to have a conversation about it.

Even though I really liked Edgar, I knew we didn't have a future together. Right?

My love. His voice lingered in my memory, causing my cheeks to burn. Maybe there could be a future, maybe there was something, some way for it. I forced myself up, shaking my head as I rushed to get dressed.

I couldn't think about it right now. I had too much to do today. My love life would have to take a back seat for now.

I wore the warmest clothes I could find and went to the back garden. The sun was barely up, its watery rays casting long shadows against the manicured hedges and white statues. My breath steamed in puffs while I hustled to the crypt. I wanted to get this done before breakfast before the others had a chance to figure out what I planned to do.

The golden gates of the crypt were closed, gleaming against the morning sun. I pressed onto them gently, letting them swing inside. It was somehow colder inside, the white marble soaking up the chilly winter temperatures. Walking along the wall, I spotted Griffith's plaque quickly. His stone was newer than the surrounding ones, courtesy of his recent burial.

I eyed the little painting of his face framed in gold. It was a good likeness to the boy I'd seen at Thanksgiving, when he chewed me out for being dramatic. I smirked, hoping he was willing to have guests.

My knuckles rapped against the stone three times, the sound echoing around me in the silent crypt. A second passed by, followed by a sound like someone sighing. The sigh turned into a moan, carrying the chilly morning air into a current that

wrapped around me. I shut my eyes, tightly grasping the pendant on my neck.

It was the necklace Edgar had given me on my birthday. I wasn't sure if I needed an anchor when I traveled to a family member's tombworld, but I figured it wouldn't hurt to have it. The world spun around me, and I focused on the pendant until I felt my feet hit solid ground.

Cracking an eye open, I was met with the image of the manor, but younger. The hedges and trees were smaller, and more vibrant than in my time. I glanced around, realizing I was in the back gardens.

"Hello, cousin." I spun around, seeing Griffith posed on the very bench Edgar and I had been on last night. I felt a blush creep up my neck at the memory.

"Are we cousins?" I asked, returning his wide smile.

He shrugged, his boyish arrogance showing as he said flippantly. "Does it matter?" He was wearing a fine suit, looking every bit like a 1920s upper-crust millionaire. Then again, I suppose he had been one.

"How are you doing?" I asked, slowly making my way to the empty place on the bench by him.

"I'm settling in." He said softly, the arrogance gone from his eyes as he peered out into the garden. "I still have moments where I forget where I am, but other than that I am doing well."

I sat down, pulling my thick coat off. His tombworld was in the middle of spring, the garden just starting to blossom around us. “I have something I need to ask you, but only if you think you are ready to answer.” He glanced at me, curiosity making him grin like a Cheshire cat.

“Oh?” He asked, sitting up. “About what?”

“The crooked tree.” His smile fell slightly. “Again, only if you are up to it.”

“Why do you want to know about that?” He asked quietly.

“Selfish reasons.” I grinned at him, earning another boyish grin from him. “My mom was looking for it before she died. It might have something to do with her death.”

He nodded. Puffing out his cheeks, he replied, “Well, I do owe you.”

I scoffed, “No, you don’t.”

He gave me a pointed look. “That swamp is very dangerous. I mean, besides obvious reasons.” He waved down at himself. “There are all sorts of creatures in there. When I think back on how many times I went in there, by myself, I wonder how I didn’t die sooner.”

“Stop it.” I said sternly, “It doesn’t help to think like that.”

He shrugged, “But I do. I can’t help it. Anyway,” he stood up, brushing off some invisible dust from his pants, “What do you wish to know?”

“Can you remember where it is?”

He bit his lip. “That part is fuzzy. Whenever I try to remember the path, it goes all watery. But I can show you what it looks like.”

“That’ll work,” I said, standing up with him.

He squinted his eyes, concentrating on something. A muscle in his jaw twitched as his hands balled into fists at his sides. I kept quiet, not wanting to distract him. He gasped, his body unclenching. “Sorry,” he breathed, “I’m still getting used to this.”

“Take your time. There’s no rush.” I placed a hand on his shoulder, giving him an encouraging smile.

“Could you... hold my hand?” He asked sheepishly, “Just so I don’t lose you.” He added quickly. I held his hand, our fingers entwining as he looked off into the distance again.

“Take a deep breath, and just breathe,” I said softly, watching as his body tensed up again. “Don’t force it.” I had no idea how tombworlds worked, but it seemed like the right thing to say. He let out a soft sigh, and the world turned around us. It was different from the spinning sensation I felt when I entered a tombworld. This was literally like the world turned around us while we remained stationary.

The turning stopped, and we were back in the swamp, knee-deep in the water. I glanced around us, noticing the trees here looked different from the ones I’d seen when I was searching for his bones. His grip tightened, prompting me to turn to see what he was looking at.

A massive tree sat at the edge of a cliff, a short distance from where we were. The thick trunk shot up into the sky, then suddenly curved to the left, the branches all dripping down over the edge.

“My friends called it the crooked tree,” Griffith said quietly. “But it was known by another name. The Witch’s Claw.”

“It looks so strange,” I said, trying to pinpoint what it was about the tree that felt off.

He chuckled low in his chest, “I thought so too when I first saw it. My friends called me a coward, and said that townies feared what they didn’t understand.” He shook his head. “I acted like it didn’t bother me, but I always felt like it was watching me.”

I raised a brow. “Watching you?”

He nodded gravely, “Sometimes I swear I could hear it calling my name,” he said dreamily. The hairs on my neck stood up as I recognized the tone in his voice. He sounded like he had when I found him in the swamp, when he was slipping back into oblivion.

“We need to leave,” I said, squeezing his hand. He blinked a few times, then looked down at me slowly.

“Griffith, take me back to the garden,” I said, but he was looking at me like he’d never seen me before.

“What are you doing here?” He asked, and my heart nearly stopped.

“No,” I growled, then slapped him across the face. The boy frowned, but I saw the recognition flash in his eyes, if only for a second. “I’m sorry,” I said, then slapped him again.

This time he glared at me. “Stop slapping me, Willow!” He snapped.

“Take us back now!” I cried, grasping his face between my hands, so he focused on me. “Now Griffith!” He must have seen the fear in my eyes because the next second the world turned again, and we were standing back in the gardens.

I let go of his face, holding a hand to my pounding heart. “I’m sorry about slapping you, but you were slipping away.”

He rubbed his cheek, the marks already disappearing. “No need to apologize. I should have warned you that might happen.”

I waved him off, taking a deep breath to calm myself. “No worries. Thank you for showing me what it looks like.”

“You shouldn’t go in there alone.” He said quickly, “Please tell me you won’t go in there alone again.”

I smirked, “I couldn’t even if I wanted to.”

Chapter 7

“I want to check out the swamp,” I said casually over my bowl of oatmeal.

Alexa coughed, her tea shooting through her nose. Edgar’s eyes widened over his newspaper, his coffee cup clattering to the table. Grandma was the only one who remained poised as if I hadn’t said a thing. I glanced over at her; her ancient eyes trained on her teacup as she lifted it to her thin lips.

“No,” she said simply. “Not with those werewolves prowling around.”

I took a breath. Knowing she would do this, I replied, “You said I wasn’t a prisoner and that I could go where I wanted, as long as someone was with me.” I roamed my gaze over them all, making a point of making eye contact with each one. “So, let Lucien come with me. Or if he’s not enough,” I said quickly, seeing Edgar ready to protest, “Let someone else come with me.”

“Who?” Grandma sighed. I swallowed hard. I knew it would come to this. It was going to be hard to say it, but I knew I had to.

“Wesley,” I grumbled, his name like salt in my mouth.

Edgar's eyes flashed, but he remained still. Alexa snorted, giving Grandma a pleading look. Grandma only smiled - a genuinely happy smile that I rarely saw grace her face.

"Deal." She nodded.

"Whoa, wait, aren't we going to talk about this?" Alexa blurted. "Wesley is a little weasel! We all know what he wants!"

I sighed. "I am not interested in him. So, there's no need to worry about that." I kept my gaze from Edgar, knowing he was burning holes in my skull.

"Wesley and Willow are adults. I am sure they can get along long enough to do whatever it is Willow needs to do in the swamps." Grandma raised a brow. "Which is what, by the way?"

I couldn't tell them I was retracing my mom's steps. That would be a way of one ticket to being locked in my room. Instead, I had to lie, "I dropped my mom's necklace in the swamp when I was looking for Griffith's bones." I could feel Alexa stiffen next to me and I prayed she would keep her mouth shut.

She knew my mom had a theory about the tree, so I could only assume she knew I was lying about this.

Edgar raised a brow, but Grandma sniffed. "Fine. Take Wesley and Lucien with you. Edgar will arrange for Wesley to come by."

I let out the breath I was holding, giving her a smile. “Thank you.” I glanced at Edgar, his face a mask of bemusement. “Can you ask him to come by today?”

I noticed the twitch in his eye, but he said, “Of course.”

“Lucien has been hanging around the graveyard,” Alexa said shortly. “You should go gather him and make sure he’s coherent before taking him with you.” I shot her a look but nodded, grateful she wasn’t spilling the beans on what we’d read earlier.

“Good idea. Dress warmly. It’s supposed to snow tonight.” Grandma said before ringing for her maid. I took the opportunity to leave as well, making my way quickly out the back before Edgar had a chance to stop me. I heard Grandma’s voice echoing as she called for him and I said a silent prayer of thanks, though I felt bad for doing so.

I power walked through the graveyard, calling out for Lucien at every twist and turn until I spotted him lounging on the roof of a tomb. “How did you get up there?” I called to him.

He had one leg dangling over the roof, the other bent at the knee. One arm slung over his face while the other held the neck of a bottle. I sighed, knowing it had to be booze. “Lucien!” I bellowed when he didn’t answer.

He groaned, turning his head just enough to gaze down at me. “Stop your squawking woman!” He moaned, then let out a belch. I rolled my eyes.

“Get down, please. I need you to come with me.” He moaned again. “Lucien!” I snapped.

“Go away, witch. I have a terrible hangover.”

“You’re dead. How can you have a hangover?”

He chuckled, “By drinking copious amounts of alcohol.” The bottle slipped from his hand. I stepped back before it came crashing onto my head.

“I don’t care how hungover you are, dead man. I need you to come with me. I don’t want to be alone with that snake, Wesley.”

Lucien chuckled again, then belched. “Wesley Hargreaves? You’re safe in that hunter’s hands, witch.”

“It’s his hands I’m afraid of,” I grumbled. “Come on! Get up! Don’t you have some superhuman healing thing that will kick in and get rid of that hangover?”

“Yes, but by that time, I will be drunk all over again.” He lifted his hand, frowning when he found it empty. He cursed, flinging his arm over the roof with a moan. I scoffed, my patience reaching its end. I ran up to his leg, leaping up and taking a bite out of it.

He yelped as I hung on like a spider monkey, “Get. Down. Here. Now.” I growled between clenched teeth.

“Let go of me, woman!” He cried out, trying to shake his leg. Lucien sat up, attempting to pry me off with his hands, but in his current state, he didn’t think about the angle he was bending at. Far too top-heavy for his body to handle, and with

me weighing him down, Lucien toppled over the roof, sending us both crashing to the ground.

I rolled over, scrambling to get on top of him before he managed to flee. Pinning him to the ground, I glared down at him.

“Lucien, you are coming with me!”

He groaned beneath me, a string of curses echoing in the graveyard. “Would you leave a poor man alone, for the love of God, you harpy!”

“How many years have you drank away, Lucien? Huh?” I asked, watching as the man pouted beneath me. His gray eyes squinted in the afternoon sun as he glared up at me.

“Not enough.” He said, his tone dark. I could see the pain in his eyes, still fresh even after all these years. The man had been dealt a bad hand, but so had the rest of us.

“Look, I’m not going to lie and say I know the pain of losing someone you love because, let’s face it, I don’t really have many people I love.” His features softened, just enough for me to ease off his arms a bit. “If you want to waste your years of eternity drinking your pain away, I am not going to stop you. But I need your help, so I will make you a deal. I’m going to guess you either manage to steal or beg your way into getting alcohol?” I questioned.

He raised a brow, which I took as an affirmation. “Thought so. Your clothes are always filthy and you look like you haven’t showered in years, so it’s not a stretch to say you

haven't had a steady job." He shrugged, the movement lifting me nearly off the ground. I blinked in surprise at how strong he was, then realized he could have thrown me off him at any moment.

"Look, I bet you want this curse broken as much as I do, as much as anyone does. My mom thought the swamp had the answer, and I am beginning to think she was right. I need to go into the swamplands, but my family won't let me unless Wesley is with me. I don't want to be alone with that creep, so I need someone to act like a buffer, and you, my friend, are the only person who can leave the manor grounds."

"Go on." He said after I paused for a moment.

"I can't promise I will break the curse. But if you agree to sober up long enough to accompany me on my exertions, I promise to supply you with all the alcohol you want."

He raised a brow. "Really?"

"Really," I said sternly. "But only if you honor the deal and sober up before we leave the grounds. I need you alert and aware, and you are not to leave my side."

He smirked, "Hargreaves, have you that worked up, huh?" I kneed him in the groin as I stood up and he bent over in pain.

"I need someone who will make sure he doesn't try anything, yes. But I also need someone who has a history with the curse. I don't know exactly what I'm looking for, and I don't know enough about the past to know when I am looking

at something important. But you knew Scarlet, which means you must have known Harrin.”

“To a point.” He coughed. “But I get your reasoning.” He smirked up at me, “I agree to your terms, Willow.”

“Good, now let’s get you a bath and clean clothes. No more of this,” I said, snatching the bottle from the grass, “Until we come home.”

“You drive a hard bargain, witch.” He winced, standing up. “But I will play your knight and protector and offer whatever knowledge I might still have of the past.”

I sighed, “If it hasn’t been soaked away with booze.”

Lucien’s eyes darkened. “Trust me, Willow, I haven’t forgotten the past.”

Chapter 8

An hour later, Lucien and I were waiting in the front for Wesley. I couldn't stop catching glances of Lucien, his face clean-shaven and hair cut down. His jet-black hair was still long enough to drape over his eyes, but what surprised me most of all was his jawline.

Beneath that mass of a beard, he had a jawline that could cut glass. He looked much younger now, and I realized he was probably in his early twenties when he died.

“What?” He snapped, seeing me glance at him again.

“You look nice,” I replied, giving him a scrunched-up smile. He rolled his eyes.

“You look creepy when you do that.” He adjusted the silk shirt Edgar loaned him. His shoulders were wider than Edgar's, so it was a little tight around the chest.

“Good, I'll make sure to give Wesley one of these.” I scrunched up my face, trying to make it look as ugly as possible. Lucien stepped back, his expression wary.

“Are you sure you're sane, woman?”

My answer was cut short when we heard the car rolling up the driveway. I'd been expecting the driver, Andrew, and one

of his usual sleek black cars. Instead, Wesley pulled up in a massive iron gray truck that looked like it was decked out for a zombie apocalypse.

“Dear God,” Lucien said, shaking his head. “I can’t believe you are making me do this sober.”

I threw an elbow into his side just as Wesley rolled down the passenger window.

“Are you going to stand there all day?” He asked, his dimpled grin making me nearly puke.

I sighed, climbing in the back. Wesley turned around, confusion plastered onto his face as Lucien got in next to me.

“Do I look like a chauffeur? One of you better get up here.”

Lucien buckled his seat belt, whispering, “Me riding up with him was not part of the deal.” I groaned, jumping out and climbing into the front.

“You don’t need a seat belt, dead man.” I shot back at him, ignoring the smirk on Wesley’s face.

“Just because I can’t die doesn’t mean I enjoy regenerating limbs due to crashes.”

“Good point, but I’ve never been in an accident.” Wesley gave me a wink, causing my heart to race despite how much I was telling myself I didn’t like him. He hit the gas, and we went flying down the drive, then out the gates.

I yelped, holding onto the door for dear life as we sped down the road.

“No offense, but I think he was lying about the whole not crashing thing.”

“No shit!” I cried as he blew through a stop sign.

“Bullshit. I’ve never been in a crash.” His turquoise eyes flicked to my face, “that I caused.”

Lucien cackled in the back, thoroughly enjoying the look of terror on my face as we whipped down a curve.

“So, where to?” I could have screamed then. I hadn’t even given him the directions, and the madman was already going on a joy ride. I threw the map Edgar had drawn for me weeks ago to find where Griffith was.

Wesley barely looked at it, nodding as he took another turn.

“Lord Edgar said you lost a bracelet or something?”

“Necklace.” I gritted between my teeth. “And he’s not a lord.”

He chuckled, “The way he talks, he should be.”

“The unofficial lord of the manor,” Lucien grumbled. I couldn’t help but glance back at him, questioning. There seemed to be some unspoken yet shared animosity between them and Edgar.

I swallowed back a scream as he jetted down a hill, my stomach falling into my ass. I made a mental note to ask them

about Edgar later. After we survived the car ride.

Wesley only slowed down once we found the dirt road that led into the swamp. I let out a sigh of relief as we coasted down, stopping at a familiar curve.

I leapt out, nearly falling to the ground weeping, thankful I was on solid earth again.

Wesley opened the bed of his truck, pulling out a duffle bag.

“So, you lost a necklace in there?” He eyed the thick growth and water before us. The truth was, I hadn’t lost the necklace here, but in Beau’s tombworld when he tried to trap me. No one knew that, and I wasn’t about to go back there to find it.

“Yeah.” I said carefully, “I was looking for Griffith’s bones by the crooked tree, and I must have lost it there.”

Wesley continued to eye the swamp, then shrugged. “Right.”

“What?” I asked, feeling stupidly defensive of my lie.

“It’s going to be like finding a needle in a haystack, but hey, I have time if you do.” He gave me a wink as he unzipped the bag. I watched him pull out a double gun holster, slipping it over his white button-up shirt. He slung another holster over his hip, sheathing a knife and a smaller gun there.

He clipped on his spare ammo before strapping some knives to his boots.

I watched, not realizing how mesmerized I was until Lucien gave me a gentle nudge. I tore my gaze from him. “I didn’t realize we were going to war,” I said flippantly.

“These are just precautions, Cherry. It’s like a condom, better to have it and not need it, then end up in the clinic with the clap.” I swear I saw my own brain when my eyes rolled.

“Charming, as always.” I sighed.

Once GI Wesley was done packing his gear, we headed into the swamp. This time I’d come prepared with water shoes and waterproof pants. Lucien didn’t care about the icy swamp water as he trudged next to me, with Wesley bringing up the rear.

“Know where you’re going?” Lucien asked.

“Generally speaking,” I answered, pushing us toward the area I’d seen the cliffs before.

“You know, you didn’t have to come up with some story about a necklace to get me to go out with you, Cherry,” Wesley called from behind me.

I bristled but kept moving forward.

“Why do you call her Cherry?” Lucien inquired. I could feel the look he was giving me.

“Because I look like I taste like cherries,” I said bluntly, before Wesley could come up with some smart-ass response. Lucien raised a brow, having the decency to look mortified on my behalf.

“Three guys have said that, by the way,” I said with a sigh.

“Who?” Wesley asked, his tone changing.

“A cannibal spirit that nearly killed me.”

“And?” He prompted when I paused.

I turned to see the frown on his face and smiled. “Someone who knows what I taste like.”

The look on his face was priceless, but not as laughable as the terrified look Lucien was giving me.

“Jesus, I need a drink.” He muttered, moving a few steps away from us.

Wesley recovered quickly, his expression lightening as he smirked at me. “Well done.” That was all he said before continuing. I followed next to him, keeping an eye out for the cliffs or the strange trees I’d seen surrounding the crooked tree in Griffiths’s world.

“I’m surprised the dead man agreed to come out,” Wesley commented.

“I told him I’d buy him all the booze he needs.” He chuckled.

“How is your neck?”

I sighed. “You don’t have to do that.”

“Do what?”

“Make small talk.”

“How else am I going to woo you, Willow?” I glared at him. It was the first time he’d admitted to his intentions.

“You can’t.” I shot back, “I’m not interested in you, Wesley.”

“You seemed interested before.” I stopped a shiver from running down my spine. He wasn’t wrong. The first time we’d met, I was so enamored with him that if he’d asked me to his bed, I would have followed.

But that was before I knew his motives, before I knew Grandma was practically planning our wedding.

“I’m not interested in...a male version of a succubus.”

He raised a brow, his dimpled grin widening as he said, “Are you calling me an incubus?”

“I think she means man whore.” Lucien offered.

I rolled my eyes. “I know you only want to get in my pants to get to my family’s fortune. That’s not happening, buddy.”

“Buddy? So we’re friends now.” I groaned and Lucien stopped walking to turn to us.

“For the love of God, you two! Just screw and get it over with! Or don’t, I don’t care, but stop bickering!”

I was about to chew Lucien out when I felt Wesley’s grip on my wrist. Without a word, he pulled me behind him, nearly causing me to fall over as he stood in front of me. Lucien turned just as I noticed the movement a few yards away.

Three wolves emerged from the brush, their golden eyes glowing as they watched us.

“Werewolves,” Wesley growled.

Chapter 9

The trio of werewolves watched us, their golden eyes glowing in the shadows of the swamp. Lucien backed up until he was standing next to Wesley, shielding me behind them. The werewolves weren't moving, just staring at us.

Wesley made a move for his knife, and suddenly they were all teeth and growls. "Stop it," I said quickly, placing a hand over his arm. He paused, fingers itching to grasp the knife, eyes trained on the werewolves. I stepped around him despite Lucien's huff of protest.

"I'm looking for Grayson!" I called out. The werewolves continued growling, their hackles standing on edge. "Or Luna, the Swamp Spirit?"

The werewolf in the middle of the trio stopped growling all of a sudden, its head tilting to the side. The others seemed to calm down, but still bared their teeth at us.

"What are you doing?" Wesley hissed, but before I could answer, a sound echoed throughout the swamp. The sound of bones snapping, growing, and rearranging. My jaw hung open as I watched the middle wolf transform into a young woman, her silvery hair plaited behind her back, and completely naked.

I averted my eyes quickly, trying to focus on her face. Her features were delicate, but her eyes glowed with those golden orbs.

She lifted her head, her small nose raised as if scenting the air. "I know you." She said, her voice surprisingly old for looking so young.

"Are - are you Luna?" I asked. It was hard to tell from the wolf form, all three looked very much alike.

She cocked her head to the side. "You were looking for something."

"Yes! Yes, you helped me and I never got to thank you!" My words were rushed as the excitement took over. So this was the wolf who had brought Griffith's bones to me!

"You're welcome. Now you may leave." Her tone was dismissive.

I gawked, completely shocked by her response. "I'm looking for the tree, the crooked one."

Her brows knotted ever so slightly, "The Witch's Claw?"

"Yes!"

"What could a human want with that place?" She inquired.

I hesitated, glancing over to Lucien and Wesley, both poised for a fight. I could trust Lucien to keep my dealings a secret, but not Wesley.

"I dropped something there." I lied.

A howl erupted from the wolf to her right, the body morphing into a large man, equally unclothed.

“She lies.” He growled, “The human lies.”

The girl, Luna, only stared at me. I sighed, realizing I had no choice. “You know who I am?” I asked.

The man bared his teeth. “Rosenbay.”

I nodded. “The tree is linked to my mother’s death. I just want to find it and see if I can find answers.”

“We do not help humans, especially those with tainted blood.” The man roared.

Luna silenced him with a look. He backed down, nearly bowing to her gaze. It was then I realized she had to be an alpha wolf if that large man let such a small girl command him.

She swung her golden eyes back to me. “When I helped you, I didn’t know who you were.” She explained, “We have orders now to eliminate you.”

My heart nearly stopped; my legs turned to jelly. If they attacked us, I had no way of defending myself. How stupid could I be, walking into the swamp I knew was full of werewolves?

“You’ll die trying,” Wesley growled next to me.

Luna smirked. “I have no desire to try, Hargreaves. I know we are outmatched.”

The last wolf growled, turning into another large man, equally as terrifying in his human form. “We can take these mortals, Luna!”

I could almost see her roll her eyes. “The pretty one is immortal, and the sly one is trained to slay our kind.” She shot him a withering look. “Do not question my intelligence.”

“Am I the pretty one or the sly one?” Lucien asked. I stifled a groan, but Luna smiled in return.

“I cannot help you find the tree; my orders were clear.”

My shoulders sagged in defeat. “I must find it.” I said softly, “There has to be a way.”

“Let me be clear. I cannot help you. And you cannot find the tree without help. That cursed place has a way of staying hidden when it wants to. Only a wolf can sniff it out.”

“You can’t, but someone else can. Is that right?” Wesley asked, surprising me.

She sneered, “Yes, hunter.”

“Luna-” The man to the left started but backed down, kneeling to the ground when she growled at him.

“What concern is it of ours if the human wants to try her luck with the tree? If we’re lucky, she’ll meet her end there, and we won’t have to continue these stupid patrols.” She scoffed, “We have better things to do than circle that property like common dogs.”

“Yes, Luna.” The man whimpered beneath her gaze, but I caught the dark look in his eyes. From my angle, I could just make out the large tattoo on his back, a black sword piercing a burning heart. I wondered if it had something to do with werewolves, or if the guy just liked douchebag tattoos.

“My brother is not a part of our pack.” She started, her gaze still pinning the man. “So he is not bound to our orders. You will find him in Crag’s End, at the edge of the town. Follow the main road to where the swamp bleeds into the ocean, and you will find his cabin.”

“Do you think he will help me?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Since he was cast from the pack, he has had a hard time finding jobs. He might help, for the right price. He is the only wolf who could help you, human. He knows the tree you speak of, and he operates alone.”

I glanced at Wesley, his hand still poised to grab his knife. His turquoise eyes flicked to mine, the only indication I had that he agreed.

“What is it about this tree?” I asked, “You called it cursed, is it really?”

Luna chuckled, a deep rumbling noise that came from her core. “That’s for you to find out, human. Perhaps my brother will be in a charitable mood and answer your never-ending questions.”

“Who is he then?”

“You’ve met him.” She smiled, and I realized who she meant.

“Grayson?” I asked, incredulous. The young man who helped me in the swamp when I got lost.

“The very same.” She jutted her chin, and the men transformed back into wolves, their eyes boring holes in my head before they turned to leave.

“Wait, one last question.” I pleaded, and Luna inclined her head.

“You said you have orders to kill me, but you’re clearly the leader here.” Her eyes twinkled, a small smirk forming on her lips. “Who gives you the order, then?”

She chuckled, “So many questions.”

“Please, I know my family’s history with the werewolves here, and I want to make amends if I can.”

She raised a brow. “It’s true your ancestors and mine had a bloody past, but that is not why we must hunt you.”

“Then who is it? Someone my family has pissed off too. Maybe I can do something about it! I’m not like the rest of my family!”

She cocked her head to the side. “No, I suppose you aren’t what I was expecting at all. But it’s no matter, the person who orders your death is far from reasonable.” She glanced down at the other wolves. “But who am I to stop you from trying?”

The wolves at her side bowed their heads to her gaze. Her small frame seemed to deflate a fraction as she said, “The Swamp Witch is who you seek.”

Chapter 10

We walked back to the truck in silence, Wesley keeping an eye and ear out for any ambush while Lucien stayed next to me. The moment we were in the truck and the doors were shut, Wesley burst into a fit of laughter.

I glared at him from the passenger seat. He continued to laugh, holding his sides while I glared, and Lucien eyed him cautiously.

Finally, his laughter subsided enough for him to choke out, “That was fun.”

Lucien raised a brow. “Almost being torn to shreds by wolves is your idea of fun?”

“You sure know how to piss people off, Willow.” Wesley giggled, wiping the tears from his eyes. “Your grandmother is going to be livid when she finds out what you were really doing.”

I rolled my eyes. Of course, he was going to tattle on me. I wouldn't put it past him to tell my grandmother - anything to get into her good graces.

“What were you doing, by the way?” Lucien asked from the back.

“Yes, Willow, enlighten us about this tree.”

“You guys don’t know about it?” I asked, my curiosity peaking. They both stared at me with blank expressions, shrugging. “Fine, I’ll tell you, but you don’t say a thing to anyone about this!” I snapped, putting on my best angry face as I locked eyes with Wesley.

“Why are you looking at me?” he asked, clearly offended. “The dead man might have loose lips!”

There was a pregnant silence between us, then, “There is nothing about me that is loose, thank you.” Wesley and I turned to see Lucien practically pouting in the back seat. “Now, if you would so kindly take me back to the manor. As long as I get what I was promised, you don’t have to worry about me saying anything.”

Wesley swung his eyes back to me. “Why can’t your grandmother know about this?”

“It’s complicated, and I don’t want her to know about it until I know for sure what’s going on.” I huffed into his face. Suddenly, I realized how close our faces were and I pulled back.

“Fine. You have my word. I won’t mention this to anyone.” He promised, holding out his pinky to me. I ignored his offer of a pinky swear, but nodded in agreement.

Still, I hesitated, but when I realized he wasn’t going to start the truck until I started talking, I finally blurted, “I found a journal that belonged to my mom.”

“Oh,” he tittered, “How many crushes did she have?” Lucien snickered as I smacked Wesley’s arm.

“It’s not like that. She kept her own log of the spirits she helped.” My tone was harsher than I thought, but I didn’t care. “Don’t make fun of my mom,” I growled.

Wesley and Lucien exchanged glances, and then Wesley said, “I’m sorry. That was tone-deaf of me.”

I huffed, but continued, “Her last entries were about the crooked tree, and how multiple spirits she helped had seen it before their death.”

“Do you think the tree killed them?” Wesley asked.

I shook my head. “I don’t know, but there is something strange going on with that tree. When Griffith died, he was on his way to the tree to meet his friends. Even now he can’t remember where the tree is, and when he tried to show me what it looked like, something strange happened.”

“Like what?” Wesley raised a brow.

“He started acting like he did when I found his spirit trapped in the swamp. Confused and dreamy. I thought that was the effect of him not being buried on the manor grounds, but now I’m not so sure.”

“So, your mother thought the tree was connected to these deaths, then?” Lucien questioned.

“Yes.” I glanced at the rear-view mirror, catching Lucien’s eyes. I wasn’t going to tell him there was a possibility the tree was also linked to the curse, because I wasn’t sure about that

yet. “She searched the swamp for it, and one day she came back saying she only had a year left to live. So, it’s safe to say there’s something going on with the tree.”

Wesley sat back in his seat, frowning off into the distance. “Well, if the tree is linked to a bunch of deaths, and if the werewolves are calling it cursed, I’d say it’s something we should look into.”

“We?” I groaned. He threw me a toothy grin, his dimples more apparent than ever.

“You think I’m going to let you have all the fun? Besides, now we know who put the hit on you.”

“The Swamp Witch,” Lucien growled, causing us both to look at him. “Vial wench.” He muttered.

“Why would she want me dead? What did my family do to her? And also, shouldn’t she be dead?” Alexa had mentioned Lucien and the witch had history, which would make her just as old as the dead man.

“She has her voodoo magic to keep her young and living,” Lucien grumbled.

“I’m pretty sure it’s just called voodoo.” Wesley sighed.

“Whatever she wants to call it, it’s strong enough to keep her alive for all these years.”

“And give her sway over an entire werewolf pack.” Wesley pointed. “I’ve heard stories about her, but they were more rumors than anything.”

“So your family hasn’t hunted her?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No one has actually seen her since Harrin’s time. The last known record of her was the witch trials.”

“The one where Harrin burned his own wife,” I said, nodding.

“Vial man.” Lucien spat.

“She was never tried, or outright accused by the public. She was known as a healer for the people living in the swamplands. But after the witch trials, something changed, and rumors of her dark magic spread.” Wesley explained

“Do you think she could have something to do with my family’s curse?”

Wesley shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“Then why want me dead? Why now?”

“That’s something we’re going to have to figure out.” Wesley’s truck roared to life, “Hopefully this Grayson guy will be able to shed some light on it for us.”

“Are you coming with us to see him?” I asked.

He grinned as he backed up the truck, barely glancing at his mirrors. “Of course.”

I sighed, sinking deep into my seat. “Fine, can we try tomorrow?”

“Sure, I will come pick you guys up at noon.”

Lucien's head popped between us, frowning, "What about-"

"I will get you your booze!" I snapped, causing him to plop back down.

Wesley drove like a maniac all the way back to the manor, his truck skidding and sliding to a halt at the manor doors. I toppled out, my legs weak from the walk in the swamp muck and my body shaking from the adrenaline.

Lucien gave him a swift salute before marching into the house. I followed him, choosing to stay silent until Wesley called from the truck, "Let's do this more often, Cherry. I do enjoy our time together!" I sneered, flipping him off without turning around. His peel of laughter followed me all the way into the foyer, where Edgar was standing with Lucien.

"I need a case of whiskey and not the cheap stuff!" Lucien was saying as I approached them.

"Can you please get him what he wants? I made him a promise." I said, my voice weary from the day.

Edgar's eyes flashed from Lucien to me, then to the truck hurtling down the driveway.

"Are you alright?" Edgar asked.

I nodded. "Everything is fine."

"Did you find the necklace?"

I stiffened, Lucien's eyes looking anywhere but at my face as I lied again, "No, we're going back out tomorrow."

“Willow, I know the necklace was your mother’s, but this is a bit much.”

My brows knotted. “What is a bit much? Everyone coddling and lying to me over the past month? I’m not a child, I know the risks. Wesley, as much as I hate him, can keep me safe. Lucien is there to keep me sane. There is nothing to worry about.”

I stomped off to the stairs. My body was stiff and cold from the swamp and the lies I had to keep up with. How ironic, I’d bitten his head off talking about lies and here I was being the liar.

“Just get him what he wants, please. Wesley will be here tomorrow at noon for us.” I called down as I rushed off to my room, eager for a hot bath.

“Make that two cases, then, Lord Edgar. I have a feeling tomorrow is going to be a long day.”

Chapter 11

I emerged from the bathroom cloaked in steam, the scent of jasmine trailing behind me as I collapsed onto my bed. My will to get dressed and join the others for dinner was nonexistent. I was considering curling up beneath the blankets and sleeping until dawn when Edgar popped into existence.

I yelped, nearly falling out of bed, and then when I realized it was him, my adrenaline moved swiftly to fuel my rage. “Are you trying to put me in my grave early?” I snapped, chest heaving as I shoved him.

He barely moved, his blue eyes trained on my face as he said, “What happened out there?”

“I told you, we didn’t find the necklace, so we’ll try again tomorrow.” I waved off his concern, moving to find my robe.

He caught my arm, his grip like steel as he held me in place. “Ow, Edgar, loosen the grip!” I pulled away, but he held firm.

“What happened with Wesley?” He asked, his tone dark. I froze beneath his intense gaze, the waves of jealousy rolling off him, making little alarm bells ring in my mind.

“Nothing happened with him.” I retorted, not trying to hide the edge in my words, “Why? Are you jealous?” I purred,

pulling myself closer to his face, hoping to catch him off guard.

Instead of letting me go, he pulled me into his chest, pinning me with one arm. I gasped, glaring up into his molten eyes as he held me close.

“Of course I’m jealous!” he growled. “He can leave these walls with you and there is nothing I can do about it!” He shook his head. “I’m powerless.”

“It’s hard for me to feel sorry for you when you’re holding me like this,” I grumbled. His expression softened as he took a step back, letting me go.

“I’m sorry, Willow. I just got so worried thinking about what that cad was trying to do out there.”

“I have no interest in Wesley, Edgar.” I sighed. “Besides, I had Lucien there with me.”

“Right.” He said sheepishly, nodding his head. He chuckled weakly, “I don’t know what came over me.” I caught the movement from his fingers, gently caressing an invisible ring.

“You’ve been acting a little off lately,” I commented, thinking back to the night the vampire attacked me.

“What do you mean?” he asked, looking wary.

“Ever since the vampire you’ve just been...I don’t know, a little off.” Edgar was usually the one bantering with me, keeping me on my toes while he threw jabs at me. Lately, he’d

mellowed out and seemed more interested in keeping me in bed than having a real conversation with me.

He raised a brow. “I’m worried about you, Willow, that’s all. I’ve almost lost you twice in the last month! How do you think I should be acting?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know, but I need you to let up a little.”

“Let up on what?”

“This! Everything! I have no idea what you and I are doing, but I feel like you’re getting in too deep with it and I need some space to breathe!” I took a deep breath, realizing I’d just blurted out everything I’d been feeling for the last few days.

Edgar eyed me for a moment, his brows knotted as he considered what I said. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, he said softly, “Do you want this to be something?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. I’ve been having fun, and it was uncomplicated at first-”

“Then why does it have to change?” He asked. I caught the heat in his words and tried hard not to feel the burning need welling inside me.

Uncomplicated and fun, that’s what it had been until the vampire. Then I sensed a change in him, and what he said the other night.

“I’m not saying it has to change, but I would like the space and time to figure it out.” I sighed.

He took a slow step toward me, closing the space between us. I could feel the heat coming off his skin and tried hard to ignore it as he whispered, “Are you sure you want space?”

I swallowed hard, my throat suddenly bone dry as I gazed up into his heated eyes. I tried to will myself into having self-control. I told myself I could do it.

Gently, slowly, he dragged a finger over the tops of my breasts; the sensation making my nipples hard. I shut my eyes, silently cursing my body for betraying me. He chuckled, his breath coasting over my skin in waves that sent shivers down my spine.

“Is this far enough?” He questioned, his lips hovering over my left breast. I didn’t trust myself to answer, squeezing my eyes shut as I felt his wet lips pull at my nipple. I gasped, skin burning beneath his touch as he nipped at me, making my body shake with desire.

His other hand teased my right breast, fingers grazing and pinching until that nipple ached. His tongue lashed out, barely touching my nipples as he whispered, “Do you want me closer? Or further?”

Whatever resolve I had left shattered into a million pieces the moment I felt his fingers teasing the hair between my legs. I cursed myself, even as I moaned and pressed myself against his hand.

“Closer.” I gasped, my eyes still shut.

“What was that?” he purred against my neck.

“Closer.” I pleaded, desperately trying to grind myself against his outstretched palm. He chuckled again, pressing his palm between my legs. The moan that escaped me was nearly drowned out by his groan upon feeling how wet I was.

“Your body doesn’t lie,” he growled into my neck as he moved his palm, my hips moving in time to his rhythm.

Without a word, he spun me around until I faced the bed, and then he gently pressed his hand, still slick with my juices, into my back. I bent over, placing my hands on the bed as he dragged his palm down my back and between my legs again.

“Closer?” he questioned.

“Yes.” I moaned.

“What was that?”

“Closer!” I moaned louder, crying out as he slipped two fingers inside me. Then I felt his tongue, hot and wet as he dove in. My shock and surprise only lasted a moment before I felt the building pleasure as he worked another finger in, his tongue and hand moving in tandem.

“Yes!” I cried out, spreading my legs further apart as he nuzzled his face deep between them. He moaned against me, his fingers sliding in deeper, stretching me out. Then I felt it, another finger gently pushing into an entirely different hole.

I froze, unsure at first until I felt it slip in. I gasped, the sensation rolling over me as he slowly worked me, adding a fourth and final finger to the front. I pushed myself against him, begging for him to go deeper at both ends.

He growled in response, his hand moving faster and faster until I felt my own juices dripping down my legs.

Just when I was about to come, he withdrew his hand, despite my protests.

“Say it,” he demanded, his tone dark.

I swallowed, turning my face to see his expression. I was his in that moment, entirely his. He owned me and he knew it. All I had to do was say it.

“Closer.” I pleaded.

I cried out as he rammed into me, all the way in until he was deep inside me. He started slowly, pulling almost all the way out before ramming into me again. Long, hard, slow strokes that threatened to undo me.

Then I felt it, another finger gliding right into that other hole. I moaned, pressing my ass into the finger as he rammed me.

“Are you mine?” he growled, thrusting deeper into me as he slid another finger into my ass.

“Yes!” I cried out, feeling myself teeter at the edge of pleasure. I wanted to ride it out, let it roll over me as he thrust into me.

“Harder!” I begged, surprising myself. Edgar obliged. His thrusts became harder, faster, making me bounce against the bed, my arms barely able to hold me up against his strength.

Then I felt it. The wave of release washed over me as he changed his rhythm. I screamed out his name just as I felt him pour himself into me.

We collapsed onto the bed in a mess of arms and legs, breathing heavily.

I traced lazy circles over his toned stomach as our breathing evened out.

“I don’t want to stop this.” I said softly, “I just don’t want to rush from this - whatever this is - into something I’m not ready for.”

A silence stretched out between us until he said, “Could you, though? Ever get to that point?”

I sat up, giving him a small smile. “Maybe. There’s just so much going on right now. I just want to enjoy this.”

“Whatever this is,” he said softly. I nodded.

“Is that okay?”

He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Of course.”

“Thank you.” I curled up to him, savoring the heat his body gave off despite him being dead.

“Willow?”

“Yes?”

“Are you still going to the swamp with Wesley?”

I sighed. “I don’t want to, but I have to.” I cocked my head until I could see his face. “But don’t worry, I will be back for

more of whatever that was.” I smiled, blushing slightly as I recalled what he’d done.

Edgar smirked. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Chapter 12

I barely recognized Lucien in his fresh shirt and jeans waiting for me in the driveway. “Look at you,” I said, giving him a wolf whistle.

He rolled his eyes. “How long is this going to take?”

“As long as it takes.” I winked.

“Do you think this guy’s going to help?”

I shrugged, “I hope so. I met him, briefly, and he seemed alright.”

Lucien raised his eyes to something behind me. I turned, seeing Edgar leaning against the door frame.

“Hello, Lucien.” He said.

Lucien gave a half-hearted wave in response, turning back to look down the drive. Edgar’s gaze swung to me, but before he could say anything, I heard my grandma’s voice echoing in the hall.

“Edgar!” He steeled his face before turning back inside.

“Lord Edgar checking on you?” Lucien said.

I rolled my eyes. “He’s been a little much lately.”

“Much as in?”

“As in too much.” I joined Lucien in what little sun we had peeking from the clouds. There was a good chance it was going to snow today, and I wanted to find this cursed tree before then.

“He worries about Wesley sweeping you off your feet,” Lucien said, his voice low.

“Does he?” I asked, quirking a brow. I knew Lucien was right, of course. But it was still worrisome that everyone else could see Edgar acting like a jealous boyfriend.

Lucien nodded just as we heard the telltale screeching of Wesley’s truck speeding up to the manor. “I overheard him and Dahlia arguing the night that vampire appeared.”

“Arguing about what?” I asked, my curiosity peaking. Edgar didn’t seem like the type to argue with my grandmother. So Lucien must have caught them discussing something very serious if they had been arguing over it.

He shrugged. “Something about keeping you safe. I didn’t hear a lot of it.” His eyes swung to my face. “She knows about you guys.”

All the blood from my face drained. How did she know about us? My vision blurred as I teetered, but he caught me holding me up while the truck flew up to us. Alexa had said if Grandma ever found out about us, she would kill Edgar all over again. I’d been keen to keep our relationship, whatever it may be, a secret from her, thinking she wouldn’t understand.

I'd expected her to kick down my door and drag me around the house behind her wheelchair while scolding me for sullyng the family name. Yet, she'd known about this since Thanksgiving and hadn't said a word to me.

Lucien let go of my arm just as Wesley rolled up to us. Leaning over the passenger's side, he threw open the door, "Lucien! You're upfront with me today, dead man." His dimpled smile made my pulse quicken. How did he look so attractive even when being a douche?

Without protest, I climbed into the backseat while Lucien joined him in the front. I started when a cup of coffee was thrust into my face. "I figured you'd be a peppermint mocha girl," Wesley smirked, waiting for me to take the drink.

I raised a brow. "I am." Taking the cup from him, he held out a brown bag, the scent of something sweet and buttery rolling off it.

"Cheese Danish?"

I caught Lucien's amused look in the rearview mirror and snatched the bag from him quickly. "Are these drugged?"

Wesley had the decency to look mildly offended as he scoffed, "It's going to snow, eventually. I figured you'd want something hot to drink. And the area we are going to won't have any greasy spoon diners."

He gestured to the cooler behind his seat. "I packed some sandwiches and drinks. We don't know how long this is going to take."

Lucien chuckled, “The town has places to eat.”

“Drink you mean,” Wesley shot back, “Those bars will price gouge us.”

I couldn’t help the laugh that erupted from me. Both guys shot me a look. “Aren’t you rich, Wesley?”

“That doesn’t mean I don’t care about how I spend my money.” He hit the gas, and we shot down the driveway. I sipped on my coffee, surprised at how rich and minty it was. I tried not to dwell on how he knew my favorite flavors. Probably bribed our staff, I thought bitterly.

The drive to the swamp town took us twenty minutes down the stretch of road that dipped down into the watery lands. The boys chatted about bars in town, and which ones had the best-looking staff. I drowned them out by focusing on my phone. Hailey was planning on proposing to Anna when they came up for Christmas, and I was enlisted to help.

I planned to book them a private cabin by the cove, decorate the gardens, and make dinner reservations for the proposal. Normally I would ask Edgar, but after finding out Grandma knew about us, and he failed to disclose that to me, I decided it would be best to do it all on my own.

“What is the fanciest restaurant in town?” I blurted. Lucien paused his rant about bars watering down his drink and shot me a look.

Wesley flicked his turquoise gaze to the mirror. “Are you asking us on a date?” He inquired.

Lucien snorted at my sneer. “My friends are coming for Christmas. One plans on proposing to the other, so I want to do something nice for them.”

“Ah, the shackles of marriage.” Wesley mused. “Well, if they want to be romantic, I suggest the Salt and Spoon. It has the best view of the sun setting over the ocean, and I love their seafood. If you want to be super fancy, then take them to Esme’s. Their salads alone are fifty bucks.”

“Is that where you take your dates?” Lucien snickered into his drink.

Wesley smirked, “No, I take them all to Blue Bay.” Lucien howled with laughter and by the twinkle in Wesley’s eyes, I could only surmise he was talking about a strip bar.

“Classy,” I muttered while I made a to-do list for later.

“Oh, I wouldn’t take you there, Willow,” Wesley said, throwing me a serious look in the mirror.

“Where would you take her?” Lucien asked. I rolled my eyes. I didn’t care what his answer would be. It was never going to happen.

Wesley didn’t answer. He pulled off onto a dirt road that led us deep into the swamp. Spanish moss hung low over little homes that seemed to burst from the wet earth, teetering on stilts. The road twisted and curved through the thick trees, interrupted only by the sudden clearings for homes and a few trailers converted into bars.

Gray clouds blocked the sun out overhead, the chilly air whispering through the trees, the promise of snow clear as every porch was empty, and every chimney we passed plumed with smoke. Though we never saw a soul outside, I had the distinct feeling the people dwelling in the swamp knew we were there and knew we were outsiders.

Fifteen minutes passed before the road spat us into a massive clearing, and then ended. Wesley pulled the truck to the side of the road as we all gazed over to the expanse of ocean to our right. The swamp rolled right up to a sandy beach, a mixture of swamp land and sea that eventually gave way to the ocean nearly a mile down from us.

“There.” Lucien pointed to the sky, a trail of smoke curling. We left the truck and walked towards the smoke. A tiny cabin, hidden behind a stretch of trees, sat at the very edge of where the swamp and beach married.

“This must be it,” Wesley said. He had a long knife in one hand as we carefully approached the cabin. Lucien decided to take the lead, breaking from us to climb the three log steps to the door. He knocked, which suddenly seemed absurd to me. There was no one else around. Why were we knocking?

“Grayson!” I yelled, my voice echoing over the clearing.

Silence was my answer. Lucien chanced a peek through one of the windows. “Empty,” he said.

Wesley left my side to walk around the cabin, his eyes trained on the ground, looking for what I assumed were tracks. “He was here recently.” He mused.

I turned to the trees behind me, dreading having to go trudging through the cold swamp again. Something moved behind the trees, making the hairs on the back of my arms stand up. “Grayson?” I called, hoping it was the friendly blonde who’d plucked me from the muck once.

“Willow?” a familiar voice called behind me. I spun, seeing Grayson, arms laden with driftwood, making his way up the beach to us. Wesley was between us, his eyes trained on something behind me, his knife poised.

A growl erupted from the trees. I had just enough time to see the ghoul emerge from the tree line before Lucien screamed, “Run!”

Chapter 13

The ghoul rushed straight for me, jaws open to reveal rows of rotting fangs. Galloping on all four malformed paws, it cleared the tree line and came within feet of me before I was thrown to the side by Wesley. I fell back into the dirt, landing on my tailbone.

Wesley stood in front of me, legs spread wide in a coiled stance as he prepared for the ghoul to leap. But the ghoul stopped, just out of range of Wesley's knife, its milky eyes focused on me hiding behind the hunter.

Up close, I realized it looked slightly different from the grave ghoul. For one, its body wasn't falling to pieces, though it looked just as twisted and the smell was just as rancid. Second, its head appeared to be more human-like, but elongated.

It snarled, lips curling over its fangs while it watched me between Wesley's legs. A growl from behind us echoed over the clearing, the sound making my skin prickle. I turned my head to see Grayson approaching, the driftwood forgotten, his eyes glowing amber.

"Get off my property." He glowered, snarling like a savage beast.

The ghoul snarled back, hackling, standing on end as it faced Grayson. Wesley took his chance while the ghoul was distracted. Quick as an adder, he struck, his long knife cutting the ghoul's head clean off with one stroke.

The head rolled to the earth with a wet smack; the body collapsing in a heap after it.

Grayson groaned. "Now my yard is going to smell like a ghoul." He curled in his nose, looking down at me while I still huddled in the dirt. "You Rosenbay's love attracting danger."

He offered me a hand, and once again I found myself being plucked from the ground by him. "Was that thing here for me or you?"

"You, obviously." Wesley grimaced at the grayish blood dripping from his knife. Lucien came down from the porch, eyeing the knife with disgust.

"Ghouls." He spat, "Nasty creatures." Wesley nodded, swiping the bloody knife over Lucien's shirt.

"Much better." He smiled, placing the now clean weapon back onto his belt. Lucien cried out, ripping the shirt off while throwing out a string of curses.

"A hunter and a..." Grayson sniffed the air. "Dead man?" He cocked his head to the side. "Dead Man Lucien."

"In the flesh." Lucien sniffed, tossing his soiled shirt to the side.

My cheeks burned, but I forced myself to look back at Grayson. "Luna said you might be able to help me."

He quirked a brow. “Luna? You spoke to Luna?”

“The Swamp Spirit herself.” He chuckled. When he first found me floundering in the muck of the swamp, running from Luna in her wolf form, he’d called her the Swamp Spirit. At the time, I thought he’d been a crazy local, spouting folklore about a wolf that lived in the swamp. Now I knew better.

“How are you alive, then?” He inquired.

I gestured to Lucien and Wesley, “She didn’t want to pick a fight with these two.”

He shook his head, his blonde hair falling out of place over his eyes. With a massive hand, he brushed the hair back, his muscled arm poised behind his head as he considered the guys behind me. “Always the smart one, Luna.”

“I ran into her looking for the crooked tree. I need to find it, and she said you might help me.”

His golden eyes narrowed. “The crooked tree? Why?”

“There’s a connection between it and some spirits my mom helped. And I think it might be connected with her death, too.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised. That tree is bad news.”

“So, will you help me?”

“Nope.” He turned around and went back to his pile of driftwood. I watched him pick it up with my jaw hanging open.

Wesley snickered behind me. I shot him a glare as I marched over to Grayson. “Please! It’s really important that I

find this tree!”

He moved around me, walking to the cabin. I trailed behind, ignoring Wesley’s grin and Lucien’s chuckle.

“Grayson please, I will pay you whatever you want!”

He climbed up the stairs to the cabin door, pausing. Wesley appeared next to me, an air of arrogance surrounding him as he said, “Forget it, Willow. He won’t help us. He’s so happy stuck out here in his little cabin.”

“So what?” Grayson retorted.

“So, I’ve never met a lone wolf who is happy. Come on, you’re miserable out here without your pack.” I bit back my look of surprise. Wesley appeared to be helping, in his own arrogant, annoying way.

Grayson’s eyes narrowed, his arms tensing around the driftwood. I tried hard not to watch how his muscles bulged with the movement, but I failed terribly.

“My pack made their choice.”

“And now they are under the control of the Swamp Witch.” Wesley threw back. “Let me guess, you were their Alpha? You have the look for it, unlike Luna.”

Grayson was their Alpha? How could that be?

Grayson’s head dipped, his blonde hair falling over his eyes again. “Like I said, they made their choice.”

“What’s stopping you from unmaking it?” Wesley inquired.

Grayson's head shot up, his golden eyes burning molten amber as he growled, "What do you care, hunter? The way I hear it, you've slaughtered countless packs in your short lifetime, so why are you so interested in my pack?"

"I'm only interested in helping Willow. And we need you to do that." Wesley slung an arm around my shoulder, pulling me closer to him. My nose filled with the scent of smoke and wood, and I found myself inhaling it a little longer than I should have.

Wesley peered down at me, his dimpled smile widening as he noticed. I shoved him away, taking a step closer to Grayson, who was watching the display with muted intrigue.

"Are you two dating?" He asked.

"No!" I snapped.

"Maybe," Wesley shrugged.

Grayson cocked his head to the side. "Interesting."

"Grayson, please, will you help me? I can get you whatever you want!"

"I don't want money, if that's what you mean."

My shoulders deflated. "That's all I have to offer."

"Not true. You have something else."

"Want us to dethrone Luna?" Wesley asked, spinning his knife in his hand.

"No! My sister made her choice, and now she will have to deal with the witch herself." I held back a gasp. I could only

imagine what he was feeling, losing his pack and his sister at the same time.

Grayson swung his eyes at me. “Go on a date with me.” I nearly choked in surprise. Of all the things he could have asked for, this was not something I had expected.

Wesley’s knife tumbled to the ground as he lost control of it. Lucien chuckled behind him, then ducked away when Wesley chucked another knife right at his head. He turned to face Grayson, his eyes burning with displeasure.

“No way.” He said, “She’s not some prize to be passed around.”

I raised a brow. “I can make my own choices, Wesley.”

He scoffed. “He’s only asking to get a rise out of me and you.”

“Oh, so this is about your ego, then?” I laughed. “You don’t think he’s asking me just because he might like me?”

Wesley threw his hands up in the air. “Of course, he’s asking you because he likes you! He’s also doing it to make me mad!”

“Somehow, you always end up making things about you.” I groaned. “You and Edgar are so overbearing, it’s suffocating!” Wesley went silent, his brows shooting up in surprise. I felt the heat of a blush run over my neck as I realized what I’d said.

Grayson sighed. “Look, all I ask is you go on a date with me.” I tore my eyes from Wesley to see Grayson shrugging.

“Whatever happens, happens, but if you do this, then I will consider taking you to the tree.”

“Consider?” I scoffed, placing my hands on my hips. Grayson waited for my answer as I shuffled around, debating his terms. On one hand, I considered his request a gross misuse of his power here. I wasn’t some object to be bartered with.

On the other hand, I could use a night out away from everyone in the manor. Besides, he really was the only one who could help us. Plus, it clearly annoyed Wesley. I stopped pacing, looking Wesley straight in the eyes as I said, “One date. In public. I leave when I want.”

I saw the way his eyes tensed up, but he didn’t protest.

“Done,” Grayson said. “I will pick you up tonight at seven.”

I spun on my heels, “Tonight?”

“Yes. Do you have other plans?” I shook my head, and he smiled. “Good. See you then.” He kicked in his door and left us standing there.

“You better give a good date, Willow, or we will be searching around that swamp for the rest of our lives.” Lucien sighed.

“As long as he doesn’t take me to Wesley’s normal hang-out, I think it will be fine.” I shot back as I stomped over to the truck. How was I going to explain this to Edgar? He was going to be livid.

“If he takes her to Blue Bay, I will skin him alive,” Wesley growled to Lucien.

Chapter 14

“You can’t be serious.” Edgar’s tone was incredulous, his toned arms folded over his chest as he glared at me from the door frame.

I pinned up my wet hair, the lofty scent of jasmine filling my senses before I tossed my robe aside. I hadn’t been out of the shower for more than five minutes before Edgar appeared, asking what had happened. I’d been dreading telling him about dinner with Grayson, but there was no getting around it.

I flicked my eyes to him. “It’s just dinner, Edgar. And he only asked me because he knew it would piss off Wesley.”

Amusement crawled over his face, his lips curling slightly. “Take Lucien with you.”

“No,” I said firmly, pulling my tights up. “He’s done enough for today. Besides, Grayson isn’t a threat.” Slipping the long-sleeved dress over my head, I picked at the fabric, hoping it would be warm enough. I looked casual in the outfit. I didn’t want to wear anything too flattering.

“This isn’t a date,” I said, giving Edgar a pointed look.

“It’d better not be,” He growled. I spun on my heels, glaring at him, annoyed that he had the audacity to be jealous.

The stifling feeling was growing in my gut, making it hard to breathe.

“You don’t own me, Edgar. So, stop acting like it.”

“You weren’t complaining last night.” He said, his voice thick, his eyes full of heat. I swallowed hard, feeling my body burn at his gaze.

I tried to force the heat down, and tried not to think about last night. But the visions kept swimming in my mind, and he could see me struggling. Edgar stood, pinning me with his gaze.

Just then, someone knocked on my door. “Willow, your date is here.” Alexa sang. “Do you want me to take care of him?”

“I will be right down,” I said, trying to keep the thickness out of my voice. I slipped into a pair of boots before grabbing my coat. “I have to go,” I said as I marched out of the room.

Edgar didn’t follow me until I reached the front door, appearing just as I stepped out into the yard.

“I’m not trying to control you, Willow. I’m just trying to protect you. We don’t know what this guy wants. We only know he is a part of a pack of Werewolves who want you dead.” I paused, taking in his worried expression and hunched shoulders.

“He’s not a part of the pack anymore. Plus, if he wanted me dead, he would have. He’s had the opportunity multiple

times now.” Besides, I highly doubted he would get the chance to do so out in public with a bunch of humans around.

Grayson was waiting just outside the manor gates, his black jeep idling, unable to pass through the barrier that kept werewolves out.

“I will be back soon,” I said, giving Edgar what I hoped was a reassuring smile.

“Not too soon I hope,” Alexa called from the front door. She gave me a little wave, but her eyes were glued to the werewolf waiting for me. I appreciated her effort to be civil, despite being a Monster Hunter. I just wished Edgar would make the effort.

He made a move as if to kiss me, but I ducked away, opting to pat him on the shoulder before power-walking down the gravel driveway. I prayed he wouldn’t follow after me, wouldn’t make this any more awkward than it was.

Grayson rolled down the passenger window, the light sounds of jazz drifting from inside. “You came.” He called, smiling as he leaned over to open the door for me. “I would get out to open it, but I think Edgar might implode.”

I choked back a laugh, hopping up into the seat. Slamming the door behind me, I turned, waving to them as Grayson rolled away.

“They’re worried you will take me straight to the pack and offer me up,” I said, giving him a side-eyed glance.

He smirked, “I probably would, if it would help my situation, but alas, it would not.”

“Hm, where are we going? Blue Bay?”

Grayson swerved, nearly clipping the guard rail before he jerked the jeep back into position. “Sorry!” he yelled. “How do you know about that place?” I raised a brow. He looked surprised, even blushing, as he flicked his eyes to me.

“Wesley and Lucien mentioned it.” I shrugged.

“Of course Wesley did.” He rolled his eyes, his shoulders relaxing. “No, Willow, I would not take you to that...place.”

“What is it?” I asked, my curiosity peaking.

I watched a blush creep up his neck, flushing his cheeks again. “Is the big bad wolf too embarrassed to say?” I teased.

The corner of his lips dipped into a frown. “It’s not a place I would take you.” He said, his tone telling me the topic was now done.

I shrugged. “Then where are you taking me?”

“Shuckers.” He said with a boyish grin. I couldn’t help but smile back as we drove into town.

I’d never been on a date before - I didn’t count what happened in the graveyard on Halloween as a date. Excitement roiled through my body as he drove us up to a cute little shack by the ocean. Strings of lights were strung all around the parking lot, guiding us to the open door where lively jazz music mixed with the spicy scent of Cajun food.

Grayson led me inside, walking right past the hostess with a gentle nod of his chin. The girl broke into a wide smile, a dreamy look in her eyes as she watched him go before her gaze settled on me following. I gave her a little wave, her smile faltering.

The shack was much larger on the inside, with a stage at the far end where a band was playing. I followed Grayson to a quieter corner, away from everyone. The moment he sat down, a waitress appeared, placing her elbows on the table as she leaned close to him.

“What will it be today, gray?” She asked, her voice husky, her eyelids fluttering as she propped her heavy chest up for him.

“Two of the usual.” He said, oblivious to her advances. He was looking at me, standing awkwardly behind her. “I hope you don’t mind me ordering for you?” He asked, his lips quirking into a teasing smile.

The waitress whipped her head around to me so fast I thought her ponytail would smack him across the face.

“That’s fine. I trust you.” I said, maneuvering around her to get to the chair next to him.

“I will get that right out.” The waitress said, her voice tight as she walked away.

“You come here a lot,” I said.

He shrugged, his gaze moving to the band. “I like the music, and the food is great.”

“The staff sure seems to like you.” I could see other waitresses eyeing him as they moved through the tables. Most of the tables were packed with couples or families.

“They’re nice. I normally come by myself, so I’ve gotten to know most of them.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, seeing the hostess, still staring at me with a dead expression.

“So, tell me about yourself.” Grayson tore his eyes from the band, pinning me with his gaze.

Normally I would balk at small talk like this, but I found myself immediately telling him about my life. Maybe it was because he already knew about my family, or because he’d helped me before, or even because I knew I needed him on my side if I wanted to find the tree. Either way, by the time two towers of food were brought to us, I’d told him everything.

He barely registered the waitress hovering, waiting for him to say something. His eyes were glued to my face, his brows knotted in a thoughtful look.

“Thank you,” I said, offering her a smile. She ignored me, stomping off to the hostess.

“I can’t say I’m not surprised, given what your family has done in the past. But I am still sorry you had to go through that, Willow.”

“Did you, like, date anyone here?” I asked, watching her animated hand movements as she and the hostess spoke.

“No. Like I said, I come here for food and music.” He pulled an oyster from the tower, dabbing it with sauce before slurping it down. Anyone else would have made the action look awkward, however, watching Grayson wrap his lips around the shell and suck down the meat made my cheeks burn.

“Try some.” He said, handing me one, already sauced up.

“Do you just...suck on it?” I asked, and he burst out laughing.

“No, you just kind of let it slide in.”

I gave him a doubtful glance before cocking my head back and letting the oyster slip between my lips.

“Don’t chew, just swallow.” He instructed.

I tried not to focus on the texture as I swallowed it whole. Smacking my lips, I gave him a little shrug.

“Not bad.”

He smirked. “You’re good at swallowing.”

I chucked the shell at him, making him laugh. “You better behave yourself.”

“Sorry,” he said in a way that I knew meant he wasn’t sorry at all.

I downed a few more oysters before we broke into the crab legs and scallops. He was right; the food was great, and the music had a way of wrapping around me, making me forget

about the tree and the manor. And Edgar, who had to be waiting at the manor, nearly in a fit.

By the time we'd cleared both towers, we were so full we had to sit back in our chairs, both our gazes on the woman playing the saxophone on stage. I was so engrossed with her movements and the music; it took a moment for me to realize Grayson had asked me something.

"What?" I blinked back at him.

"I said, are you sure you want to find the tree? I'm not being dramatic when I say it's not a nice place."

I sat forward, ignoring the way my full stomach protested against the movement. Who knew seafood could fill you up so much?

"I have no choice. It's the only link between my mom, her death, and the family curse."

Grayson eyed me, his expression wary. "You want to break the curse?" He stated dryly.

I bit my lip. "I'm not sure what I want." It was true, in more ways than one. My life had been turned upside down in such a short amount of time. Although I had adjusted myself to my new reality, there were times when I still felt like I was reeling. Like I was still falling, with no end in sight.

Grayson caught my look, his eyes softening. "I've felt lost ever since I was kicked out of my pack."

I frowned, "The Swamp Witch." I spat.

He nodded. “She has a hold over them, and I fear for them every day.”

“Maybe I could reason with her.” He gave me an incredulous look, and I rolled my eyes. “I have to talk to her, eventually. To try to get her to call the wolves off me.”

He shook his head. “She won’t. Once she’s made up her mind, she can’t ever be swayed.” He picked at his napkin, letting out a long, deep sigh. “I will help you, Willow. Only because I really have nothing else to do, but also to make sure you don’t go walking into trouble.”

I cocked a brow. “What do you mean?”

He smirked. “I’ve heard the stories about you. I’ve seen how reckless you can be. You’re a walking accident waiting to happen. No wonder Wesley is so attached to you.”

I balked, “Let’s not talk about him.”

The waitress appeared, smiling as she cleared away our dishes. “Will you be having dessert?” She asked, fluttering her eyes at Grayson.

He raised a brow at me, and I considered saying no. He’d agreed to help me, and I had only agreed to dinner with him. But the thought of going back to the manor now, and facing Edgar’s questions, made me hesitate.

“Sure,” I said, watching her smile fade. “Do you have cake?”

Chapter 15

We ate a few slices of red velvet cake and sipped on hot chocolate until late into the night. I became so engrossed with the music and food and talking with him that I lost track of time. Grayson was the one who realized how late it was and promptly took me back to the manor.

“Do you think you can be at my place at nine?” He teased, seeing me yawn. “Careful, you’ll dislocate your jaw.”

I rolled my eyes. “We will be there.” I didn’t want to admit it out loud, but I hoped Wesley would bring coffee and pastries again.

Grayson shrugged. “I will be there all day. There’s no rush, but I would prefer not to be anywhere near that tree when the sun goes down.” I watched him shiver a bit and wondered just how bad this tree was.

“Thank you for helping us. I really appreciate it.” I gave what I hoped looked like an encouraging smile, but what probably came out as a lopsided grin as I fought back the urge to yawn again.

He waved me off as he rolled up to the manor gates. “I can’t have some city girl running through the swamp, getting herself into trouble.”

I rolled my eyes again. “Well, thank you. And if there is anything I can do about...you know...”

He shook his head. “Not unless you can usurp the Swamp Witch and beat my little sister in a brawl.”

“Oh, those are my specialties.” I gave him a sleepy wink before stepping out into the frigid night. I cursed under my breath, a puff of smoke rising as I trotted up the drive.

“Get some winter clothes!” He hollered from the jeep, followed by his trailing laughter as he drove off.

I burst through the front doors, slamming them behind me as I took deep breaths of the warm manor. My lips barely had enough time to work again before Edgar popped into existence before me, scowling.

“Good news!” I said quickly, forcing my frozen lips to move. “Grayson will help us search for my necklace in the swamp.”

Edgar raised a brow, his toned arm folded over his chest, pulling at the open part of his silk shirt. I averted my eyes from his exposed chest, forcing myself to maintain eye contact.

“Oh, how valiant of the werewolf. I wonder, will he also help you with a certain tree?” Edgar’s tone was cold, his eyes narrowed as he waited for my reply.

My heart skipped a beat, and I blurted, “Who told you that?”

He unfolded one arm, holding up my mother’s journal.

Heat flooded my face as anger burned deep in my belly. I tore the journal from his hand so quickly that he blinked in surprise. “How dare you snoop through my things!”

Pain and anger swirled in his eyes. “I had no choice, Willow. You’ve been keeping things from us - from me!”

I pushed past him, stomping my way to my room. The suffocating feeling was coming back like someone was holding me down and sitting on my chest. I blinked back my tears of frustration as he followed me.

“You’re running around with dangerous men, and lately it seems like you’d rather do that than be here.”

I spun on him. My gaze hitting him with every ounce of anger I felt burning inside me. He took a step back, startled momentarily.

“How could I not? When I have you smothering me, grandmother mocking me, and Alexa pitying me. I can’t leave my room without one of you following me and pushing me to make a choice! No matter what, you had no right to go through my things.”

“Are you going to search for that tree?” He demanded.

“It’s none of your business. Good night, Edgar.” I rushed back to my room, slamming the door behind me, but just as I entered my bedroom, I found him standing in front of the bed.

“Get out. I want to be alone.” I seethed.

“You say that Willow, but I know you. I’m sorry I went through your things. I was just trying to protect you.”

“You keep saying that, and it still doesn’t feel like protection. It feels like control. Leave me alone, I have to get up early.” I placed the journal on my vanity and crossed my arms, glaring at him. If he thought he was going to climb into bed with me tonight, he was sorely mistaken.

Edgar moved to close the distance between us, but I just backed up.

“Willow,” he said, hurt in his voice and eyes, but I steeled myself. When I didn’t budge, his eyes narrowed again, the hurt replaced by suspicion and jealousy.

“Fine. If you want to put yourself in danger, go ahead. If you want to put the future of this family in jeopardy, that’s on your head, not mine. Just remember, those guys only want your fortune and power, not you.”

I scoffed, unaffected by his lame attempt to hurt me. “Wesley, sure. But Grayson has no interest in me or my fortune.”

He smirked. “Keep telling yourself that. I saw the way he looked while he watched you walk away. Like a dog with a bone.”

The jealous faces of the waitress and hostess washed over me. Grayson said he never brought girls to the restaurant until me. So why me?

I rolled my eyes, hoping to hide my expression. “Go away, Edgar. Your jealousy isn’t attractive at all.”

He shrugged, “Fine. Have a great night.” With that, he vanished, leaving me sighing in relief. I crawled into bed, suddenly so tired I couldn’t be bothered with a shower or changing clothes.

It took a while to fall asleep. My mind kept racing with Edgar’s words. I found myself rethinking every move, every word Grayson spoke at dinner. At the time, I didn’t think he had any other motive to ask me out, other than making Wesley angry.

Doubt filled my mind, and I had to kick it back down. I told myself Edgar was just trying to get into my head to make me doubt Grayson. It was his way of driving a wedge between us. I couldn’t understand Edgar’s need to do so. We weren’t a couple - I’d made that very clear.

When did he turn into such a controlling douche? Or had he always been that way?

By the time I finally fell asleep, my alarm clock went off. I groaned, cursing my life and the men that haunted it. I took a quick shower and found the warmest clothes I had before I trudged down to the foyer where Lucien was waiting.

He took one look at me and howled with laughter. “Late night with the wolf?”

I didn’t have the energy to punch him, so I just leaned up against his shoulder. “Something like that.” He chuckled, his shoulder and chest moving with the deep rumbles.

Wesley skidded into the driveway, waving at us and holding up a pastry bag. I ran to the car, leaping into the front seat. Wesley watched me, slacked-jawed, as I nursed the drink he got me. Lucien climbed into the backseat. “Good morning.” He said, nodding to Wesley.

“You look like shit. Are you alright?” Wesley asked as he handed Lucien his drink.

I groaned, “Edgar is intolerable.” I grumbled into the peppermint-scented steam. My eyes widen, realizing what I’d said.

I expected Wesley to come out with a smartass remark, but instead, he seemed concerned.

“Want to talk about it?” He asked, his eyes flicking to Lucien, who shrugged.

“No.” I shook my head, offering him a tight smile. “I just need caffeine and sugar. Thank you.” I grabbed a donut from his bag. “Grayson said he will help us. We’re going to meet him at his place.”

“He better get us there quick. I think it really will snow today.” Lucien said, munching on his bear claw.

Wesley didn’t comment. His turquoise eyes were glued behind my head. His expression was unreadable, but his eyes seemed to burn. I turned slightly, just enough to see Edgar’s silhouette in the doorway, watching us.

“Wesley?” I said softly, snapping him back to reality. He blinked, then smirked.

“Good thing I got the wolf something, too.” He said before slamming the gas so hard that a wave of gravel went flying straight at Edgar.

I forced myself to keep my eyes on the road, trying to hide the grin plastered on my face.

As usual, Wesley had a great time speeding into the swamp. We arrived at Grayson’s cabin two minutes before nine, much to his surprise.

Grayson didn’t comment on my appearance, but I saw the way his eyes lingered on the dark circles under my eyes. Wesley shoved a drink and bag into his hands, then stomped away.

“Raspberry mocha! And a chocolate sprinkle donut. I love these!” Grayson exclaimed, his eyes nearly bulging from his head.

“It’s his way of saying thanks,” Lucien said. We glanced over to where the Monster Hunter was busy doing squats, trying hard to act like he didn’t notice us staring at him.

“I think it’s his love language,” I observed.

“Coffee and donuts? That’s the best kind.” Grayson said, shoving the entire donut into his mouth. I watched as he chewed twice and swallowed, then gulped down the drink.

“Bottomless pit,” Grayson said, patting his stomach. Lucien snickered, lightly pushing my unhinged jaw back into place.

“Are we going or not?” Wesley called.

Grayson led us into the trees, where we trekked through miles of swamp and coastline. For the most part, we walked in silence, with Lucien and Wesley occasionally squabbling. During one of their longer conversations about absinthe, I found myself wandering closer to Grayson.

“Did you sleep at all?” He asked, watching me through his long, dark lashes.

I sighed, “Not really. Edgar wasn’t happy I stayed out so late.”

He raised a brow. “I’m not one for insulting dogs, but he’s-”

“My grandmother’s lapdog, I know. They’ve become so suffocating lately, trying to pressure me into breaking the family curse or popping out an heir.” I blushed suddenly. “Sorry, info dump.”

He chuckled, the sound deep and warm. “I don’t mind. I was in a similar situation as our pack’s Alpha. I had so much pressure to reclaim our land back, while also ensuring I had a mate and an heir.”

“Mate?”

“Every werewolf has one true mate. Someone meant for you.”

He looked off into the distance, a wanting look in his eyes.

I felt my stomach clench, and my palms go warm as I asked, “Have you found yours?”

He shook his head. “Not yet.”

“How do you know who they are?” I felt more relieved than I should have. Why did I care if he’d found one yet or not?

“The mating bond snaps into place. You feel it in your soul.”

I started asking another question, but the icy chill that crept up my spine stole my words. Grayson halted, throwing up a massive arm to hold me back. The others froze behind us, Wesley crouching down low while Lucien knotted his brows, gazing around the swamp.

“There. Do you see it?” Grayson whispered, his voice tense.

I followed his line of sight, to where a mass of blackened, broken trees rose in a clearing. Behind them, the Crooked Tree towered over.

Chapter 16

The Crooked Tree. The Witch's Claw.

It loomed over the edge of a cliff, its branches grasping out towards the azure sea below. Its trunk was thick, at least the length of a truck. I'd heard of the redwoods out West being large, but the blackened, twisted tree before us had to have been on the same scale.

"What kind of tree is that?" I asked.

"No one knows," Grayson said, his golden eyes trained warily on it.

"Cursed." Wesley spat. I quirked a brow, turning to see the hunter standing close to my shoulder.

"Scared?" I teased, despite how my stomach recoiled at the very sight before us. Something was off about the tree, that much was sure.

Wesley snapped his turquoise gaze to me and I realized how ashen he looked. He really was scared.

"Can you feel it?" He asked.

I nodded, and I knew Grayson felt it, too. Lucien, on the other hand, seemed oblivious.

The dead man had his hands clasped behind his back, his head cocked to the side as he studied the tree. “I feel like I have seen this place before,” he mused.

Grayson and Wesley scoffed at the same time, exchanging bewildered looks. “How can that be?” I asked him.

Lucien shrugged, “No idea. It’s just a vague feeling of familiarity and now it’s gone. Pity.” He strolled away, completely unbothered by the obviously cursed tree.

“No doubt his whiskey-soaked brain is to blame.” Wesley sighed. “Drunkard.”

“Man-whore,” I countered, earning myself a heated glare from the hunter. “Lucien is doing his best. Not one of us here can claim to be perfect, so give him some grace.”

His eyes darkened, turning a deep green that nearly took my breath away. I would have been dangerously close to swooning over him again, like I had that night on my birthday if it wasn’t for the words that hissed from his lips.

“I would expect as much from a Rosenbay.” He sneered.

My heart leapt into my throat as my entire body ignited in a fiery rage.

“That’s rich coming from a money-hungry Hargreaves.” I shot back. “I know the promises my dear old grandmother has been whispering to you, Wesley.”

He had the audacity to look surprised, which only served to enrage me further.

“I know why you’re really here. All you care about is taking my family’s wealth, but you need me and my blood to make that happen. Well, let me be crystal clear right here.” I stabbed a finger right into his chest, savoring the look of shock on his face. “You will never be a part of my family, let alone fuck me.”

The rage that swelled in my belly burned to the top of my skin, the heat mingling with Wesley’s body in the cold air. A soft mist was forming around us as we stared each other down, ignorant of what was happening.

Then I felt a heavy hand on my shoulder and saw the way Wesley’s gaze snapped to the owner like he would cut it clean off.

“Willow, be calm. It’s the tree doing this, remember?” Grayson whispered between us.

The tree. In my anger, I’d completely forgotten about it. I turned around, seeing the mist start to gather at its base.

“Can’t you feel the energy it’s giving off? Don’t you feel how malignant the very air is?” Grayson continued.

“How can you stand it?” I said, my throat suddenly dry as I realized he was right. Sure, I had some misgivings about Wesley, but my feelings were usually buried beneath the more pressing matters, like the tree in the swamp that probably killed my mom. Under normal circumstances, I could tolerate the hunter, even knowing his true intentions.

“I’m not sure, but I think it has to do with my family having lived here for generations.” Grayson turned a knowing look to Wesley, who had the decency to lower his shoulders slightly under the weight of the werewolf’s gaze. “We lived on this land, and the tree seemed to tolerate us until we were forced out.”

Grayson spoke about the Hargreaves who hunted and killed the werewolf pack, causing them to flee the swampland. Wesley stayed quiet, but we all knew.

Grayson gave my shoulder a gentle squeeze, his expression warning, but warm. I took a deep breath to steady my nerves, willing the anger that had suddenly boiled over to recede. I reminded myself why I was here - to figure out what happened to my mother. I wasn’t here to hash out my issues with Wesley and my grandmother.

That could wait, but the cursed souls of my family could not.

“The werewolf is right,” Wesley grumbled before pinning me with a glare. “You should hurry up and do whatever it is you came here to do.”

I couldn’t argue with him about that. The waves of malice from the tree seemed to be getting stronger the longer we stayed.

“Don’t get close to it,” Grayson warned, removing his hand from my shoulder. I glanced back to see Lucien still strolling through the clearing, as if studying the area. I made a

mental note to ask him later if he remembered anything about the tree before I took a few steps closer to the tree.

Grayson growled softly, a low warning to keep my distance. I waved his concern away, having no intention of getting too close. I only wanted to see if there was any obvious sign that this twisted, malformed thing was responsible for killing my mother and my cousin.

From all the accounts my mother had documented, as well as my cousin Griffith, no one could remember what had caused their death, only that they had been close to the tree. Griffith was said to have been killed by a snake bite, though now as I neared the tree, I had my doubts. By the time I found his body, he was nothing but sun-bleached bones, so there was no evidence of a snake bite. And his accounts of his time in the swamp were murky at best.

Still, I watched the ground for any snakes.

I stopped a decent way from the tree, keeping out from under its reaching branches. There was nothing amiss, aside from its strange appearance and dark aura. I sighed in frustration. I wasn't sure what I had been expecting - blood pouring from its knots, perhaps? But whatever I'd been expecting, or hoping for, was not there.

Only the dark aura pulsing from the tree in waves, the malice so thick I could practically taste it in the air, met me.

I turned from the tree, disappointment stabbing my heart. There had to be more to it, I thought, looking at where Grayson and Wesley waited. There had to be more to it, there

had to be. This couldn't be a dead end, not when I had to choose between staying at Harrowgrove or being a broodmare for Wesley.

A branch groaned behind me as if bearing a heavy weight. I froze, the hairs on the back of my neck standing as a cold shiver snaked down my spine. The creaking continued in a rhythmic beat. I turned slowly, a feeling of being watched washing over me.

Two feet were swinging back and forth just behind my head. They were caked with mud and soot, but beneath the grim, I could see the decaying flesh. Dread gripped my gut. My body ran cold as I looked up to see the bloated face of a woman hanging from the branches. Somehow I had ended up beneath the tree - how did that happen? Her milky white eyes were wide open, and just as I took a breath to scream, she blinked.

I did not hear Wesley scream my name or Grayson erupt into a howl as he called for Lucien.

I was trapped in her gaze, my petrified face mirrored back to me in her milky eyes. Her rotting lips curled into a grotesque smile. I watched in silent horror as she opened her mouth to speak.

“Which truth do you seek?” She croaked and a glob of blood, black as tar, oozed from her lips.

I couldn't speak. It was as if every word I'd ever learned fled my tongue, chased away by the hanging woman. My mind struggled to understand what was happening. She hadn't been

there before. I would have noticed her hanging over me. And despite the bloated, decaying flesh on her face, I could see the wickedness as if it were etched into her very skin. She had to be from the tree.

“Which truth do you seek?” She inquired again, still smiling.

I shook my head, trying and failing to speak something, anything. Instead, I took a step back, remembering suddenly that I shouldn't be close to the tree. I nearly tripped over one of its gnarled roots snaking from the darkened soil. I couldn't remember being close enough to touch the roots, let alone be under the branches. I looked for Grayson and Wesley but could only see fog behind me.

The woman's smile widened as she watched me struggle to leave, my confused expression making her chuckle darkly.

Somewhere a wolf howled in the fog.

“Grayson!” I called, finding my voice finally.

“Done.” The woman cackled, and I felt a cold, withered hand grasp my neck.

Chapter 17

The earth crumbled beneath my feet, revealing the twisted, thick roots of the tree. They stretched out towards me, tangling themselves around my ankles and waist. The trunk split open at its center; the gaping wound turning into a dark mouth. I was pulled into the darkness by the tree's menacing, splintered teeth.

I had no time to scream as I was swallowed inside the trunk. A chorus of voices swirled in the blackness, varying in language and accent. They were all so jumbled, I couldn't focus on just one.

Then I heard one, louder than the others, and familiar. It was soft at first, but soon the voice drowned out all the others until it was the only one I could hear.

Grayson. I could see him in the swamp as if I were floating just above him.

He was calling my name in the fog, his golden eyes glowing as he ran, searching for me. I tried to call out his name, to tell him the tree had decided to eat me for lunch, but found I couldn't speak. No sound would escape my throat.

He turned, and his face was a mask of rage and worry that struck me to my core. He barely knew me, yet he was worried

about my safety.

I was suddenly thrust forward, straight into him. I threw out my hands but did not meet his flesh. Instead, the image changed, morphing into something different.

Grayson was in a different part of the swamp now, carefully picking his way through the muck and growth. He froze, cocking his head as if listening for something. A flash of color raced by, only a few feet away.

I gaped in surprise as I watched myself running through the swamp. The other me tripped, falling face-first into the mud and I realized I was looking at the first time we'd met. I'd been searching for Griffith's bones in the swamp, but I came across Grayson's sister in wolf form instead.

I watched as he approached me, his golden smile erupting on his face as I struggled to get up from the mud. I looked like a bog witch, with my hair wild and windswept, covered in swamp muck. I hadn't noticed it then, but there was a distinct look in Grayson's eyes as he watched me.

I barely had a moment to let it register in my mind that at that moment, despite everything, he was admiring me. The image changed, and I was now looking at Grayson with his sister Luna in her human form. They were watching me as I rode my bike away from the swamp, the bones wrapped in my jacket, tucked under my arm.

I'd found them there, on my bike. After Alexa told me I'd run into werewolves, I'd assumed one of them had left them for me.

“She made a wish,” Luna said, side-eyeing her brother, who grinned back. Luna growled lowly, then snorted. “This changes nothing, brother. I didn’t know who she was at first, and that was enough to save her. But the witch wants her head.”

Grayson’s expression fell, his shoulders tightening as he looked back at my fading figure.

“The witch will destroy us.” He said, his tone warning.

Luna huffed, then let out a deep sigh. “I have no choice.”

“I know.” He said before walking away.

The image changed again and this time I was looking at Grayson and I. It was only last night, when we had dinner together. Looking at his face now, I wondered how I’d missed it.

The hunger in his eyes as he watched me eat. The way his gaze flicked to my neck, his lips twitching as he watched my throat bob. He was looking at me like a piece of meat.

Like a wolf looking at a rabbit.

Fear and doubt snaked into my veins. Had I been too naïve and quick to trust Grayson? Maybe he was still trying to get back in the good graces of the witch, so he could be the alpha of his pack again.

My head on a platter would be the perfect gift.

Was he playing a long game with me?

A dry cackle made my heart race. I shook my head, trying to remember this was all the tree and its hanging woman. I could be seeing distorted memories, or false images entirely.

You asked for the truth. See it. The hanging woman hissed in my ear, and the images changed.

I was back at Grayson's home this morning when we arrived. He had the same look on his face, full of hunger.

“Enough.” A hand split through the fog, grasping my hand. I clung to it, the warm flesh pulling me back into myself. I entwined my fingers with theirs, our hands clasped in a vise grip as they tugged me through the fog and memories back into my body.

I blinked, seeing I was now standing on the edge of the cliff, the tree behind me still encased in fog. Waves crashed against the cliff side below, the foamy waters churning dangerously through a bevy of jagged rocks.

My feet were mere inches from the edge.

I felt a gentle squeeze and realized I was still holding someone's hand. I took a few steps back towards them, then turned, expecting to see one of the boys.

Instead, I was faced with a girl close to my age, but a good foot taller. “Jesus, you're gorgeous,” I said, then felt my entire face burn as I realized what I blurted. She smiled back, showing two perfect dimples that only enhanced her beauty.

“Thank you?” She laughed awkwardly, her short, dark curls bouncing with the motion.

“Sorry,” I sputtered, “I just didn’t expect to see... well, you.” She smiled softly, her umber complexion deepening as she blushed.

“Yes, why are you here, Antoinette?” Startled, I nearly leapt back toward the edge of the cliff to escape the hanging woman. Only she wasn’t hanging now.

She was sitting on one of the largest roots; her decaying feet swinging over the edge as she watched us.

The girl, Antoinette, turned to face the woman. She held fast to my hand as if to anchor me in place, and I had to admit I felt grounded just touching her. But there was no time to consider why this supermodel holding my hand made me feel safe, not when the decaying woman was watching us with her milky white eyes.

“Mrs. Barren. I thought we had an agreement about telling fortunes to strangers?” Antoinette said sweetly.

The woman, Mrs. Barren, only shrugged in response.

“Mrs. Barren.” Antoinette admonished gently.

The woman groaned, throwing her hands up like a petulant child. I couldn’t believe she was the same terrifying figure hanging from the tree just moments ago.

“I didn’t tell her no such fortune.” She explained, “I only showed truths. No harm done.” She flicked her milky eyes to me and I shrank back slightly. Antoinette held my hand firmly, giving it an encouraging squeeze.

“She made no contact then?” Antoinette asked, and the woman nodded. Contact? What contact does she mean?

“Good. Then maybe you can explain why she was about to throw herself into the sea?” Antoinette asked, her tone warning.

Mrs. Barren huffed, “Tis boring swaying from these limbs.” She threw me a toothy smile. “I was only playing.”

“Playtime is over. Leave her and the others be,” Antionette ordered. For a moment, I thought the woman would argue. Antoinette must have, as well. She raised her free hand, showing the woman her palm. From where I was standing, I couldn’t see if there was anything there, but Mrs. Barren seemed to understand.

With a hiss, she disappeared into the fog, and then a heartbeat later, the fog began to lift.

I could hear Grayson and the others calling my name in the distance. The fog was thinning, and I knew I would soon be able to see them.

Antionette let go of my hand, offering me an apologetic smile. “I am sorry. She doesn’t mean anything by it, but she is right. The spirits here grow bored, and a Rosenbay is a tempting plaything for them.”

My lips parted in surprise, but before I could ask how she knew who I was, she placed a finger over them.

“There are eyes on the tree.” She warned. “Go back to your friends. I will make sure you leave this place in peace.”

She waved a hand and the roots of the tree lifted, revealing a path out of the fog and away from the tree.

She gave me a wink before gently pushing me towards the path. I took a few steps away, turning back to see she'd disappeared.

“Willow!” Grayson bellowed, startling me.

He was rushing towards me, his expression a mask of fear and rage.

The memory of him looking at me like dinner fluttered through my mind, and I took a step back. He stopped suddenly, a few feet from me. His expression changed, looking sheepish.

“There you are!” Lucien appeared behind him, breathing hard. “I am glad we found you! I am not fit to run a marathon through this dreadful swamp.”

Wesley waltzed up at last. He wasn't disheveled like the other two and appeared less than interested in seeing me.

“I'm fine. I think we should go back home.” I said, taking one last look behind me. The tree was further away than I had thought, having only taken a few steps down the path. Antionette was nowhere to be seen, but I had to assume she was still watching.

There are eyes on this tree, she'd said before promising to help us leave this place in peace.

I only hoped she was right.

Chapter 18

“Whatever you saw up in that tree terrified you,” Grayson growled.

“Then the fog came in and you vanished,” Lucien said. He was walking next to me as we made our way back to Wesley’s truck.

“I told you,” I said again, “I don’t know what happened.” They’d been grilling me the entire walk back. True to her word, Antoinette did whatever she had to in order to make sure we got back to the truck in peace. No ghoul leapt out to surprise us, no witches or werewolves followed us back.

Whoever she was, she held a heavy sway over the swamp. And the cursed tree.

Someone like that could be a valuable ally.

Grayson let out a low growl of frustration for me. I suppressed the urge to look over my shoulder to see if he was looking at me with that strange, hungry look I seemed to always miss.

The overwhelming feeling of being hunted surged up, and I had to quicken my pace, trying to put some distance between us. As the trees broke and I saw Wesley’s truck parked in the clearing, I told myself I would have to forget about Antoinette

for now. Even the tree would have to wait, at least for a day, while I figured out what to do about Grayson.

“Super productive day boys, but it’s time for me to get home.” I rushed to the truck, ignoring Lucien’s confused look as the guys stood, dumbfounded, in the clearing. I leapt into the backseat, slamming the door behind me.

Wesley and Lucien exchanged looks, then turned to Grayson. He had his brows furrowed, his eyes focused on me in the truck. I felt a blush creep up my neck as I recognized the look. How could I have missed it all those times before? Was I so blind?

I rolled down the window. “Guys?” I called, not caring that my voice sounded strangled.

“Maybe nature calls,” Lucien said with a shrug.

“I do not need to use the restroom!” I shot back.

“Ah, woman issues.” Lucien chuckled. I groaned, throwing myself back into the seat. Let them think what they want. I just want to get out of here.

Wesley climbed into the truck, his expression unreadable, but by the way his brows knotted, I figured he was still pissed at me. Whatever, I told myself, let him pout about his spoiled plans for his future.

Lucien, on the other hand, seemed cheerful. I figured it had to do with the alcohol waiting for him back at the manor.

Wesley turned the truck around and sped down the dirt road, away from Grayson and his cabin. I fought the urge to

turn and see if he was still watching me with the same hungry expression.

I let my head fall against the window, shutting my eyes to the passing swamp as we tore through the dirt road. I had learned a few things about the tree, but nothing that seemed to link it to my mother or the other deaths. Or even my family curse.

But I had met Antoinette, and she had been helpful. I silently cursed at myself for not asking her where to find her, but something deep in my heart told me I only had to return to the tree.

Which would be an issue. Grayson was the only one who could get us there, and after today, I wasn't too sure if I wanted to trust him again. I decided not to mention Antoinette to Wesley or Lucien yet. I needed some time to consider my options.

Wesley pulled up in front of the manor gates, and with a whoop of glee, Lucien launched himself out of the truck. I watched him hustle up the gravel driveway, practically dancing towards his awaiting drinks.

I hesitated, remembering what awaited me in the manor. Feeling eyes on me, I glanced in the rearview mirror to see Wesley's turquoise eyes trained on my face.

We held each other's gaze, unblinking, until he finally broke the silence. "You don't have to go in there." He said, giving me one of his smiles that would have turned me into putty. It had once before.

I quirked a brow. His charms no longer had the same effect on me, but I was willing to banter with him if it meant prolonging seeing Edgar.

“What do you have in mind?” I asked.

His smile changed, and I noticed his hands grip the steering wheel a little tighter. “Something happened to you by the tree.” He stated.

“Yes. But I don’t want to talk about it, not right now.” I said, hoping my voice had more conviction in it than I felt.

His brows knotted and I couldn’t help but admire how his neck muscles stuck out. His jaw ticked as he considered his next words. “Don’t do that, Willow. Don’t shut us out like your mother did.”

I felt like someone sucker-punched me in the gut. Of all the things for him to say, I had not expected my mother to be brought up.

“Don’t act like you know anything about her.” I snapped. Clearly, he was trying to get under my skin and make me react. I told myself to calm down, that it didn’t matter what he said, he was just being petty about what I’d said earlier.

“Are you sure about that?” He quipped.

I felt my breath hitch in my chest. Was it possible he knew something?

I scoffed, forcing the steel in my voice as I said, “Even if you did know something, it would be pretty shitty of you to keep it from me.”

“Maybe I want to barter with you.” He said, and I felt my stomach churn.

“You mean slither your way into my family’s home, and into my bed?” I scoffed. “Thanks, but no thanks.” Movement by the gate caught my attention, and I realized Edgar was waiting for me. He stood at the very edge of the border, his arms crossed over his perfectly pressed silk shirt. My mouth turned sour as dread snaked up my back.

As much as I didn’t want to face Edgar, I dreaded staying with Wesley even more.

“I am sure I can figure out what you know, if you know anything at all.”

His eyes turned to Edgar and his rigid posture.

“I am sure you could, Willow. Especially with such a devoted staff, like my aunt and Edgar around.”

I rolled my eyes, reaching for the door.

“Wait.” He said. I froze, surprising myself. I had no reason to stay and listen to him, but something in his tone made me.

He turned in his seat, facing me. His scent hit me and I was transported back to the first night we met at my birthday party. My throat went dry as I remember his hands on me while we danced, or at least attempted to dance, alone on a balcony.

I breathed slowly, steadying my racing heart as I reminded myself he no longer had the same effect on me.

He smiled as if he knew my internal struggle. “If you ever need a break from them, or you just want to live, you call me.” He handed me a card, and I had to choke back my laughter.

“A business card?” I asked, incredulous. “Is this how you get all your dates?”

He smirked. “That’s my personal line. Not even your hound, Edgar, knows about it. And no, I do not have to try this hard to get a date usually. Besides,” He reached out and tucked a lock of my hair behind my ear, “when you want me to take you out on a date, you will ask me, Willow.”

My skin burned when his finger brushed against my cheek. To my horror, I felt my entire body burn with excitement as my core blazed to life.

He saw my cheeks burning, and a slow, lazy smile curled up his lips. My eyes snapped down to his lips, his perfect jaw, and then down the hard line of muscle that was his neck.

Something hit the side of the truck, making me start. Wesley was still looking at me with that lazy smile, but he turned his attention to Edgar, who had his hands on his hips.

“Your boyfriend just threw a rock at my truck.” Wesley mused, his voice thick.

“Bill my family for it.” I breathed, fumbling with the door.

He chuckled, “Remember, you can call me anytime, Willow.”

I tumbled from the truck, thankful for the blast of cold wind that smacked into me, cooling my feverish skin.

Slamming the door, I rushed away from the truck, eager to get distance between us. Wesley was smiling at me through his window, then slowly drove away. I heard the rev of his engine once he was further down the road, then the squeal of tires as he sped off.

“Willow,” Edgar said, exasperated. I turned to him, finally, seeing his foot tapping the ground impatiently. My shoulders slumped as I approached him.

“What happened?” He asked, looking me over like a nervous mother hen.

“I’m tired,” I said. “I am going to bed.”

“Alright.” His hands fell from his side as I stepped around him, starting up the drive. “I will be there shortly,” he said.

“No.” I sighed, stopping. “I want to be alone. I’m tired.” I turned, forcing myself to smile back at him. “I am fine, I promise. I just need to rest.”

He faltered, then nodded before disappearing.

I heaved a sigh of relief, alone at last.

Chapter 19

I slept well into the next afternoon, a near-dead to-the-world dreamless slumber that left me feeling refreshed but vaguely confused until I noticed the time. I rolled out of bed, taking a long hot shower before searching for my phone.

Edgar was sitting at my vanity when I emerged from the bathroom, a plush robe tied around me. I paused, my pulse racing, when I noticed my phone sitting on the vanity, his finger lightly tapping its screen.

Anger boiled in my core. His behavior was becoming more than tiresome and concerning.

“Why do you have my phone?” I asked, not hiding the annoyance in my voice.

Edgar was looking at himself in the mirror, one hand under his chin while the other continued to tap on my screen.

“I am concerned about you, Willow.” He said finally. I suppressed the urge to roll my eyes. Concern was one thing. His actions were something else entirely.

“I can appreciate your concern, Edgar, but I am fine.” I closed the distance between us, snatching my phone from him. There wasn’t anything on it for him to find since Hailey and Anna were the only people I spoke to outside of the manor. I

glanced at my clothes from the swamp, piled in a dirty heap by my bed. Wesley's card with his personal number was somewhere in them. I walked over to them, kicking them towards the hamper.

“Did you find your necklace?” Edgar sneered behind me.

I threw him a warning look, but he refused to back down. “I shouldn't have to tell you how dangerous Wesley is. Let alone that dog.”

“You're right, you shouldn't,” I said calmly. “You aren't in any position to tell me anything, Edgar.”

He scoffed. “Is that what you want? An official title? Is that why you're acting out, Willow? You want me to ask you to be my girlfriend?”

I scoffed, offended and equally appalled by how he was acting. I'd heard of gaslighting before, but never experienced it myself. Not until Edgar.

I took one look at his face, the stupid self-satisfied smirk he had, and the way he seemed so pleased with himself, and I knew there was no getting to him. I had been trying since the moment I was allowed to leave my room to get through to him.

The man really thought he'd made a soul-crushing statement just then, when the reality was he looked like a jealous idiot.

“No, Edgar, I have never wanted to be your girlfriend. In fact, I never wanted to be anything other than a good time

when I was bored.” I shot back, holding back my rage. I watched his satisfied expression melt into confusion before turning into anger. I could see the cogs working in his brain, and, bless his dumb heart, I knew what he was going to say before he said it. He was that predictable.

“You’re fucking him, aren’t you?” He sneered.

I laughed a genuine belly laugh that made my sides hurt. “Would it matter if I was?” I gasped as I tried to stop laughing. “Maybe I’m fucking both of them. Would it matter?”

“I suppose not,” he said coldly. “You’d just be another Rosenbay whore.”

My laughter died in my chest. His face fell immediately, realizing he’d overstepped.

“Willow-” I held up a hand, silencing him.

“Enough, Edgar. I’ve had enough. Clearly, you wanted something else, and I cannot give it to you. Let’s end it here. I have more important things to worry about than your fragile ego.”

I moved to my closet, finding a pair of jeans and a warm sweater. Edgar popped in just as I was clipping my wet hair up.

“Get out, Edgar,” I said evenly.

“Willow, you don’t mean this,” He said, stepping in front of me as I tried to leave the closet.

“I have never meant anything more than what I am about to say.” I sneered back, finally losing my temper. It was starting to worry me how he felt he could just appear in my personal space. I had been afraid before of ghosts appearing when I least wanted them, and now it was starting to become a reality. No door could hold him back.

“You will leave me alone. You will not enter my rooms without my explicit permission. I am tired of feeling suffocated by you.” I pushed past him, the feeling of my chest being constricted easing as I moved towards my bedroom door.

I had originally planned on finding something to eat, but now my appetite was ruined. Instead, I figured I’d find Alexa and see what she was up to.

Edgar appeared in the hall just as I left my room. I groaned in frustration.

“Willow, please.” He pleaded, looking hurt. “I just lost my head. I am sorry. I don’t know what came over me. I saw you and Wesley alone in his truck, and I just let my mind get the better of me.” He took a step towards me, holding out his hands as if he were praying. “I can’t help it when you are keeping secrets from me. It’s what your mother did, right before....” He trailed off, his face contorted in pain.

I tried not to let it affect me. I tried to steel my heart from it. I understood how it looked; me keeping them all in the dark, just like my mother did. But it wasn’t the same. I was going to tell them all what I had found.

“Edgar, it’s not the same at all. The only reason I don’t trust you all enough to tell you what is happening is because of this behavior. You all keep me in the dark, and try to trap me here! I’ve had enough!” My voice rose until I was nearly shouting. “For the love of God, give me some space! At this rate, I’d gladly take becoming a baby machine over living here if it means my freedom!”

He froze, still as stone. His eyes became ice as he stood up straight, composing himself.

“As you wish,” He replied coldly, then vanished.

But I could still feel his eyes on me. In fact, for the first time since being in the manor, I felt the eyes of many spirits on me. So far, I’d only seen Alexa and Edgar haunting the halls, despite the hundreds of spirits trapped here. Perhaps they’d kept away, or maybe I’d never felt them before.

Or maybe they’d all chosen this moment to make themselves known after my little outburst. The weight of their presence was suffocating, making my shoulders slump as I rushed down the stairs. I needed to be out of the manor. I needed air.

I needed to be alone.

Outside, the winds howled, kicking up the freezing air, the threat of snow looming overhead. Yet even out in the front gardens, I could still feel them all watching. I fumbled with my phone, dialing the driver, Andrew.

I sat on a bench, waiting until I saw his headlights at the gate. I ran as fast as I could before the car rolled over the boundary. I nearly body-slammed the front door, my frozen fingers fumbling with the handle. He unlocked the car, and I dove in, slamming the door behind me.

“Please don’t go on the property.” I gasped. I must have looked wild, half-crazed, as his eyes widened and his jaw nearly dropped. “Everything is fine,” I said. “I just need space from my family.”

He blinked slowly, then started to chuckle. “Holidays with the family are hell, right?” He said, putting the car in reverse.

I smiled, thankful he wasn’t asking questions. “They can be. Do you mind driving me here?” I asked, punching in the address on his smart screen. The GPS blared to life, showing the directions.

He frowned, but nodded. “Shouldn’t be a problem.”

We drove in silence as I thawed my fingers against the heater. I knew what I was doing was stupid and reckless, but I would be killing two birds with one stone. I needed to get away from the manor and its ghosts, and I needed a question answered before I continued with the Crooked Tree.

The car turned onto the dirt road, and the driver smiled. “I was expecting some Christmas shopping today. I haven’t been in this area in years.”

“Oh, I am a procrastinator. I will probably call you last minute to do my shopping.” The truth was, I hadn’t thought

about shopping at all.

“I saw your friends are coming to town again.” He motioned to the schedule on his screen. “I just got the request to pick them up from the airport. You must be excited?”

“It will be nice to see some new faces.” I said truthfully.

He pulled into the clearing, stopping in front of the cabin. I could see smoke curling from the chimney, and the lights were on.

“Oh good, he’s home,” I said, reaching for the door.

“Let me, ma’am.” I waved him off.

“It’s freezing, and besides, I am sure I ruined your plans for the afternoon. Thank you for taking the time to bring me here.”

He shook his head. “I only work for your family, so I am literally on call for you anytime you need me. Should I wait? Or will you be needing a ride later?”

I glanced back at the cabin. “I am not sure how long this will take.”

“I will be waiting for your call, then.” He gave me a nod as I left the car.

I knocked on the cabin door, and when Grayson didn’t answer, I tried the handle. It opened, and I gave the driver a quick wave before slipping into the warmth.

I heard the car drive off as I took a look around. The cabin was small, but cozy. Everything was made of wood, from the

couch frame to the breakfast table tucked beneath a window. Just from the rustic look, I surmised Grayson must have handmade most of what I could see.

A chandelier, composed of deer antlers and stained glass, was the only source of light.

“Grayson?” I called. I’d expected his werewolf’s ears to hear me coming a mile away, but it appeared he wasn’t home. I sighed, plopping on his couch. It was stupid of me to come by myself, especially if I suspected Grayson of possibly wanting to serve me up to the Swamp Witch.

But I needed to know if that was true or not before I carried on with the Crooked Tree.

There was a thump in the back of the house, making me jump. I stood up, walking through the kitchen towards the back of the cabin where I could hear movement. “Grayson?” I called softly, suddenly remembering that his pack was hunting me. Perhaps one had followed me here, or maybe it was another ghoul. Stupid, stupid, I thought bitterly as I slowly made my way to the back room.

Grayson’s bedroom was empty, but the bathroom door was slightly ajar. Steam was rolling out of the opening, and I sighed in relief as I realized he was taking a shower. Then I felt a blush creep up my neck as I realized I was standing in his bedroom, unannounced, while he was taking a shower. I quietly turned to leave, considering waiting outside until he was done when I heard my name.

I froze, wondering if I had misheard. Then he said it again, softly. A groan followed, and I panicked internally. Was he doing what I thought he was doing?

“Willow.” I heard the grunt that followed my name and nearly toppled over. Grayson wasn’t biding his time, intent on handing me over to the witch.

He was in his shower, masturbating while calling out my name. Suddenly, the memories of the hanging woman showed me made more sense. Grayson had been eye fucking me!

I panicked, unsure what to do next, but hell-bent on leaving his room before he figured out I was there. I rushed to the door, and in my panic, didn’t see the table. My hip smacked into it, knocking over a wooden figure of a wolf.

“Shit,” I said under my breath.

“Hello?” Grayson called, and the water shut off.

I ran.

Chapter 20

Shit, shit, shit, SHIT!

I ran out of the cabin, away from the immensely awkward situation and conversation that would have to happen.

Oh hi Grayson, I just came by, uninvited, to see if you planned on killing me but I see now you just want to bang me, so it's all good!

I cringed as I flew down the cabin steps and booked it for the forest. I needed to hide, I was way too embarrassed to face him right now. I heard a noise from the cabin just as I hit the treeline.

I continued running, trying to find somewhere to hide in thick undergrowth, but only managing to get lost.

When my lungs couldn't take it anymore I finally paused, leaning against a tree as I tried to catch my breath.

Something wet and cold slapped against my cheek. I yelped, then realized it was snow. Fat, fluffy globs of snow drifted down from the gray sky. I cursed, groaning as I collapsed to the ground. Of course, it would snow right now, I thought.

Now that I was thoroughly lost in the swamp, unwilling to find my way back to what surely would be the most embarrassing, awkward moment of my life.

How did my life turn into this? I thought bitterly. Hunted, cursed, and now, alone. All because I made a stupid, terrible impulsive decision to meet a fuck boy at a Halloween party in a graveyard.

If anything, I was getting very good at making stupid, impulsive decisions lately.

Look where it's gotten me.

Was I actively trying to make my life harder? It was complex enough with this damn curse hanging over me, and my grandmother pressuring me to make a choice.

“Well, that is a serious face.” I glanced over to see Antoinette, wearing a simple summer dress despite the snow and cold. She was barefoot, holding a wicker basket under her left arm as she smiled down at me. “Why, you look like you’re contemplating your entire existence.”

“I am.” I sighed, leaning my head against the tree.

Her smile faded and she picked her way to me.

“Aren’t you cold?” I asked as she sat down next to me. She placed the basket, full of mushrooms, on her lap.

“No.” She said simply. She looked ethereal, sitting in the cold mud with me.

“What are you, some kind of swamp fairy?” I asked, seriously.

She chuckled, “No. I am no different than you, Willow.”

“Then how do you know who I am?” I asked.

Her butterscotch eyes fluttered, as if she were steeling herself to answer. Just as she looked like she was about to, she turned her head sharply, gazing into the trees.

“You should go back, Willow. This swamp is dangerous.” She said, barely a whisper.

I looked in the direction she was but saw nothing.

“What do you-” She stood up, cutting me off.

“Go now, Willow.” She said sharply, flicking her wrist. The trees and undergrowth moved, making a path. “Follow that to your friend.” The urgency in her tone made me leap up.

“Will you be alright?” I asked, looking for whatever had spooked her.

“I will be fine. You need to hurry.” She said, pointedly. I nodded, starting down the path she created, and then a thought struck me that made me stop.

“You aren’t her, are you?” She swung her head to me, looking confused. “You aren’t the Swamp Witch?”

She gave me a sad smile, “No.” Her brows furrow in thought, “You should come visit me. I live down Lily Lane.” Before I could ask where the heck that was, she motioned for me to move.

I raced down the path, forcing myself to keep my eyes forward. I didn't want to find out what it was that had her so worked up. Once again, the girl from the swamp had saved me.

The path took me right back to Grayson's cabin, but I wasn't ready to face him yet. I stuck to the tree line, following the dirt road. I knew I could have called for the driver to come get me, but that would mean I'd have to give him a destination and I didn't have one.

I wasn't ready to go back to the manor. I didn't want to go into town, not with all those families shopping for Christmas and tourists enjoying their holiday.

Instead, I found a path that led behind the cabin and down to the beach, where Grayson had been collecting driftwood. I walked down to the water, falling back into the soft, cold sand as I gazed out over the gray expanse.

The snowfall was steady now, but in smaller pieces. They melted into the sand, turning it a shade darker. The sound of the melting snow coupled with the waves was a much needed balm. My chest relaxed as I breathed in the cold, salty air and let my body and mind focus solely on the sounds.

I dug my fingers into the chilly sand, savoring the grainy touch of the beach.

"Willow?" I nearly jumped out of my skin.

"Jesus Christ on a stick!" I yelled. Grayson was standing on the beach, his golden hair disheveled and wild looking. He

had only a pair of gray sweats on.

“Willow, it’s freezing out here!” He said, stalking towards me.

“Says the half naked werewolf.” I grumbled, trying not to focus on his perfectly toned abs.

“Come on, let’s get you out of this weather.” He held out a hand. I hesitated, looking down at the beach. “Are you really that embarrassed you’d rather freeze to death out here?”

Heat blazed up my neck and into my cheeks. I didn’t need a mirror to know I was beet red.

“I don’t - I have no idea - ” I tried and failed to lie but couldn’t.

He wiggled his fingers in front of my face, “We can play that game where it’s warm.”

I huffed, then took his hand. The unexpected heat pouring from his skin made me gasp.

“We run hot.” He said, pulling me to my feet. “But I keep a fire going. I like the aesthetics of it.” He gave me a warm smile, but I couldn’t meet his eyes.

I followed him to the cabin, practically dragging my feet the whole way.

Once instead I picked a plush chair, closest to the door in case I needed to flee again. Grayson put a kettle on the stove and then started preparing a teapot.

“I hope you like cinnamon. It’s the only tea I have.”

I didn't answer. I kept my eyes on the deer antler chandelier, trying to think of what I would say. Maybe he didn't know I'd walked in on him? He was acting pretty nonchalant for a guy who just got caught masturbating in the shower. And calling out my name.

I smelled the tea before I noticed the cup in front of me. He was holding the mug, a heavy thing with a cartoon wolf on it.

I quirked a brow. "You really lean into the whole wolf thing, huh?"

"What? You don't have a bunch of mugs that say 'Cursed' or something?" Grayson smirked. I took the mug, careful not to accidentally touch him. I hadn't realized how cold I was until I felt the warm mug against my fingers.

"No, but I think I should get one that says 'Hot Mess'."

"Oh, I am sure your grandma would love to have that mug amongst her crystal and china." Grayson mused. He leaned against the back of the couch, crossing his legs at his ankles. He looked relaxed, and unworried as he sipped his tea from a large mug shaped like a wolf's head.

His golden eyes watched me over the steaming rim, waiting.

"It wasn't my intention to just pop in on you like this," I said, figuring we should start somewhere. Grayson continued to watch me over his mug, and I couldn't blame him. He probably wanted an explanation and an apology.

“I’m sorry I just barged in.”

“You came alone?” He asked, dropping his mug slightly.

“Yeah. Things have been - complicated, at the manor.” I blew on my tea, carefully sipping the spiced liquid. It warmed me to my bones, making me shiver as my body tried to shake off the rest of the cold clinging to my skin.

“Do want to talk about it?” He asked. If it wasn’t for the sincerity in his voice I would have thought he’d asked only to keep the conversation away from the elephant in the room.

I shook my head, “You already have a lot on your plate. You don’t need my family drama too.”

He smirked, then pushed off the couch. Without a shirt on I could see every muscle ripple as he moved to the breakfast table. He sat down, pulling a plate of cookies towards him.

“Come on, I won’t bite.” He said, motioning to the opposite chair. Something about his smile told me he would definitely bite if asked. Get a grip, I thought, pushing the thoughts away as I slowly got up and approached the chair.

The cookies were calling my name. I hadn’t eaten all day and my little run through the forest had left me ravenous.

“I’m sure you’ve figured out about Edgar and me by now,” I said as I plopped down in the chair. There was an assortment of shortbread cookies to choose from. Grayson was dipping a plain one in his tea, listening as I picked a chocolate covered one. “Let’s just say I’ve recently realized that was a mistake.”

He gave me a knowing look, nodding. "I am sorry to hear that."

I quirked a brow. "Don't make jokes."

"I'm not." He said seriously. "Everyone is on their own path in life, doing the best they can. I am sorry the path you took didn't work out. I am sure that's going to make for a few awkward dinners."

I scoffed, biting into my cookie like a savage. "Understatement," I grumbled. Just thinking of having to face Edgar at dinner enraged me.

"What else?" He asked.

"My grandmother wants me to make a choice by New Year. Either I stay at the manor and try to end the curse, or I take a settlement of sorts. The settlement includes having Wesley's kid so the Rosenbay bloodline doesn't die out."

Grayson looked appalled. "I'm confused. You said you wanted to find the tree to break the curse. So, have you made your choice?"

I shook my head, "No. I wanted to find the tree because I think it's linked to my mother's death. It's possible it's linked to the curse. The whole reason my mother went looking for it is because she thought it was. But now I am not so sure."

Grayson shoved a cookie, whole, into his mouth. He chewed thoughtfully as I sipped my tea.

"Edgar thinks I am keeping things from him, like my mother did. Which, in a way I am." I admitted. I took a deep

breath, “I don’t want to tell them about the tree or my mother. I’m afraid they will lock me up in that manor, thinking they are keeping me safe, when the reality is they’re just suffocating me. I had every intent of telling them about what I found, but first I wanted to see if I was right at all.”

“And were you? You never said what you saw, but we all know you saw something.” He said.

“I saw a woman hanging in the tree.” He raised his brows. “She showed me things, and I sort of misunderstood them?” I wasn’t sure who I was asking. Myself, or him.

“Like what?” He asked after an awkward pause.

“You - and me,” I added quickly seeing the surprise in his eyes. “I thought you were working with the witch. That maybe you were just waiting for the perfect moment to, I don’t know, kill me or something.” I grumbled, the weight of my stupidity was starting to wear me down.

“So you came to my home, alone? To do what?” He asked. I could see the sides of his lips twitching as he tried to suppress his laughter.

“Ask you if you were?” I threw my hands up. “It seemed like the best choice at the time.” I groaned, slouching in my chair. “I’m starting to realize how impulsive and thoughtless I can be.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself. Those can be great qualities, if you learn how to control them. Not the other way

around.” Grayson dipped a caramel shortbread into his mug, soaking up the final dredges of tea.

“I wish I could do that. Sometimes I feel like I have no control of anything. Take my loving grandmother and her ultimatum. No matter what I pick, I am expected to have a kid at some point, in the very likely case I cannot break this damn curse.”

“Maybe stop letting her make the rules then.” He shrugged, like it was the most obvious thing.

I scoffed, “What do you mean?”

“Look, you know what they all want, right? You know you need to make a choice, so make one, but do it on your terms. If you want to stay at the manor, do it your way. If you rather leave, do it on your terms. You hold all the cards, Willow. It only feels like you don’t.”

I drummed my fingers against my mug, thinking. He wasn’t wrong. I’d been letting grandmother and Edgar call all the shots since I set foot in Harrowgrove. I looked back and realized how reactionary I’d been.

It was time to start being proactive.

“It’s not going to be an easy conversation.” I mused, imagining grandmother’s sour face.

“Well, if you can sit here and have a normal conversation with me after walking in on me in the shower, I think you can manage one with your grandmother.”

My tapping ended as my entire body went rigid. “You weren’t just going to let that slide, were you?” I coughed.

He smirked, “How about this? You can stay here, and take some time to think about what you want to do with your family. And I will pretend like this afternoon didn’t happen.” He raised a brow, “Can you?”

Chapter 21

Could I forget I'd walked in on Grayson masturbating in the shower while groaning my name?

No.

But I could pretend like I could for the sake of saving face. I accepted his offer. The reality was I had nowhere else to go. I could go stay in town, but honestly, I didn't trust my grandmother enough. She'd cancel my cards and cut me off of the family money in a heartbeat if she thought it would get me back into her grasp.

So Grayson was my easiest choice. Besides, who could they send to come retrieve me? I couldn't see Grandmother or Edgar striking a deal with Lucien. They barely tolerated him hanging around the manor as it was.

Wesley was my only concern. He was the only one that they could still buy or bribe to help them drag me back to the manor. If they could find me at all.

By the evening, I'd had several missed calls and messages from Edgar. Even Alexa reached out, messaging me right as Grayson breezed into the cabin, a pizza box in hand. The luscious scent of cheese and basil filled the little living area as he nudged the door shut with his bare foot.

“Did you really walk barefoot for pizza?” I asked as I finished typing out my response to Alexa.

I am fine. I just needed some space. I will be back in a few days, promise.

I hit send and shut off my phone, my shoulders relaxing as I looked forward to disconnecting from the world for a few days.

“You could say that.” Grayson set the box down on the breakfast table. I eyed it, my stomach churning with anticipation, when I noticed the marks on the box. I sat up, leaning over the back of the couch to get a better look.

“Are those - are those teeth marks?” I asked.

He gave me a sheepish smile. “I run faster in my wolf form.”

Frowning, I glanced from the pizza box to his shirtless body. “You just walk into the store shirtless? Or do they serve you in wolf form?”

He chuckled, “Let’s just say they don’t bat an eye when a wolf comes looking for some pie.” He motioned to the box. “Go ahead and get some. I’m going to get the couch made up.”

“And what about your clothes? Do you just leave sweatpants all over the swamp in case you need them?” I asked. He just gave me a devious grin in response.

I rolled over the back of the couch, digging into the pizza while Grayson rummaged around in a closet. So far, we’d made a silent agreement. I wouldn’t mention I’d walked in on

him in the shower, and he wouldn't bring up what he was doing in the shower. It left an uncomfortable chasm between us, but I preferred it.

At first, I'd wondered if he knew I'd heard him. He was acting pretty calm for a guy who just got caught doing some self-service, but then I noticed how careful he was to keep space between us. How he wouldn't let his fingers come close to touching mine when he handed me something.

But it was the look he gave me when he thought I couldn't see. Even as I tore into my pizza, I could see him out of the corner of my eye, watching with a haunted look. It was almost like he wanted to say something, and I'd watched him come close a few times in the awkward hours I'd been in the cabin with him.

But he always stopped himself.

So I continued eating my pizza, acting like I couldn't see him watching me. Halfway through my third slice, I noticed Grayson draping a sheet over the couch. I turned, noticing the blanket and pillows he had set up.

"I will sleep out here." He said. He tucked the sheet into the couch, then threw a blanket and the pillows on it. "It gets cold at night." He explained, motioning to the fireplace. "This cabin works for me, but I don't feel the cold the same way you do. It would be better if you slept in the bedroom, where it's warm." He cast me a sideways glance. "And safer."

I quirked a brow. "Safer?" I asked over a mouthful of pizza.

“I don’t expect my pack to come looking for you here, even if they know you are. But there are no guarantees they won’t.”

“Ah.” I sighed, realizing what he meant. “If it’s too much of an inconvenience-”

“It’s not.” He said pointedly before he strode over to the pizza box. Careful to keep his distance, Grayson folded half of the pizza up and took it with him to the couch.

He devoured the pizza within minutes, licking off the grease from his fingers with a hungry abandon I couldn’t help but smile at. Feeling my eyes on him, he glanced over, still licking his fingers clean.

His lips twitched at my smile. I could see the mirth in his eyes, and a question hung heavy over us as he continued to look at me.

Unable to take the pregnant pause, I blurted out, “I saw a girl in the swamp.”

Grayson’s brows furrowed in confusion. He dropped his fingers, looking thoughtful.

“Not Luna?” He asked, and I shook my head.

“Oh no, she said her name was Antoinette. She helped me escape the hanging woman from the tree. She says she isn’t the swamp witch, but I think there’s more to it.”

“Nettie?” He asked looking bemused.

“You know her?”

He shook his head. “No, I haven’t met her.” The way he hesitated made me sit up straighter.

“Who is she then?” I asked. I tried not to let my annoyance show. I’d only known him a short while, but so far Grayson had been honest with me, almost to a fault at some times. If he was withholding information, I figured there was a good reason.

He’s not like Grandmother or Edgar. He’s not holding back to control me, I told myself as Grayson struggled to answer me.

He let out a half groan, half sigh, his toned shoulders slumping as he sank into the back of the couch. “I don’t want to scare you.” He admitted.

I bit down on my lip, fighting back my laughter. “I’m not sure there’s much that can scare me these days,” I said.

He gave me a baleful look. “It’s complicated, and I don’t know the real story, just rumors.”

“Okay?” I urged him to continue.

“While I was Alpha, when we first arrived back here and the Swamp Witch approached us, I’d heard she had a family.”

My fingers grew cold as I realized what he was about to say.

“Nettie is related to her, in some way.”

“That’s not possible,” I said, shaking my head. “Didn’t the witch live back when Harrin was ruling the land?”

Grayson shrugged. “All I know is the Swamp Witch is old, and during her long lifetime, she must have gotten busy with someone.”

I thought of Antoinette by the tree, how she commanded the hanging woman to leave me alone. How she was able to make the swamp bend to her will with just a flick of her wrist. She was powerful, that was for sure. I had even thought she might be the Swamp Witch.

I scoffed, remembering the sad look she gave me when I asked her if she was.

“That makes sense,” I grumbled.

“What does?” He asked, looking curious.

“Nothing, just that it makes more sense now.” I tossed the remains of my crust back into the box, my appetite now spoiled. “I’m curious what her goal is,” I said aloud.

Grayson eyed the box and the remaining pizza. I scooped it up and handed it over the couch to him.

“What makes you think she wants something from you?” He asked before stacking the last slices on top of each other and wolfing them down.

I shrugged. “She knows who I am. That much is clear. I’ve run into her twice now in that swamp, and both times she could have easily taken care of me for the witch. So why not? And why help me instead?”

“Not everyone has it out for you, Willow,” Grayson remarked.

I laughed, “Could have fooled me.”

Grayson lent me some old sweats and a shirt of his, since I only had the clothes on my back.

“There is a general store on the main road where you can get some things. We can go tomorrow if you’d like.” He said as I made my way to his bedroom.

“Sure,” I said, then stopped just at the door. I saw the way his eyes widened slightly, clearly expecting me to bring up the shower incident.

“Is Lily Lane close to it?” I asked, remembering Antoinette mentioned that’s where she lived.

His face relaxed, but he shook his head. “I haven’t heard of that street.”

“Interesting.” I shrugged.

Grayson had put fresh sheets on the bed for me and an extra blanket. It had been snowing all evening but none of it was sticking yet, however; it meant the nights were going to be colder and colder now.

I curled up in my borrowed clothes, listening to the melting snow fall outside as waves gently lapped against the beach.

With all its splendor and wealth, Harrowgrove manor never made me feel as cozy and safe as I did falling asleep in Grayson’s cabin.

Chapter 22

“Cash or card?” The old woman behind the register croaked. Her bent body was leaned up against the counter, her withered hands curled around a steaming mug of coffee. I breathed in the scent, aching for something warm and caffeinated, before handing over my card.

She eyed it suspiciously before swiping it. I couldn't blame her. It did look out of place. Back in my tiny hometown, where I grew up thinking Simon was my dad, we had one local bank, and the cards they issued were bright orange and flimsy.

Normally, I would have used the sleek black metal cards Edgar had issued me from the Rosenbay family bank. But I was certain they could track those transactions.

The machine beeped and spat out my receipt. I gathered my bags and hustled out of the store to where Grayson stood waiting.

“Find anything good?” he asked. He had a flannel sweater and jeans on, making him look every bit a lumberjack. I pulled two shirts out, one blue and one green, that both said ‘Swamp Buddies’.

Grayson took one look at them and went red in the face as he coughed back his laughter.

“What?” I asked, smirking. “The blue one is for you.” I tossed him the shirt, tucking mine back into the bag. “They didn’t have much, but I was able to get a few shirts and the essentials.”

Grayson held his shirt out like it was about to bite him. “Would you like some breakfast?” He asked.

We walked down the slushy dirt road to a cafe where Grayson bought us some pastries and two large coffees. We shared the pastries on the walk back to his cabin through the slush and mud. It had stopped snowing, but the skies were still gray and heavy overhead. I sipped my coffee, savoring the warmth it brought to my bones as we walked.

“I’ll have to stop at the store later for some groceries. What are your plans for the day?” Grayson asked.

I considered the question. For the first time in what seemed like forever, I didn’t have anything planned. “I need to think long and hard about what I’m going to do when I go back to Harrowgrove.” I said. I glanced at him from under my hair. “It shouldn’t take too long. I don’t want to impose on you.”

He rolled his eyes but smiled. “Take all the time you need. Just remember, you don’t have to agree to something without getting something you want in return.”

I nodded, taking a gulp of my coffee. He was right, and it was what I planned on figuring out sooner rather than later. My friends would be flying in soon for the Christmas party and staying until after New Year. I wouldn’t have much time

then to think about my choice, so it needed to be now, while I had the chance to do it without anyone trying to influence me.

But all thoughts of being left alone were dashed the moment I saw Wesley's truck parked outside of Grayson's cabin. We stopped in the middle of the road, a good half mile from his driveway.

Grayson's brows knotted as we watched Wesley's figure appear from the woods, Lucien on his heels.

"So, they really did send him to drag me back." I said, draining the last dregs of my coffee before slowly walking towards them. Grayson followed but a few feet behind me.

As they got closer, I could see Wesley was wearing a thick jacket over his hunter leathers, his weapons hidden beneath the layers. His face was still as stone, and for the first time since meeting him, I caught a glimpse of the cutthroat killer he could be.

We stopped, leaving a good ten feet between us. Lucien peeked out from behind Wesley's imposing frame, his bloodshot eyes flicking to me with unmasked shame. Grayson stayed behind me, but I could feel the tension rolling off of him like waves. If Wesley tried to grab me, would he interfere?

A part of me hoped not - this wasn't his circus, and I would feel guilty if my hiding out with him ended up with him being caught up in my family drama. But a small part of me, deep down inside, secretly hoped he would intervene.

I shook the thought away, plastering on a sweet smile as I addressed Wesley. “So, what did my dear old grandmother promise you this time?” I asked.

He swung his steely turquoise gaze at me. “Don’t act coy, Willow. Your family has been worried about you.” His words were so devoid of emotion, I felt a chill sneak up my spine.

“I’m fine.” I waved a hand over my body. “Totally fine. You can go report back to them. I will return when I feel like it.”

Fire licked his eyes. “I am not your errand boy.”

“No, but you certainly come running whenever my grandmother calls, don’t you?” I shot back.

“Willow,” Grayson warned, but I ignored him.

“That’s why you’re both here, right?” I couldn’t hide the venom in my words. Wesley was looking at me like I was some kind of runaway teen that needed to be grounded. “She called you to come drag me back, right?”

Lucien’s head swiveled back and forth between us, clearly expecting Wesley to say something. When he continued to stand still as stone, Lucien stepped forward. “We were only asked to find you, Willow.” He explained.

I scoffed. “Did she take away your booze? Is that why you’re here?”

Lucien held up his hands and stepped back behind Wesley.

“If you want to stay here with this mutt-” Wesley shot, his eyes flicking to where Grayson stood behind me, “be my guest.”

A low growl erupted from Grayson. “Who are you calling a mutt, murderer?”

Wesley’s face finally cracked as a slow, deadly smile curled his lips. I tried not to notice his dimples or the way his eyes lit up with the prospect of a challenge.

“Murderer? That’s rich coming from you.” The implication in his tone was not lost on me. “Have you told her why your pack came running back here, with your tails between your legs, after so many years?”

“This is my home.” Grayson snapped. I chanced a glance at him over my shoulder. The gray clouds hung low behind him, threatening us with the chance of more snow, but it was the shadows they cast across his face that made me start.

The happy, carefree Grayson I’d come to know was gone. In his place stood a savage-looking man, his face twisted up, showing off elongated fangs. I caught a glimpse of the feral wolf inside him.

“This was never your home,” Wesley shot back. I caught Lucien’s movement in the corner of my eye. He was inching away from Wesley, eyeing something under the hunter’s thick jacket with a wary expression.

Tension hung between them. The air was crackling with the promise of violence. In the back of my mind, I knew it was

all my fault. I'd brought this all to Grayson's doorstep, without a thought, and now here he was, faced with a hunter who was practically foaming at the mouth to take a shot at the werewolf.

I stepped forward, wedging my body between them. I turned my back to Wesley, confident he wouldn't dare lay a finger on me, and focused on Grayson.

"Hey," I said calmly, trying to get his attention on me. The blood lust in his gaze was palpable. "Grayson," I said a little louder, taking a step towards him. He snapped his eyes to me, and I froze. If I'd ever wondered what a rabbit felt like when a predator faced them down, I now knew.

His chest heaved with each ragged, deep breath he dragged in. I knew without a doubt he could smell the fear that covered me like sweat.

"Move, Willow," Wesley warned behind me.

"Grayson, he's not worth the energy," I said, taking a step closer. His brows knotted in confusion as I reached for his face. Gently, I cupped his face between my hands, my half-frozen fingers warming against his burning skin. "He's not worth it," I repeated, the steel in my voice making him blink in surprise.

With a torturous slowness, his features melted back to normal and once again I was looking at Grayson as a man.

"There you are," I said softly as I felt my lips twitch into a smile.

Grayson heaved a heavy sigh, placing his massive hands over mine and gently pulling them away from his face. A blush crept up my neck as I realized how little space there was between us.

“It’s alright, Willow.” He said gruffly. “I am alright.” I nodded, side-stepping away to face Wesley, who looked like he’d just swallowed a bunch of glass.

“I think it would be best if you two left now,” I said.

Lucien’s eyes swiveled from me to Wesley, widening slightly as if he expected something to happen.

The disgusted look on Wesley’s face gave way to his cold mask with such speed I nearly felt the chill of his emotionless voice as he retorted, “We were asked to find you, and we did. It doesn’t matter to me if you want to shack up with a werewolf. But don’t come crying to me if your family ends up retaliating.”

I scoffed, “By hiring you to come kidnap me and bring me back to them, kicking and screaming?”

His turquoise eyes were like steel. “No. By hiring my entire family to hunt down his pack.”

A cold shiver snaked down my back, making my stomach churn with dread. My grandmother was a cold-hearted old goat, sure, but would she really stoop so low?

Wesley didn’t give me the chance to respond. He turned, leaving us standing in the road as he walked back to his truck.

Lucien hesitated, looking torn between leaving with the hunter or staying.

Just before Wesley reached the truck, Lucien pulled something from under his shirt and handed it to me.

“Edgar threw a fit when he realized you weren’t coming back. He tossed this in the graveyard, but I felt like it was important to you.” His words were rushed and jumbled as he backed away towards the truck.

“Take care, Willow.” He called before leaping into the bed of the truck as Wesley peeled out of the driveway.

I waited until they were out of sight before looking down at the dirty journal.

My mother’s journal.

Chapter 23

Grayson could not cook for shit.

He tried one night to make mac and cheese for us and somehow the pasta ended up congealing into one massive ball, and the cheese sauce was grainy.

“How do you mess up boxed mac and cheese?” I’d asked, shoveling my dinner into the garbage. It was then he revealed he’d never actually cooked before, since all the women in his pack took care of meals.

Realizing he was no better than a frat boy, I’d gone shopping with him and showed him how to make the easiest thing on planet Earth.

“Enchiladas?” He’d looked skeptical right up until I showed him a life hack.

“My dad - well, Simon, actually.” I corrected myself as I placed the rotisserie chicken on the cutting board. “He was a terrible cook, and looking back now, I can see why. He hadn’t used a modern kitchen in decades and the food was very different, but regardless, I ended up having to not only learn how to cook but also how to do it on a shoestring budget.”

I tore apart the precooked chicken, placing the shredded meat in a bowl while he watched me.

“Baking is a bitch, but cooking can be as easy or as hard as you make it. This was my go-to dish when I knew we needed to stretch out meals for the week.” Stripped of all the good meat, I tossed the carcass into a pot of water and turned it up.

“You can get two meals out of this, and you don’t even need to cook the chicken.” I gave him a pointed look. His sheepish smile made my pulse quicken suddenly.

I turned back to the cutting board, trying hard to keep my mind on cooking and not on his shirtless body. The few days I’d stayed with him had been uneventful and relaxing, but the damned wolf insisted on walking around his house without a shirt and it was becoming more and more distracting.

“So you’re saying I don’t have to make everything by scratch, then?” He asked, bringing me back to dinner.

“Exactly.” I opened the can of sauce and began stacking my tortillas. “Just put some chicken in the tortilla, spoon some sauce over it, roll it, and place it in the pan.” I showed him, tucking my poorly made enchilada into the pan. “Once it’s full, we just toss some cheese and some more sauce over and put it in the oven to warm up. Easy.”

I stepped back, leaving him room to work. He quirked a brow at me and I threw him a sweet smile. “I am not one of your wolves. You need to make your own dinner.”

He chuckled, stepping up to the board and mimicking my steps. While he worked, I threw some vegetables into the pot with the chicken.

“And now you have chicken soup,” I announced. He eyed the pot, then sniffed it.

“Needs more carrots.” He said.

I glanced down at the pot in surprise. “Already a critic,” I muttered as I cut up some more carrots.

“You did this often then, with Simon?” He asked, gently rolling his tortillas up. I couldn’t help but smile as I watched him carefully lay it down in the pan like it would explode.

“Not really. He was either too sick or too busy to help in the kitchen. I learned a lot from TV shows or my friends.”

“You miss them.” I looked up to see he was watching me. “Your face changes when you mention them.”

I nodded. “Anna and Hailey have always been there for me. We’ve been friends since grade school, and being away from them is hard. But then there’s also all of this-” I waved the knife around, shrugging, “I haven’t been entirely honest with them, and that tortures me.” I’d considered telling them the truth many times before, but I always chickened out. It wasn’t that I thought they wouldn’t believe me - getting them to believe everything would be easy - it was the weight of that truth that they would have to carry that worried me.

“Having people to share your life with is a special gift.” He said softly.

“You must miss your pack,” I said, seeing the forlorn look in his eyes.

He only nodded, suddenly hyper-focused on placing just the right amount of chicken in his tortilla. Days earlier, when Wesley had found us, he'd mentioned something about Grayson and his pack.

“Why did you guys come here?” I asked.

His broad shoulders were hunched slightly. “I made a mistake in the city.” He said.

“The kind that gets you run out of town?” I asked, intrigued. What could he have possibly done? So far, Grayson had proved to be a kind, intuitive person, so it was hard for me to view him as anything else.

He paused, his fingers wavering over the chicken before he stood up a little straighter. He sprinkled some cheese over the chicken as he spoke. “My pack was pushed out of here by the Hargreaves years ago. At the time, my grandfather was the Alpha, and it was his life’s goal to take back our territory. He spent a lot of time trying to prepare us for a war that never came because, when he died, my father took over.

“He didn’t care about coming back here. He wanted to scratch out a territory in the city, and he was in the perfect position to. The pack was ready for a war, but not the kind he forced us into.” He dropped the last tortilla in the pan, his golden eyes looking far off as he spooned some sauce over them.

“Urban warfare is an entirely different beast. In some ways, it’s a lot more savage, and the toll it takes on your soul -” He took a deep breath.

“It’s alright, you don’t have to -” I paused when he shook his head.

“You deserve the truth, Willow. I would want to know if I were in your shoes.” He pinned me with his golden eyes. “Is the man I am staying with a murderer?”

My throat went dry. Sure, I’d thought it a few times since Wesley had implied it a few days ago. But that had been Wesley trying to get under everyone’s skin, right?

“My father took his territory, leaving behind a trail of blood and death that stained everyone in our pack. But we had no choice, right? He was our Alpha, and we had to do as he said.” He shook his head, a look of disgust rolling over him as he scoffed. “One day I’d had enough. Enough of the bloodshed, of the pain and darkness that he seemed to track with him everywhere. So I did the only thing I could. I killed him, and I took his place.”

My pulse quickened as an icy dread snaked up my spine. An awkward silence settled over us, causing the space between us to fill with a palpable tension. I struggled to say something, anything at all, and I knew the longer I remained silent, the worse it would make it.

I was saved by the pot, having been forgotten, boiling over. I yelped, rushing to shut off the heat and push the pot away from the burner.

“Jesus,” I mumbled, slightly singeing my fingers on the handles.

I jumped when he grabbed my hand, gently pulling it towards him. His skin was warm, but it was the look in his eyes that made every nerve in my body flare to life.

He blew on my fingers, the cool kiss of his breath coasting over my burning flesh. I struggled to breathe as he gingerly turned my fingers in the golden light of the evening sun, his eyes raking over the marks.

“No one can blame you for that, Grayson.” It sounded like someone else was speaking from far away. All the blood had rushed to my head, the roar in my ears silencing everything else. But somehow I’d found my voice again.

He flicked his gaze to me, still holding onto my hand. “I didn’t just kill him, Willow. I annihilated anyone who sided with him. I set his entire world on fire and let it burn to the ground before I tore his head from his body. I made sure he watched.”

I could see the pain in his eyes as he spoke. The guilt and regret, but also the satisfaction.

“Then I took what remained of the pack and brought them here, thinking it would be a fresh start.” He let out a shaky breath, dropping my hand.

“But then the Swamp Witch came,” I said, finishing the unspoken thought. He nodded.

“And now I wonder if they would have been better off with my father. At least with him, they wouldn’t be under her thumb.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head eagerly. “Don’t ever think that, Grayson. There’s still a chance to make this right. We just have to-” I paused, grasping for something to say.

“Kill the Witch?” He asked, his smirk rueful.

I was about to answer when I noticed his pupils widen, nearly encasing his golden eyes in black. Grayson lifted his head up as if scenting the air, when one of the windows exploded.

Chapter 24

My first thought was Wesley had made good on his threat.

I could picture him outside the cabin with his hunter family, weapons at the ready to slay the werewolf inside and drag me out, kicking and screaming. Even when Grayson threw me to the ground, covering me with his body as the room exploded with glass and a very distinct growl erupted, I couldn't help but blame the damn hunter.

So when I lifted my head and saw the giant wolf standing in the cabin, I had a momentary brain fart.

It wasn't until Grayson growled above me - the sound traveling down his chest pressed against my back - that my brain kicked back on and I realized we weren't being attacked by Wesley. Relief washed over me, but it was short-lived.

The wolf had its eyes on me. Its muzzle was curled up into a vicious snarl as it poised for attack.

In a flash Grayson was off me, his body morphing into an enormous white wolf as he tackled the other to the ground. I rolled away, barely avoiding the two wolves as they wrestled, the breakfast table exploding into splinters as their bodies crashed into it.

Knowing I wouldn't stand a chance if I got caught up with them, I leapt up onto the couch, looking around the room for something to help.

Grayson threw the other wolf halfway across the room, sending it flying into the fireplace. I caught the glint of the poker in its stand and figured it was better than nothing. I moved quickly, jumping over the coffee table to grasp the poker with both hands.

I barely had a moment to lock eyes with Grayson by the front door, his beautiful white coat splattered with fresh blood, before the window behind me exploded. I shrieked as glass peppered me, slicing into my bare arms as I crouched down, trying to avoid more.

Grayson barked once. Then he was on the second wolf, shoving it away from me. I moved to get back on the couch and out of the way, but the glass covering the floor made me stop.

I cursed under my breath. Like a normal person, I was barefoot. As I considered tiptoeing my way to safety, I heard a low growl from the fireplace to my left. The wolf inside was back on its feet, and it had me in its sights.

"Shit." I gasped, holding the poker up. The wolf took one look at it, then raised its lips back in a gruesome smile. A glob of drool hung from its mouth as it took one step towards me. I swung the poker as a warning, though I knew they outmatched me. The wolf was three times my size and, if it was a wolf

from Grayson's pack, a trained killer. It would tear me apart with one snap of its mighty jaw.

My only chance was to get away.

I lunged for the couch, ignoring the glass that cut through my skin. Leaping onto the couch, I turned just in time to see the wolf closing in. It jumped, but I had the high ground. I swung the poker right into its face; the metal collided with its skull, making a dull ring.

It cried out, backing away from me as it shook its head. I let out a shaky sigh of satisfaction, and then a ton of bricks slammed into my back. The force threw me forward onto the coffee table, the wood breaking beneath me. My lungs cried out for air as the weight of the wolf on my back crushed me against the broken table.

White hot pain shot up my thigh as it sank its teeth into my flesh. My lungs had no breath left to scream, so I clawed at the floor in a desperate attempt to get away. The werewolf was going to suffocate me if I didn't get out from under its massive weight.

Black spots ate away at my sight as I gaped for air. I barely registered the hot liquid that trailed down my face. Suddenly, the weight was removed, and I took a long, ragged gulp of air that sounded more like a sob. Something heavy thudded next to me with a wet squelch. I rolled to the side, my blurry vision clearing just enough to see a wolf's head sitting in a pool of blood. Its tongue lolled to the side of its broken maw, with yellow eyes rolling back.

Grayson stood over me, back in his human form. His broad chest heaved with his heavy breaths. He was naked, but covered in so much blood I couldn't tell if he was injured. I sat up, trying to see if he was hurt, but as he crouched down next to me with such speed and ferocity, I reeled back.

“He hurt you?” His voice was barely human.

“Are you hurt?” I croaked. My chest felt bruised from being crushed.

He shook his head, and I sighed in relief. I glanced behind him, seeing the body of the other wolf, broken and twisted where the breakfast table had been.

The living room was in tatters. The couch and tables were nothing but broken pieces of wood scattered around the room, and every window was broken. I could feel the cold winter air coming in, brisk and smelling of fresh snow.

Hot tears pricked in my eyes as guilt set in my stomach like a stone. I'd done this. I'd brought this upon Grayson and his home.

“I should have stayed at the manor.” I gulped back my tears but failed. “I'm so sorry Grayson!”

He reached a bloody hand to my thigh, gently turning the torn flesh to see how bad the wound was.

“Willow, none of this is your fault.” He said, his voice slowly returning to normal. He knotted his brows, seeing the bite.

“It is!” I cried, looking around his ruined home. I was becoming hysterical, my sobs tearing through my chest as I struggled to breathe. Once again, my impulsive decisions had backfired, and now I was responsible for ruining Grayson’s home and life. He’d been so kind to me, opening his home to me when I needed it, and look what it got him.

Grayson cupped my chin with a bloody hand, turning my face towards him. Even through my panicked sobs, I could see how close his face was to me.

“Willow, none of this is your fault.” He repeated, his voice gentle and soft as he held my eyes level with his. “Do not feel guilty because of this. The only person to blame is that damned witch.” His golden eyes flared, then died down as he brushed the fresh tears from my cheeks.

“But your home-” I gulped.

He shook his head with a slow, lazy smile. “I can always fix the house, you silly girl. The only thing I’m concerned with is you.” He glanced back down at the bite mark, then at my torn feet.

I pressed my cheek closer to the warmth of his hand; the adrenaline ebbing away and leaving my body feeling cold. I shivered, the winter air sucking out all the heat in the room.

“Come on, we need to clean these up and get you warm.” Before I could protest, he had me in his arms and was making his way to the shower. Guilt still ate at me, but shock and exhaustion were snaking their way into my limbs, making it hard to continue to beat me up.

The shower was large enough for both of us to fit as Grayson flipped on the water. He stepped back, waiting until steam rose from the tiles before carefully setting me down on the built-in bench.

The warm steam rolled over my chilled skin, making me shiver as I realized how cold I was. Grayson was still crouched by me, making sure I was strong enough to sit up on my own. I happened to glance down, noticing he was still very much naked.

Suddenly I felt very hot as I remembered the incident in the shower just days earlier.

Grayson must have guessed what I was thinking, his expression changing as he turned around with his back to me.

“Uh, just give me a moment to rinse off and I will give you some privacy.” I turned my head as he washed the blood from his body quickly, then left.

I peeled my damp, blood-soaked clothes off, leaving them in the corner of the shower as I carefully washed my body. There were still glass shards stuck in my feet, making it hard to stand, so I stayed on the bench, washing what I could. I couldn't help but commiserate at the sight of my new wounds. The one on my shoulder had nearly healed completely, but now I was faced with more future scars.

I wasn't sure how long I took, but eventually Grayson came back into the bathroom, knocking on the door.

“Do you need help?” he asked.

I considered saying no, but then decided I had no reason to be stubborn. I had fucking glass inside my feet, and I needed someone to help me.

“I can’t walk,” I said. “And I am naked,” I added quickly, then internally slapped myself. What a dumb thing to say. Of course, he knew I was!

“Alright, can I come in?” He asked.

I took a deep breath and then sighed. “Yeah.”

Grayson walked in, his head turned to the side, holding out a large beach towel. I would have laughed as he awkwardly made his way into the shower, draping the towel over me before turning off the water, but I was far too tired to.

I wrapped the towel around me, then let him pick me up again.

He brought me to the bed, where he told me to lie down. I must have given him a look because he knotted his brows and sighed.

“I need to pick that glass out of your feet, Willow. It will be easier if you are lying down.” I didn’t protest further.

I collapsed against the pillows, not caring that my wet hair was plastered to my face and back. Grayson tucked a blanket around me, leaving my feet exposed, then pulled out a first aid kit. “The bite on your thigh isn’t deep, but I am going to put some ointment on it after I fix up your feet.”

He handed me a small bottle. I sniffed the container and winced.

“I don’t have anything for the pain, so you’ll have to make do with rum.” He gave me an apologetic smile before picking up one of my feet. “This isn’t going to feel great.”

I chugged the small bottle; the alcohol warming my stomach. Lack of food and loss of blood made it work quickly, dulling the aching throb in my thigh and feet. But it didn’t dull it completely.

Grayson made quick work of digging out the glass and bandaging my feet, despite me accidentally kicking him. Reflex or not, it was embarrassing. Though, not as embarrassing as crying silently while he handed me a pair of clean sweats after dabbing some ointment on my thigh.

“I’m fine,” I said, swatting away his concern. “Who were they?” I asked finally, though I had my suspicions.

“Vincent and Jules. They are Luna’s lieutenants, in a sense.” He replied, his eyes hardening.

I rolled over, wincing against the pain in my legs and feet. So, the two wolves we’d met in the swamp with Luna. A million questions rolled over my tongue, but I was too tired to ask just yet.

He left me to curl beneath the sheets, praying sleep would take me and give me some respite. But the broken windows were letting in the winter cold, and the fireplace had been destroyed by one of the wolves. Sometime in the night, I awoke shaking and thought I was sick.

“Grayson!” My teeth chattered violently as I rolled over, hoping he hadn’t gone far.

I nearly yelped when I saw him rise from a chair in the corner. He looked haggard, like he hadn’t slept at all.

“It’s so cold,” I said, then froze when a thought flashed across my mind. “Am I turning into a werewolf?”

He chuckled wearily. “No, it doesn’t work like that. A cold front is moving through, and it’s snowing outside.” He glanced down at my body, and I followed his eyes to see multiple blankets stacked over me.

“I put every blanket I have on you, but still-” He sighed. He was still shirtless, wearing just a pair of gray sweats.

I lifted the blankets, gasping when I felt what little heat they trapped left me. He quirked a brow, looking unsure.

“Hurry up before I freeze to death.” I snapped. He slipped into the bed, and the moment I felt his warm skin against me, I groaned, sinking against his body.

He wrapped his arms around me, encasing me with his warmth as my shivering slowly ceased. By the time I felt my body relax against him, I could hear his steady breathing, a clear sign he’d fallen asleep first.

I smiled against his chest, letting sleep take over.

Chapter 25

“Do you think Luna sent them?” I asked. Grayson didn’t look up from the teapot, but I could see his bare shoulders tensing.

Despite the frost that crusted over the broken windows, he was still sporting just sweatpants. I, on the other hand, was layered beneath multiple borrowed shirts and blankets, balled up on the only chair still in one piece.

Sometime between me being in the shower and Grayson acting like my personal space heater, he’d gotten rid of the bodies and piled all the broken furniture in the fireplace. It had been below freezing when we woke up. At least a foot of snow had fallen in the night, piling up against the broken windows and drifting into the cabin.

Grayson had cleaned everything but the bloodstains.

The floors and walls were still coated with half-frozen blood, and I was too scared to ask what had happened to the bodies.

“I am not sure.” He answered finally.

Grayson poured the steaming tea into two mugs and brought me one. I huddled over the hot tea, letting the warm steam defrost my face. He leaned against the stove, his expression somber.

“I think you should go back to the manor.” He said. My stomach clenched like someone had just kicked me.

In truth, I had been waiting for him to kick me out all morning. Despite all his reassurances last night about this not being my fault, and him not regretting letting me stay, I figured in the literal cold light of day he would change his mind.

I steeled myself, then looked up, forcing a smile. “I understand.”

Grayson gazed at me over his mug, his golden eyes twinkling with amusement. “It’s safer there, Willow.”

I waved him off. “It’s okay, I get it.” Mentally, I was already packing my things.

“No, I don’t think you do.” He growled, making me pause. Grayson set his mug down, then slowly approached me.

His long, lean body rippled with each step as he prowled towards me. Suddenly, I was sweating beneath the layers of blankets. He crouched down until his eyes were level with mine, and I swear my heart leapt into my throat when he reached out to touch my hair.

A shiver raced down my arms as he tucked a stray mahogany lock away, his fingertips brushing lightly over the shell of my ear.

“I don’t give a fuck about this cabin, Willow.” He said, but his voice was thick, heavy with those things we had left unspoken since the shower incident. “I don’t give a fuck about

killing those wolves. Honestly, I should have done that back in the city - they were assholes.” He chuckled darkly.

His fingers grazed my cheek as he pulled his hand back, leaving trails of heat on my skin. My heart was beating so hard I was certain he could hear it hammering against my chest.

“I only care about your safety. More will come, and as much as I want to protect you, I can’t risk the possibility of you getting hurt.” He glanced down to where my bandaged feet were tucked beneath the blankets. “When I saw him on you, tearing into your body-” he faltered, his shoulders heaving as he took a deep breath.

I felt compelled to touch him, to brush away the pain in his eyes. I could only imagine how he felt. Guilt for killing his former pack members - no matter how terrible they were, he was still their Alpha at one point. Not only that, but I was sure it was killing him that his sister was now working for the Swamp Witch, and possibly responsible for the attack.

I reached for him, intending to place my hand on his shoulder, trying to offer some comfort. But the moment his golden eyes flicked up to me, I saw the pain mixed with molten heat and bent forward. My frozen lips melted against the searing heat of his, the warmth spreading throughout my body like wildfire.

I couldn’t stand to see him so conflicted, so torn up, when he was usually a ray of sunshine. I kissed him, wanting to see that goofy smile back on his face. So when I pulled back and noticed the shocked look he was giving me, I sank into myself.

There I was, being the dumb, impulsive Willow again. “I’m sorry, that was inappropriate of me. I shouldn’t have done that.” I said, pulling my body back until I was a little ball beneath the blankets. Of course, it had been an inappropriate time to kiss him! The poor man was bearing his heart to me, and I had tried to smooth everything over with a kiss like some harlot.

Rosenbay whore. Edgar’s words drifted into my mind, searing through my body with electric heat. I didn’t want him to be right, but here I was, brazenly kissing Grayson in the ruins of his cabin.

“Do you really mean that?” He asked. I was halfway to saying yes when he leaned closer to me, the heat from his bare skin rolling over me in waves.

“What would you do if I were to kiss you back, Willow?” The way he sounded my name like he was savoring it made my pulse quicken.

“I wouldn’t stop you,” I said quietly, searching his golden eyes for any hint of humor. I half expected him to pull away and laugh, but instead, he closed the space between us and pressed his lips to mine.

It was a gentle, deep kiss, the kind that made my skin tingle in anticipation of more to come. So when he pulled away, leaving breathless and flushed, I reached for him. My fingers twisted in his hair as I pulled his face back.

I hadn’t realized how starved I was for his touch until it was gone.

I did not kiss him gently this time. I devoured him, eager to taste him on my tongue, hungry for every inch of him. Grayson responded with equal vigor, pressing me back into the chair as his tongue danced across my lips and entangled with my own.

We broke, gasping for air in quick gulps before he was on me again. I pressed my nails into his scalp, pulling him over me until we were both on the chair. He wrapped a hand around the back of my neck, tipping my head back as he hovered over me.

The scent of the forest mingled with cold snow wrapped around me, overtaking the stale smell of dried blood. I was burning up under the weight of him and the blankets, and just as I felt like I would explode in a flame, I heard the creak.

We froze, our eyes snapping open just as the chair gave way beneath our weight.

I cried out, dumping the mug of tea I had held away all over us. We both tumbled over, Grayson rolling to the side, but I was wrapped up in so many layers I couldn't move. I glanced over to Grayson, who was lying next to me, looking stunned.

I couldn't help myself. I began to laugh. At first, it was a soft chuckle, then it turned into a deep, braying belly laugh that brought tears to my eyes. Grayson was trying hard not to laugh at my donkey laughter, but he failed and joined in.

We sat there, laughing on the cold, bloody ground, until we both began to gasp and hiccup.

I took a few deep breaths to calm myself before I sat up, pushing the blankets away. Grayson reached out, grasping my hand in his. I looked down at him, wiping tears from his cheeks, and smiled.

“Will you come with me?” I blurted. He looked at me through his long, hooded lashes.

“To the manor? Of course, I wouldn’t dream of letting you travel there alone.” He gave my hand a squeeze.

“And what about your cabin?” I glanced around his cabin - at the ruin it was in. “Let me pay for its repairs. I owe you that much, at least.”

Grayson sat up slowly, and I found my gaze traveling to his toned muscles as he stretched out.

“I appreciate that, Willow. But I can’t let you do that.”

I threw him a devious look that made him quirk a brow. “We shall see. But first, a hot shower and new bandages.”

Grayson helped me up, carrying me to the shower.

He left me on the bench again, with the hot water running. As he left the bathroom, I called out to him. He paused at the door, looking back to see me slowly stripping off my borrowed sweater.

I watched his eyes darken at the sight of my bare breasts.

“Care to show me what you were doing in here, alone?” I asked.

A slow, sly smirk curled at his lips.

“I will,” he said, his tone low and husky. “When you are somewhere safe, and I know I can have you without distractions.”

He winked and left me, feeling feverish and agitated. I peeled off the rest of my clothes, accepting I would have to take a shower alone, and without release. Then an idea struck me, and I chuckled.

I knew he could hear me, and that he was probably outside the bathroom door waiting. If he wanted to wait to fully seduce me, then so be it. But it didn't mean I couldn't service myself.

Still sitting on the bench, I spread my legs wide and drove two fingers into my soaking center. I shut my eyes, thinking back to how he kissed me just moments ago, and then imagined him in the shower, touching himself while he moaned my name.

It only took a few strokes before I found the edge. I hadn't realized until then how the last few days had basically been a slow, sensual foreplay between us. With Grayson constantly walking around shirtless, and the unspoken incident sitting between us. My body had been an exposed wire, and I hadn't noticed until I felt just how wet he made me.

I arched my back, driving my fingers deep inside my pussy until the walls clamped down on them and my body exploded with the orgasm. I gasped, bracing myself against the damp tiles.

“Grayson.” I groaned, riding out the wave.

Something shuffled in the other room, and I smirked, knowing he'd heard everything.

Chapter 26

The drive to the manor was quiet, but the tension in the car was thick. The thick snowfall slowed us down to a crawl in some places, so we didn't reach the gates until well after dark.

Which was entirely fine with me. The moment the gates came into sight, I could feel my chest tighten. Dread sat like a stone in my stomach, making my entire body slump back into my seat. Grayson noticed and slowed the car down, parking a decent distance from the gates.

"You don't have to go in just yet," he said, his voice gentle. "We can stay here for as long as you need."

I kept my eyes on the gate, afraid to look at him. I knew if I did, I would chicken out and beg for him to let me go back to the cabin. Werewolves be damned. I needed to go back, not just for my safety but Grayson's as well, but I felt like I was being torn in two.

I ached to stay with Grayson. In the few days I had spent with him, I had felt more like myself than I had since coming to Harrowgrove. It wasn't just the break from ghosts and family curses that made me feel lighter, but that Grayson understood me. Sometimes even when I didn't understand myself. He saw me, in all moods and expressions, and didn't

shy away from them. He embraced me and took the time to understand me.

I didn't want to let that all go, not yet.

"I wish you could come with me," I said finally.

Grayson hummed in agreement. Harrin, in his never-ending wisdom, had supposedly made a pact with the Swamp Witch to curse the property line so that werewolves could not set foot on our land.

This meant Grayson would have to stay outside, and it would force me to go into the manor alone. Again.

"I will stay close by if that's what you wish," he said, weaving his warm fingers through mine. I shut my eyes, savoring the feeling of his skin against mine. Electric heat snaked up my arm, settling in my core as I imagined his hands searching for other parts of my body.

Grayson shifted next to me, huffing. "You drive me crazy when you do that."

I glanced at him sideways. "Do what?"

His face was flushed, and his golden eyes were molten. "I can smell how aroused you are."

My entire body stiffened. My lips parted as a strangled scoff ripped through me in mortification. "This entire time, you could tell?" I croaked.

He smirked, "Yes, but I thought it would be impolite to mention it."

I struggled to respond, my body flushing to the point where I had to close the car heater that was blowing on me. Suddenly, the car felt way too hot to be in.

Grayson leaned over until he was mere inches from me. “I love it when you squirm like that.” His breath coasted over me, his tone so low and husky it made me shiver with excitement. Knowing he could literally smell how turned on I was only made me crave him more.

Before I knew it, I was closing the distance between us. I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling myself closer to him as I drew his lips to mine. I crushed myself against his hard body, bemoaning the fact that he had a jacket on for once.

Grayson lifted me up, pulling me over his lap until I was straddling him. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I considered how fucked up it was that I was getting so wet merely because it excited me he could smell it. But the moment I felt his hands on my hips, his nails digging into my tender flesh as he rolled them over his growing cock, my mind went blank and all I could think about was tearing off his pants.

“Fuck, Willow.” He growled into my mouth. I ate his words and devoured his tongue, kicking my hips against his growing length.

“I can smell how fucking wet you are,” he said. “God, you smell so good.”

“Do you want a taste?” I breathed, surprising both of us with my brashness.

Grayson growled against my neck, the sound vibrating down my spine and pooling between my legs. He slid one hand into my sweats, finding my soaking panties. Hot breath coasted over my skin in quick huffs as he pushed the wet material to the side, finding my clit.

I bucked at the touch, already so sensitive in anticipation. He dragged two fingers down my pussy, circling around my swollen entrance, teasing me before he pulled them back.

Grayson pulled his hand back, entwining his free hand in my hair and gently pulling my head away from him. He locked his golden eyes with mine, making sure I was watching as he licked my juices from his fingers.

Never in my life had I been so turned on. My entire body felt like it was about to combust when he moaned.

“Fuck, Willow, you taste so sweet.” He slid his hand back into my sweats, his fingers dancing over my clit until I was gasping.

“Do you want to come?” He growled.

“Yes.” I whimpered, arching my back until my spine was against the steering wheel.

“Look at me,” he said, his voice thick. “I want to see you come.”

I felt his fingers in my hair, tilting my head until he could see my eyes. I fought to keep them open while little spasms of pleasure began to build. He drove two fingers down my pussy, slowly stretching it out before plunging them inside.

I cried out as he stretched me, driving his fingers deep inside while his palm pressed against my clit.

“Is this what you thought of in the shower?” He asked. “Did you think about me fucking you?”

“Fuck, yes.” I gasped, arching my body until it was nearly off his lap.

He pulled me back down. “I want you to come on me, like a good girl.”

I cried out, holding his gaze while the orgasm ripped through me. I rode it out, driving his fingers deeper inside my pussy until the walls clenched over them.

“That’s my good girl. Come all over me.” Grayson purred.

I collapsed forward, my body quaking with the subsiding waves. Grayson wrapped his arms around me, holding me close as I steadied my breath.

I cradled my head against his chest, his chin resting on the top of it while he gently stroked my hair. I could feel his heart pounding in tandem with mine.

“Is that what you imagined in the shower?” I giggled, deliriously happy.

He chuckled, the sound rumbling beneath me.

“I will show you one day.” He answered.

We held each other for a while, letting our pulses even out. I started to drift off into sleep, the steady beating of his heart lulling me, when I felt him stiffen.

“Someone is at the gate.” He said.

I groaned, rolling back into the passenger’s seat. I had to blink a few times to let my eyes adjust to the darkness, then I realized it was Edgar waiting at the gates.

“Fuck.” I groaned.

“We don’t have to go just because he is there,” Grayson said.

“Yeah, I do.” I sighed. “He will stand there all night otherwise.”

Grayson reached over, cupping my face in his hand. He gave me an encouraging smile. “You got this. I will be right there with you, for as long as I physically can be.”

I placed my hand over his, leaning into his palm as I took a deep breath.

“Alright. Let’s rip the band-aid off.” I stepped out into the night, the snow still falling in fat chunks.

I barely registered the cold as I stomped over to the gates, Grayson close at my side. He moved through the piles of snow gracefully, catching my arm whenever I slipped and faltered. Edgar stood at the gates with a stoic stillness as we approached.

I stopped just at the property line, where Edgar was trapped behind and Grayson could not step over.

“It’s good of you to come back,” Edgar said, his tone hollow.

I rolled my eyes in response.

Edgar glared at Grayson, his ocean-blue eyes widening when he noticed the werewolf holding my arm.

“I see you wasted no time climbing into his bed.” Edgar huffed.

“Jesus, are we really going to start this shit now?” I snapped. Grayson growled low, his body tensing next to me. “It’s not worth it, Grayson,” I mumbled.

Grayson let out a long breath through his nose, his shoulders slumping slightly as he relaxed.

I resolved myself to having to leave him, as much as I didn’t want to. I told myself I could get Andrew to take me back to his cabin as soon as I could go. Or we could meet in town, and have dinner again. There were possibilities.

I turned to Grayson, clutching his hand in mine. “Christmas is in three days. My friends will be here tomorrow, and I really want them to meet you.”

His tense expression melted away, replaced by his goofy, boyish smile.

“I would love that. Let’s-” He paused, glancing behind me.

“Shit.” Edgar breathed.

I turned just as a voice hissed from the darkness, “Rosenbay.”

The vampire.

Chapter 27

He no longer looked like a gaunt skeleton, but it was definitely him.

His lips stretched out over his pearly white fangs, and I felt a twinge in my neck where he'd bit me.

“Fuck.” I barely got the word out before he was on me.

The fucker was faster than Grayson, flying at me before the werewolf could leap between us. I caught his startled look just as I felt my feet leave the earth and the vampire threw my body back.

For a split second, I thought he was going to take off with me, and I had a terrifying image of us flying into the dark, frosty night. The vampire hurled me instead onto the snowy gravel drive and knelt over me with a snarl.

I tried to drag some air into my lungs, preparing to scream at him to get off, but his icy hand wrapped around my throat and squeezed. A strangled yelp left my lips.

“You aren't the right Rosenbay, but you will do.” He hissed, opening his ruby lips wide to show his fangs. Grayson howled in the darkness, a pitiful, rage-filled cry. I could see his dark form pushing against the unseen barrier. It would not yield, no matter how much he clawed and howled.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I screamed for Edgar to help. He had been right there - where did he go? Had he left me to die? Would he really leave me here to die?

Lack of air and frustration brought tears prickling to my eyes. There was no one else around who could help. Was this how I died? Strangled in the snow by a vampire, with a werewolf inches away but unable to help? With the last bit of strength I had, I whispered a strangled plea.

“Let him in,” I pleaded to no one.

The vampire bowed his head, hovering over the same spot on my neck where he’d bitten me weeks before.

I shut my eyes, steeling myself for the pain to come. Lucien, Alexa - anybody! I thought, praying one of them was close by.

Then I heard it. A low hum that grew until the air was practically vibrating around us. I snapped my eyes open, sensing the vampire’s hesitation. By the way his eyes widened, he could hear it too.

The vibration snapped, and a wave of something shimmered over us. The vampire quirked a brow, looking mildly annoyed. Whatever it had been, it wasn’t enough to stop him.

His fingers squeezed my throat again, and I saw stars as my air-deprived brain screamed.

His red eyes hovered over me, looking hungry. He didn’t even notice the claw until it was through his throat. Cold blood

sprayed over me, nearly freezing against my skin as the snowy night air hit it.

The vampire was thrown back, his throat ripped wide open. I gasped for air through the metallic, stale flavor of his blood coating my mouth, forcing myself to sit up. The vampire was backing away, holding one hand to the gaping hole in his throat while glaring at something behind me.

I glanced back, seeing the giant white wolfman by my side, his maw dripping with half-frozen blood. My heart leapt into my throat seeing the molten gold eyes. Somehow, Grayson had crossed over the barrier and was standing with me, but he was caught somewhere between a wolf and a man.

“Mangy wolf.” The vampire spat, the words garbled but understandable as his skin was quickly mending itself.

“Grayson.” I sobbed, relief flooding through me. The wolfman glanced down at me, and I swear I saw it smile. He stepped in front of me, putting his giant body between me and the vampire.

The wolf let out a deep, rumbling growl that could have only been a challenge. The vampire spat a glob of blood into the snow, smirking. He lifted his delicate nose up, inhaling deeply. “Ah, I haven’t smelled someone from the Romulin pack in years. I thought you were all dead?”

The wolfman’s ears pricked up in surprise.

“Doesn’t matter,” the vampire sighed, his voice becoming clearer as he spoke. “I suppose the pact we had between my

coven and your pack no longer stands?”

I glanced from the vampire to Grayson, confused. What pact? Did the werewolves also work for the vampires? Not only that, but did he mean there were more vampires out there?

I shuddered at the thought.

The wolfman huffed in response, clearly uninterested.

The vampire shrugged. “In case it does still stand, I must inform you of my intentions with that girl.” His red eyes pinned me where I sat. “I am going to drain every ounce of blood from her body before I make her into my servant.”

Ice ran through my veins as fear shot up my spine. His servant?

The wolfman growled, daring the vampire to try.

But before either could make a move, a spear came flying between them. It sank into the snowy gravel with a heavy thunk.

“Alexa!” I gasped, seeing the ghost hunter appear. She sneered at the vampire, then disappeared. He had the decency to look startled before she appeared before him, holding a silver knife.

The vampire nearly missed being sliced. The hunter moved quickly, almost too fast for the vampire to escape her reach. Alexa would slash, then dash away, only to appear right next to the vampire.

He let out a frustrated cry, lashing out and only catching air. As a ghost, Alexa had the upper hand. Even if he was able to catch her, she was already dead. She moved like liquid through the darkness until the vampire became so frustrated he made the mistake of sidestepping her. Her silver blade sank into his side with a wet squelch.

“Got you, sucker.” She grunted, driving the blade to the hilt. The vampire hissed, trying to pull the blade from her hands, but she would not yield. His face morphed from man to beast as he clawed at her.

“You should have stayed in that coffin.” She sneered, and another blade appeared from nowhere. The vampire barely had time to scream before she slammed it towards his heart.

Only the knife did not reach its destination. There was a blur of motion, and suddenly Alexa was standing alone, looking bewildered. The vampire stood a few feet away, gasping as blood poured from his side.

“Almost, hunter. Almost.” He hissed. Blood dribbled down his lips as he spoke. He swung his red gaze to me, his lips curling into a bloody smile. He gave me a wink just as Alexa appeared next to him, but this time he was faster.

The vampire disappeared, leaving a dark mist in his wake. Alexa cursed, kicking the snow where he’d just been.

Grayson morphed back into a man kneeling next to me.

“Are you alright?” He asked, holding out a hand.

“Yes, thanks to you.” I croaked, taking his hand and trying to ignore how naked he was.

“Why is there a fucking werewolf on the property?” Alexa spat. I turned to her, her anger surprising me.

“I’m not sure,” I said, then stepped in front of Grayson when I saw the heat in her eyes. “He’s my guest, either way.”

She blinked in surprise, looking abashed. “Fine.” She grumbled. “Whatever.”

“Holy hell bells, you’re standing on hollowed ground!” Lucien cackled. He was lounging on a bench, a half-empty bottle of whiskey in one hand.

I narrowed my eyes at him, shaking my head.

“Where were you?” Edgar chimed in, appearing next to Alexa.

Lucien shrugged. “I honestly don’t know.”

“Where was he?” I screamed, “Where were you, you useless fuck!?”

I lunged at him, only to punch the air. Alexa caught my wrist, steadying me as I swayed back. “He came to get me.” She said, her look telling me to calm down.

“Of course he did.” I spat, spinning around to see him standing to the side. “Why would he risk getting dirty?”

He didn’t respond, keeping his gaze on Grayson’s naked form.

“Grayson, please put some pants on,” I grumbled, but gave him a weak smile.

“Oh, shit. Sorry.” He grabbed his sweatpants by the gate and put them on.

“Thank the lord,” Edgar grumbled.

“Shut the fuck up!” I snapped.

“Enough, all of you!” Alexa groaned. “Look, whatever the reason, he is now on the property, and that’s probably a good thing. We need someone who can come and go and isn’t a total drunk.” She shot Lucien a look, but he was too busy singing to a statue to notice.

“Dahlia will never allow it,” Edgar said, looking pleased with himself.

“She will if she knows what’s good for her.” I chuckled darkly.

Grayson came up to my side, wrapping his arm around my shoulder.

“This has been fun, but we’re going to call it a night and go to bed,” I said, taking his hand and leading him to the house. “I hope that’s okay?” I said low enough for him to hear.

Grayson threw me a devious smile. “I would love nothing more than to sleep in your bed tonight, Willow.”

I didn’t look back to see if they were watching when I wrapped my arm around his waist. But I did hear Lucien’s drunken laughter all the way to the room.

Chapter 28

I woke up confused. I was back in my elaborate room in the manor, with the early morning sun streaming through the winter-frosted windows. But my bed was empty.

I sat up, rubbing the sleep from my eyes as I surveyed the room. It had clearly been cleaned since I'd been gone. The spot next to me was ruffled, like someone had been sleeping there, and I could see a tattered jacket slung over the bottom of the bed.

“Grayson?” I called dryly.

“In here.” His voice came from the bathroom, the doors slightly ajar.

I sat back, sighing in relief. I had been worried he'd changed his mind and left in the middle of the night. We'd collapsed in my bed, and after everything, we'd passed out quickly. I didn't allow myself anytime to wonder how he, a werewolf, had been allowed to pass through the barrier. Or why the damn vampire was still trying to kill me.

He appeared in the doorway wearing one of my puffy robes that barely went past his hips. He wiped away the remnants of shaving cream from his jaw, his golden eyes twinkling as he smiled at me. All thoughts of the barrier and vampire evaporated from my mind.

“I smelled.” He explained. “And I needed to shave.”

I raked my eyes up and down his body, relishing how delicious he looked wearing my robe, freshly shaved.

“You look like you want to eat me for breakfast.” He said, quirking a brow.

I blinked slowly, my mind waking up and catching up with my burning body all at once. “I do,” I said plainly, knowing I’d never meant anything as much as I did at that moment.

Tentatively, he stepped closer to me. “Are you sure?” he asked. “Your neck-”

I shook my head, ignoring the sore muscles in my neck and shoulders. “I’m sure it looks worse than it feels.”

“It looks pretty bad, Willow.” He said softly, but stepped closer still.

“I know my limits, Grayson.” I said in the same tone. “You got to taste me last night. It’s my turn now.”

I swung my legs over the side of the bed, reaching for his robe. Gripping the soft fabric, I pulled him closer to me until he was between my legs.

The robe was long enough to cover him, but I could see his cock peeking from beneath the puffy folds, already growing hard and I had barely touched him. I pulled on the belt, releasing the knot and letting the robe fall to the side.

The tip of his cock was dripping, and I couldn't stop myself from thumbing the thick beads off the head and tasting them. Grayson let out a low, primal growl that I understood as a sound of approval.

I wrapped my hand around his base, relishing how hard and large it was before squeezing. He gasped, his golden eyes shuttering as I stroked him slowly, rolling my thumb over his velvet smooth head.

“Willow-” he breathed my name like a prayer. I bent over, lapping up the rest of his dripping cock with the tip of my tongue. He quivered, shutting his eyes as he stroked my hair with one hand.

“Fuck, Willow-” Whatever he was about to say ended in a gasp as I took him in my mouth. He threw his head back while I let his cock slide down my throat, filling me until I could barely breathe through my nose.

My eyes were half hooded, but I could still see the look of abandon on his face as I held his cock deep in my throat. I pulled back slowly, dragging my teeth over his shaft and earning a deep, rumbling groan from him.

Smiling, I grasped his cock with one hand and licked him from tip to base, watching the expressions on his face as my

lips found their way to his balls. I nipped at them gently, giggling when he yelped.

His golden eyes snapped open, his brows knotting with a challenging look. But before he could reprimand me, I devoured his cock again.

Grayson moved to grasp my head, his fingers lightly pressing against my hair, but withdrew them quickly.

I pulled away, gasping slightly as I licked my lips. “Don’t be afraid,” I said.

He glanced down at me through misty eyes. “Willow, it takes a lot of self-control not to use your mouth like the pretty fuck hole it is.”

If I hadn’t been wet before, I sure was now. I clenched my thighs together, feeling how soaked my panties became and knowing he could smell it.

“I don’t need you to protect me like that, Grayson.” I countered. “I want all of you, exactly as you are.” I couldn’t stand it if he treated me like a delicate doll that might break. Ever since I’d arrived at Harrowgrove, everyone else had been tiptoeing around me like I would. I was tired of it.

He reached for my face, dragging his thumb down the line of my jaw. Scraping the pad of his thumb over my bottom lip, he pressed down until my mouth was wide open.

“Are you sure?” he asked the tension in his voice clearly about to break.

I couldn't speak with his thumb holding my mouth open, so I nodded, keeping my eyes locked with his.

"Hm," he hummed, then pulled me down onto the ground. I knelt before him, his fingers twisted in my hair as he held my head steady. I opened my mouth as wide as I possibly could, thinking there was no way it could go further.

He sank his cock past my lips, over my tongue, and into the back of my throat. I fought back the urge to gag, tears welling up in my eyes as I struggled to breathe through my nose.

Grayson held my head in place, slowly drawing his cock over my lips again and again.

"Fuck, you feel so good, Willow." He gasped. "Do you like being my good girl?"

I moaned around the girth in my mouth, clamping my lips over him.

Grayson's hips bucked against me, his cock pressed into the back of my throat. I ran my tongue over it, feeling it tighten.

"Fuck, I'm going to come." Grayson moaned. He dug his fingers into my scalp, holding my head while he fucked my wide open mouth with complete abandon. I gave up on breathing entirely, relishing how he felt in my throat right before I tasted his come.

He rode out his waves of pleasure until I couldn't hold the amount of come anymore. I swallowed what I could, the rest

dripping from my lips.

Grayson took a step back, his eyes glassy and a dreamy smirk on his lips. He ran his thumb over my dripping lips. “I fear I’m going to become addicted to you.”

I laughed, standing up. “Would that be so terrible?” I asked, throwing off my shirt as I limped towards the bathroom, the werewolf bite on my thigh aching with the movement.

“No,” he called to me.

I took a quick shower, careful to wash every inch of my body. It was about time I found my grandmother and we had a talk. Less distracted now, I threw on some clothes and found Grayson and Alexa in the living room playing a video game.

I froze, dumbfounded.

Alexa turned to see me, smirking. “The werewolf is a better player than you. He doesn’t die every five minutes.”

Grayson chuckled next to her, completely relaxed.

“Uh, is it okay to leave you two alone?” I asked, eyeing the door. I really needed to get this talk over with today, since Anna and Hailey would be here later.

Alexa looked offended, scrunching up her nose as if she smelled something terrible. “I’m not going to fuck him, Willow.”

Grayson let out a choking cough.

“No offense, Grayson. I like pussy.” She said, throwing her braids back over her shoulder with a slick smile.

“None taken?” he chuckled.

“I mean, you aren’t going to kill each other the moment I leave, right?” I asked.

“Don’t be absurd, Willow,” Alexa said, waving me off absentmindedly. I was about to protest when she let out a yelp and began furiously smashing her buttons.

“Go away, quit distracting us,” the hunter grumbled.

Grayson threw me a wink, then went back to the game. I watched their characters beat each other up for a moment before accepting there wasn’t much for me to do. As odd as it was, they weren’t at each other’s throats and I had to trust I wouldn’t come back to a blood-soaked room.

“Good luck, Willow dear.” Alexa sang as I left the room.

I shut the door behind me, leaning against it as I took a deep breath, steadying my nerves.

I’d made up my mind a few days ago about what I was going to say to my grandmother. She wasn’t going to like it, but like Grayson had said, at the end of the day I was the one who held all the cards. There was no reason I couldn’t agree to her terms, by also making sure I got what I needed from the deal.

I stood up, shaking the rest of my nerves off. It was time to go into the dragon’s lair.

Chapter 29

In the two months I'd been living in the manor, I'd never been inside my grandmother's rooms.

I'd see her in the dining room for meals, or occasionally in my own rooms after a near-death incident. But there hadn't been a need to make the trek to the floor above mine, until now. I followed the winding staircase next to my rooms, ascending to the topmost floor.

The stairs ended in a wide rectangular room, much like the one outside my rooms. Floor-length windows lined walls, and an airy hallway dipped down towards the middle of the manor.

I turned to my right, finding the heavy double doors open to her living room.

I took one look at the room and sighed. It was as rich and vintage as I had expected. Lavish velvet sitting chairs in deep gem colors sat around a rich oak table in the center. The table sported a vase with red roses and the remnants of grandmother's afternoon tea.

Afraid to touch or even sit on anything in case it was just for decoration, I made my way to the study room.

Grandmother was sitting behind a surprisingly small desk. I paused, shocked to see her weathered, jewel-laden fingers

dancing across a keyboard with ease. I had been expecting to find her hunched over stacks of papers, armed with an old-fashioned fountain pen and maybe a typewriter. I hadn't expected the elaborate computer setup she had, or that she even knew how to use one.

"You've returned." She mused, still clacking away.

"You know how to use a computer." I countered, picking my jaw up off the floor and moving to the seat in front of her desk.

"Of course, I know how to use a computer. How else would you expect me to keep our businesses afloat?"

"I thought that was Edgar's job," I said, sinking into the seat.

She sniffed. "He does the busy work."

I leaned forward, drumming my fingers against the lacquered surface. "We need to talk," I said.

She continued typing, ignoring me until I craned my neck to see her screen. Quick as an adder, she shut the screen off and turned to face me.

"If this is about your friends coming to stay, it has already all been taken care of."

"Thank you, but no." I sat back, placing my hands in my lap in the exact way she did.

She quirked a brow. "The werewolf then?"

I shook my head. “Grayson is my guest,” I said, smirking. “And as the only heir to this place, I would assume I am allowed guests.”

“You may do as you please, Willow. Until you decide what your future will be, of course.” She glanced down at her watch. “Time is ticking, though.”

“Yours, yes,” I said, earning a withering glare.

“Do you-”

“I am taking the offer,” I said, cutting her off. She faltered, and for the first time since meeting her, she was confused.

“Which one?” She said finally.

I forced my face into a mask, hoping I appeared calm and nonchalant. Hoping my anxiety was hidden well enough, I said, “I will take over Harrowgrove as its heir.”

Her confused look melted into one of sickening triumph. “You will continue our work, then?” She asked.

“To break the curse? Yes.” I answered.

She knotted her brows, and something passed over her face. For a moment, I thought she was going to add something, but then she smiled.

“Good. I am glad you made up your mind sooner rather than later. It will make the transition much smoother.” I watched her revel in her triumph, clearly satisfied. She looked like a cat that had just captured its prey.

“So you agree to all the terms-”

“I agree to my terms,” I said quickly and nearly exploded in laughter at her indigent expression. “I will stay here, but only on my own terms.”

I could see the thoughts fluttering in her mind as she calculated what to say next.

“I suppose you want to know what those are?” I offered, unable to hold back the smile that stretched across my face. For the first time, I held the upper hand. I had all the cards. It didn’t matter what information they tried to withhold from me to bait me into doing what they wanted.

“Do go on.” She sniffed.

I nearly let it all fall out of me at once, in a jumble of words. But I took a deep breath and told myself I had to be patient.

“I want to be clear, grandmother dearest, these are nonnegotiable.” The sides of her lips twitched, but she nodded. “I will stay here, as heir, and when you pass on, I will take over the family business at that time. Not before.”

I hadn’t been sure about her intentions with the business, but I wouldn’t have been surprised if she tried to rope me into it right away. I had no intention of letting it take over my life, especially if it meant working closely with Edgar.

“Reasonable.” She answered curtly.

“I will continue searching for a way to break the curse - and no matter where that journey takes me, I will do it the way I want to.”

“You mean the swamp.” She stated bluntly.

“Yes,” I answered.

“You realize that’s where your mother ended up? Before she died?”

I nodded. “I do. And I think she was onto something there.” Grandmother perked up, but I refused to give her more. The tree and its connection to the curse and my mother’s death were something I had to work out myself.

“With the snow, I won’t be able to confirm anything quickly. But as soon as spring comes, I think we might know more.” I needed to speak with Antoinette, but I was certain she was going to be the key to unlocking the tree’s mysteries.

“You are withholding information.” She mused.

“I learned from the best.” I retorted, throwing her a shit-eating grin. Her scoff of annoyance made my petty little heart beat with joy. “And lastly,” I said pointedly, “I will decide when I want to pop a little Rosenbay out of my body.”

Her brows shot up so fast I thought she might have a stroke. “Who said anything-”

I threw up a hand, not wanting to argue with her. “We both know at some point you are going to get antsy and want to ensure we have some other poor soul to throw this curse breaking bullshit onto in case I die.”

She sputtered. “Willow, you are extremely accident-prone
-”

“Don’t worry about that,” I said. “I promise I won’t be taking any unnecessary risks.”

“Your mother said the same thing!” She snapped.

“My mother went into that swamp alone!” I yelled back. “She had no choice because you cut her off from the world! She had no one to help her.”

“How dare you-” I stood up abruptly, towering over her. She shrank back, looking panicked.

“I dare because I am your only hope,” I said my voice like ice. “You can threaten me all you want. Keep my bones from this place. Leave me to become like Griffith. It won’t matter to me - I will forget about all of this. But you-” I leaned over the desk, letting each word drip with venom, “you will be trapped here for all eternity, unable to reign like you do now because you will be dead and gone from this world.”

I stood up straight, relishing how she shrank from me. “I wonder what would happen to this land, then? Would you pass it on to the Hargreaves? Haunt them for eternity? Or maybe the state would take it and bulldoze the manor to make room for apartments.” I shrugged, acting nonplussed as I moved for the door.

“You wouldn’t?” The meek question prompted me to turn back. For a moment, I felt remorse. For the first time, she looked her age, hunched over, and sunk into her wheelchair. I could see the lines of age on her sagging face, the look of shock and horror in her bright eyes.

“I have literally nothing to lose,” I said. “I came from nothing. The wealth and power mean little to me.”

“Then what do you want?” She asked.

I took a deep breath, then shrugged. “I don’t know. But I can’t keep living under your thumb.”

She blinked at me, slowly, as if she were struggling to decipher some hidden message in my words. Only there was nothing hidden there. I spoke plainly and truthfully, the way that Grayson and I had been the last week.

My pulse quickened as I realized how much he had helped me in such a short amount of time, and with something as simple as honesty.

My entire life had been one giant lie from the start. It was refreshing to know he and I stood on level ground. Equals to each other.

If I was being honest, even my ill-fated tryst with Edgar had been a weird power play at most times. He always held the upper hand, being privy to family information and my grandmother’s schemes. I should have known better than to start something with her henchmen, but it was a hard lesson learned.

I turned to leave, thinking she would need some time to process everything.

“Your terms are acceptable.” She said softly. I glanced back at her, seeing the computer screen lighting back up.

“Selfish. Cutthroat.” She glanced back at me, a small, knowing smile playing on her lips. “But acceptable.”

Chapter 30

A mixture of weightlessness and satisfaction followed me to my room until I heard Alexa's voice echoing down the stairwell.

"I am going to make you wish you stayed in that swamp, you tramp!"

My feet moved quicker than my brain had time to process what she was screaming. After seeing Alexa almost slay the vampire, I wasn't sure I wanted Grayson to try his hand at brawling with the hunter. So when I tripped inside the room and saw Alexa jumping up and down on my couch while fist-bumping the air, I had to pause to process what was happening.

Alexa hooted, then yelled out, "Suck it!" and thrust her pelvis at Grayson, who was sitting next to her, trying not to laugh.

"What's happening?" I asked, slowly toeing the door shut behind me.

Grayson glanced over the couch, his lips twitching as he fought back a smile.

"Alexa had just won a game." I raised a brow, seeing the TV screen behind them. Her character stood over his, a

cartoon head in her hand as the words WINNER flashed across the screen.

“That’s right, wolfie! I won.” She threw me a wide smile.

Grayson nodded solemnly. “Yes. But what about the six games before this one?” He asked.

“You’re only as good as your last game.” She retorted, falling back onto the couch.

“That’s not what you said the last time I won.” I countered, rounding the couch.

Alexa shrugged. “You’re the exception. You just suck at these, period.”

I rolled my eyes but smiled. I was relieved they were still getting along.

“Rematch?” Grayson asked, his golden eyes twinkling.

Alexa chewed her bottom lip, clearly weighing the pros and cons of playing another round.

“I’ll give you a minute to consider. Meanwhile, how was your grandmother, Willow?” He turned to me while Alexa chewed her lip in thought, her brows knotted in an internal struggle. I swear, if ghosts could sweat, she would have been.

“It was fine,” I said, gently stroking the tips of my fingers over his shoulder.

Alexa took a brief break from her crisis to look at me. “Did the old goat keel over from surprise?” A wicked grin curled at her lips.

I shook my head. “No, still kicking.”

Alexa deflated slightly. “There are no Christmas miracles.”

Grayson looked mildly concerned. “I take it your grandmother is not the bake cookies and snuggle with by fire type?”

“No. More like a corporate takeover, laughs at the funerals of her enemies’ type.” I explained. “Speaking of Christmas, I need to go pick up my friends.” I checked my phone, seeing I still had some time.

“Ah,” Grayson stood up awkwardly. “Yeah, I should be, uh, leaving then.”

I quirked a brow. “Really?” I asked.

“Awkward,” Alexa poofed out of the room, probably to the hallway where she could hear us, but not be seen.

“It’s alright, Willow,” Grayson said, his hands in his pockets. “I know you need some time with your friends. I should get back home anyway, and like clean up.”

I bit back the smile that twitched at my lips. He was worried he was in the way, and he was being mindful of my time. I couldn’t help but drape my arms around his shoulders and pull him into a deep kiss.

He kissed me back tentatively, holding me close as I came up for air. “Grayson, I appreciate your concern for my time and I want to be respectful of yours as well. I know your cabin needs work, and I can totally get some people out there to fix it up - but only if you agree.” He parted his lips, but I pressed a

finger over them. “Wait. I need to say this now before everything gets crazy here.”

His full lips stretched behind my finger before he planted a kiss on it. “I really want you here, Grayson. I like you - a lot.” It wasn’t a lie. In the short time we’d spent alone together, I’d grown attached to him. “I like how bad you are at cooking, and how good you are at making me tea when I’m down. You always seem to know what I need, and I love how considerate you are. But I know my life is a mess, and my family is nothing but a complication. So I understand if you want space from that.”

I pulled my finger away from his lips, letting him speak. “Willow, I would love to stay here with you, you silly thing. I only thought you’d want space from me with your friends being here.”

I shook my head. “I would love for them to meet you. Outside of this manor, of course. They are staying in town, and I want them as far away from this craziness as possible.”

“Fair enough. I won’t take you up on the offer to fix my place up.” He brushed his fingers through my hair. “But I will get some things and clean up today while you go do what you need to.”

“Deal.” I leaned into his fingers, relishing how they felt stroking my hair.

“I suppose we won’t be going back to the tree anytime soon?” He asked.

I shook my head. “Not until the snow melts in spring.”

He smiled, leaning close to the shell of my ear. “Then I have you to myself all winter. I’ll find ways to keep you warm.” A shiver raced down my neck, making my skin tingle as goosebumps covered my arms. My eyelids fluttered against his cheek as I fought to breathe. Somehow, the damn werewolf always found a way to take my breath away.

“Am I invited to the Christmas party tomorrow?” he asked, surprising me

“Of course.” I breathed, regaining my senses as he pulled away.

“I guess I need to get something nice to wear then.” He glanced down at his faded jeans.

I dragged a finger over his bare chest, smirking. “I think a shirt would be appropriate.”

Grayson promised to come back with clean shirts and actually wear them. I walked him out to his jeep, where Andrew was just pulling in.

“I have some shopping to do before everyone gets here.” I sighed. “But I promise to be back for dinner.”

Grayson leaned in and kissed my forehead. “How about we take your friends out for dinner tonight?”

I couldn’t hide the wide smile that stretched across my face. “I would love that.” Having an awkward dinner with my grandmother and Edgar sounded worse than pulling my own fingernails out.

I watched Grayson climb into his car and drive off into the gray afternoon.

“Looks like more snow,” Andrew said, opening the car door for me.

I slid into the back, glancing at the heavy clouds above. “Sure does. It’s going to be a white Christmas for sure.” Back home, we’d had a few Christmases with snow, but I was looking forward to seeing the small seaside town decked out for the holiday.

Andrew drove me past the town where each house was laced with lights and snow, looking like gingerbread houses. Everything was soft and colorful, and I could see the giant Christmas tree in the center of town, its golden star twinkling in the gloomy light.

“This is always my favorite time of the year,” Andrew said, seeing my eyes on the tree. “How about you?”

“Halloween, actually,” I answered. “But I didn’t get to see it here this year.”

“Ah, Halloween is a great time here, too.” He said, pulling onto the main street. We ran into a few stores where I ordered some gifts and had them delivered to the manor. I bought Anna the entire collection of her favorite makeup line, including some new makeup cases and brushes. The local bookstore had a ton of first-edition books from Hailey’s favorite authors. I bought them all and picked up a few of the new ones for Lucien. Drunkard that he might be, I had a feeling he liked to read.

Alexa was harder to shop for. I nearly gave Andrew a heart attack when I gave him the address of the shady local arms dealer. But he turned out to be an old man with a long, white beard. He couldn't ship the handmade bow and arrows to the manor, since he lacked a car, so Andrew had to pack them into the trunk of the car.

"How did you even find this guy?" Andrew asked as we drove away.

"Online." I laughed. "He might not have a car, but apparently he believes in the internet."

Our last stop before picking up Hailey and Anna was an art gallery. I took the most time there, debating over the various prints and figurines until I found what I needed.

Afterward, Andrew drove us to the airport. We didn't have to wait too long before I noticed Hailey's new hair color, cotton candy pink and baby blue, bobbing through the overcrowded pickup area. Anna was in tow, sporting a smart trench coat and neon pink snow boots.

"Uh-oh," I grumbled, my warm breath coasting over the car window, making it fog.

"What?" Andrew asked, just as his eyes landed on them. "Oh, they don't look too happy." He said.

"No," I sighed, getting ready to hop out into the cold and greet them. "They must have had one of their epic, close to breaking up, fights."

The car door opened, and I could hear Hailey's gravelly voice. "Go back if you want, Anna. I'll have a great time by myself."

"I'm sure you would love that!" Anna shrilled back, her voice carrying over the crowd, earning some looks.

"Holidays, huh?" Andrew asked, giving me a wink before he popped the trunk for their luggage.

"Fucking holidays." I groaned.

Chapter 31

Anna and Hailey bickered all the way to the private cabin we'd rented out for them. It was seaside, at the top of a cliff that overlooked the cape below. They had a fantastic view of the town and the ocean, along with an outdoor Jacuzzi and grill. Andrew helped me bring in their luggage to the remodeled kitchen.

“Should we worry?” He whispered as we disposed of their luggage in the rustic living area.

I shook my head, peeking out of the front door where they still stood by the car, arguing.

“They go through phases. I am sure some alone time here will help mellow them out.” I gestured to the lavish cabin. They were staying through New Year, and I had planned enough activities for them to do alone to know they'd work whatever they were bickering about out.

“Should I send for champagne services?” he asked, watching Hailey throw her hands up above her head, her leather jacket hiking up to show the dark green leggings she wore.

“No, I am taking them to dinner tonight.” I wiggled my brows at him, earning a chuckle. We'd known each other since

grade school, and became fast friends over our shared love of unicorns. It wasn't entirely surprising to me when they first started dating. I could tell from early on their relationship was a little different from ours, but it was the volatility that shocked me. The constant break ups followed by heated make ups made the shared friendship awkward at first. But when I'd put my foot down and made it clear, I wasn't ever going to pick sides, and I realized it was just their way of working through things, the awkwardness dissolved.

What was left in its place was a cycle that got less and less frequent as they learned to communicate better. They argued in the snowy yard, and I wondered if this was their break cycle, as it had been almost two years since their last one.

The thought struck some tender cord inside me. Selfishly, I knew I could not take one of their world shattering break ups, not with everything going on. Not with my overly complicated, cursed family and a pissed off ex-ghost fling haunting my halls. No, they needed to remain the constant in my life, my North Star.

I rarely intervened when they argued. It really only made matters worse, and usually ended with us all taking a break from each other. But I wasn't about to have our Christmas girl time marred by their fighting.

"Guys." I called from the doorway. When they didn't respond, I yelled in my best mom voice, "Guys!"

Startled, they both turned to me and I felt the weight of their frustration and anger zone in instantly. I knew I was

treading on thin ice, but someone needed to intervene. With a deep breath, I reminded myself that I'd faced ghosts and werewolves, and many creatures that should have made me run screaming away. Some did, but that didn't matter now. I could face my friends and make them see reason.

“What?” Hailey asked, an undertone of warning in her voice. All resolve left me. I might have been able to face down monsters and curses, but I was terrified of causing a scene and making things worse with them.

I chickened out and said the first thing that came to my mind. “I have a guy friend who is going to have dinner with us tonight.”

The space between us had grown tense, thick with the electric unease growing from the silence. Then I saw the smile that melted Anna's hardened expression, and the way Hailey's fingers were twitching as if she were fighting the urge to clap.

“Is this a friend who happens to be a guy?” Anna quipped.

“Or a guy who we need to get to know as a friend?” Hailey added. They exchanged a discerning look, and suddenly, whatever they'd been fighting about didn't matter.

“I told you,” Hailey said, wagging her brows. “That blue-eyed butler was eating her up.”

“No!” Anna squealed. “It has to be the guy she was dancing with at her birthday party. The one with the ‘fuck me’ eyes.”

“Wrong, and wrong.” I said, my lips quirking into a smirk. One sure-fire way to get them back to reality was my love life.

“Well, why didn’t you say anything? Is it anywhere fancy?” Anna walked past me, Hailey trailing behind, giving me a wink.

Andrew waited in the car while they changed for dinner. I spent the time giving them vague, half true answers about Grayson as they got ready.

By the time we arrived at the restaurant, they thought Grayson and I had run into each other in town, and that we were casually seeing each other. Grayson was already at the table, wearing a soft gray long sleeve with slacks. His golden hair was smoothed back, and I could see the shadow of his stubble as we neared the table.

“Sorry,” he whispered, gently kissing my cheek. “I didn’t have time to shave.”

“I think you should grow it out.” Anna said, her eyes skating over him with such naked approval I felt second hand embarrassment. Hailey elbowed her, tossing Grayson a toothy grin.

“Don’t mind us. We’ve been waiting decades for our Willow to invite a man to dinner.” She said. If I could have died right there and then I would have. Curse be damned, it would have been preferable to continuing with an awkward dinner with them.

“Actually, I was the one who asked her to dinner.” He gave me a wink, placing his warm hand on the small of my back. My frayed nerves calmed instantly as I breathed in his scent.

Hailey quirked a brow, but whatever quip she had ready died in her throat as the waiter cleared her throat behind us. We realized we were all still standing around the table and rushed to take our seats.

“Isn’t this where we ate last time?” Anna asked, glancing around the private room.

“It is. They keep this space saved for my family.” I explained, glancing over my shoulder at the snowy cape below. “The chef has a special five course meal prepared just for us.”

The moment drinks were poured, Anna and Hailey dove into questioning Grayson. He kept it simple, telling them his family had relocated to the swampland recently, and he was getting to know the town. Once they heard his job was mostly woodwork, they peppered him with a million questions about his business.

By the time dessert rolled around, Grayson was asking them about their classes at the community college back home and what their plans were.

“Travel.” Anna said.

“Grad school.” Hailey said at the same time. I schooled my face into a neutral expression as Anna’s small hand wavered

over her gingerbread souffle. Grayson must have felt me tense up. He placed a hand on my thigh, gently squeezing.

Anna turned slowly to Hailey, a smile plastered on her face, but I could see the annoyance in her eyes. Hailey continued sipping her eggnog, seemingly oblivious to the can of worms she'd just opened.

"I thought we agreed on taking a year to travel?" Anna said. The shiver of hysteria mixed with disbelief made my stomach churn. I didn't need to ask to know that this was part of whatever they'd been bickering about earlier.

"No, Anna, my love." Hailey shook her head, a tender look in her eyes as she sipped her drink. "I said I wanted to talk about options. But, as always, you decided to take that as a yes."

Grayson's fingers stiffened on my thigh. Internally, I was screaming, begging that they wouldn't start up again.

Anna clenched her spoon, a look of pure rage washing over her face, but just as quickly as it came, it left and she shrugged her small shoulders.

"I must have misunderstood." She said quietly, going back to her souffle.

I felt my shoulders relax as my body slumped towards the table. Hailey sipped her drink, her eyes stitched to the frothy liquid.

"What about you, Willow?" Grayson asked.

My eyes fluttered as I tried to understand his question.

“He means, what are your plans, silly?” Anna said, the pep back in her voice.

“Oh.” I leaned back, thinking. He knew what my immediate plans were, so I had to assume he meant the question as a distraction. “Since I am the only heir, my grandmother has been talking about handing over the business to me.”

“Without a degree?” Hailey asked. I winced, kicking myself for not thinking too far ahead.

“It’s just something we are talking about.” I admitted. “I have no intentions of taking it over anytime soon.”

“I am sure your grandmother has no intentions of passing on quickly.” Grayson chuckled.

“No, she does not.” I smiled. “Which is good, because she loves her work and I am not at a place in my life where I want to take that responsibility on.” Because I already had the responsibility of the damned curse hovering over my head. “Plus, she just met me. It wouldn’t make sense to hand the keys to the castle to me after only knowing me for a few months.”

Hailey nodded, looking thoughtful. Ever the pragmatic one, I knew it would make sense to her, without having to tell them about the curse.

We wrapped up dinner without further incident, and Andrew came to take them back to their cabin while Grayson offered to drive me home.

“Andrew will pick you up at five tomorrow. If you need to get anything before the party, Andrew can help you.” I said as they got into the car. I said a silent prayer as they drove away, hoping they’d be civil tonight.

“That was pretty tense,” Grayson commented as I climbed into his car. “I thought I would get the third degree, but they seemed more interested in roasting each other.”

I collapsed in my seat, groaning. “I just hope they don’t murder each other tomorrow.” I didn’t want to mention Hailey’s plans to propose to Anna just yet. She said she would pop the question on New Year’s Eve - but I was beginning to worry that wouldn’t happen now.

“Oof,” he chuckled, “You’d be stuck with them for eternity then.”

Chapter 32

I awoke to the smell of fresh coffee and warm sugar. My eyes fluttered open to see the breakfast dolly by the bed, a platter of French toast and coffee waiting.

“Morning,” Grayson was leaning against the bedroom door, wearing the ugliest Christmas sweater I’d ever seen.

“Where the hell did you get that?” I asked, eyeing the deformed reindeer and fraying puffballs.

“Downtown,” he smiled, pressing an unseen button on the hem. A garbled, broken tune rang out. “It’s old.” He explained.

I sat up, laughing as the tune died down in a terrible screech. “I’m glad you like it. I got you one too.”

“No,” I said, half horrified, half intrigued.

He strode over to the dolly and then pulled a sweater from the bottom tray. Grayson held it out to show me, and I couldn’t stop my jaw from hitting the bed.

It must have been a light green color at one point, but now it was a dark, muddy green that only accentuated the gray snowman stitched to the front. Half the face was missing, leaving only one black coal eye and a few coals for the smile. But what was worse was the string of colorful lights glued

around it. Grayson tapped a button, and the lights twinkled silently.

“I love it,” I said, leaping from my bed to throw it on. It was two sizes too big, and fit me more like a dress. “Do you think my grandmother would have a heart attack if I wore it like this to the party?” I asked, twirling in my mirror. The hem came down to my thighs, and if I wore a pair of white tights with it, I figured I’d have a complete outfit.

Grayson smirked. “You aren’t going to, are you?” He asked.

“Why not?” I countered, smiling. “I think it’s perfect. I’ve never had an ugly sweater before.”

“Really?” He looked thoughtful. “Well, I bought a really fancy shirt for tonight, but if you want to match-”

I threw my arms around his shoulders, kissing him softly on the lips. “Of course,” I said.

We ate our breakfast, lounging on the sofa in our sweaters, until Alexa popped in.

“Dear god.” She said, eyeing us. “What are those?”

“Christmas spirit,” I answered. “I think they are going to be a hit at the party tonight.”

“Pass.” Alexa waved me off, then rounded the couch. “Are you sure that’s what you want to wear tonight?”

“Yes. I love it.” I said, smiling at Grayson.

Alexa shrugged, “Your funeral. Here, I wanted to give this to you before the party.” She handed me a small box wrapped in silver paper.

“An early Christmas gift?” I asked, quirking a brow.

“Tomorrow the veil between worlds thins. Not as much as it does on Halloween, but enough that I will have to monitor the grounds all day.” She explained with an apologetic smile.

I opened the box to reveal a silver locket in the shape of a rose. “Oh, this is beautiful,” I murmured, prying the locket open with my thumbnail. I froze, seeing the portrait tucked in the tiny frame. It looked an awful lot like me, but the nose was too delicate and the cheeks were too high.

“It’s your mother. I think.” Alexa said softly. “I found it shortly after she passed away. I don’t know if she intended it for you, or maybe she meant to give it to your father?” She shook her head as if dislodging memories. “I asked your grandmother about it, but she only told me to toss it away.”

I wrapped my fingers around the locket, clutching it to my chest protectively. Leave it to my grandmother to continually prove how much of a raging wrench she could be.

“Thank you,” I said thickly. The tiny painted portrait of her was the closest thing to seeing her I had. I felt Grayson’s warm hand on my back as I fought back tears. “Alexa, this means a lot. And it totally puts my gift for you to shame.” I chuckled.

She raised a brow, looking surprised. “I didn’t expect a gift.” She said, humbly.

I carefully placed the locket back in its box, rushing to my bedroom. I set the box by my mother's journal, then paused as I considered how both Edgar and my grandmother had tried to throw out both items. I tucked them safely away in my closet before I grabbed the awkwardly wrapped bow.

"I couldn't find a box for it, so I wrapped it. Terribly." I added as I handed it to her. The wrapping was a Frankenstein patchwork of multiple holiday prints. I didn't have enough of just one to cover the whole thing.

Alexa plucked the bow off, and the entire jumble of paper fell away. I sighed to myself. "That wasn't supposed to happen," I said, as she eyed the bow.

She was silent. Looking over the custom-made ash wood bow and arrows in such a way, I felt my fingers tingle with anxiety. Perhaps it wasn't the best gift to get her?

"I heard ash wood is supposed to dispel curses - and things," I said dumbly, stumbling over my words awkwardly. "If you don't like it-"

She wrapped an arm around me, pulling me close to her hard, lithe body. I froze, shocked at first by her sudden show of affection, then hugged her back.

"Willow," she said into my hair, "If you weren't straight I'd wife you."

I rolled my eyes, dislodging myself from her arms, as she cradled the bow to her chest.

"I take it you like it, then?" I asked. She nodded.

“I haven’t received a gift since... well since I died here.” My brows knotted as I considered how sad and messed up that was. It wasn’t like her family didn’t know where she was.

“The Hargreaves are coming tonight, right?” I asked.

Her face became a mask of indifference. “Yes. They always spend Christmas Eve with your grandmother.”

My shoulders sagged as I considered how awkward it was going to be seeing Wesley and his family. “They should at least bring you something, then,” I grumbled, sitting back down on the couch.

Alexa shrugged slightly, her eyes still on the bow. “My family is complex. My brother, Wesley’s father, sees my death as a failure.”

I bit back my words, afraid I’d strike a chord with Alexa. She was sensitive about her death. I still had no idea how she’d died on the property, but whatever it was still haunted her.

We spent the afternoon in my room. Grayson and Alexa played a series of games while I waited for Anna or Hailey to message me. They’d been silent since leaving the restaurant, and I was worried they were still bickering. I tried to take my mind off of them by doing my hair and makeup, but only ended up thinking about the journal and necklace tucked away in my closet.

I hadn’t seen Edgar since the vampire attack, so I hadn’t had a chance to confront him about tossing my mother’s

journal. If it hadn't been for Lucien saving it and bringing it to me, it would have been lost forever. The mere thought enraged me and further solidified that cutting ties with the brooding ghost had been the right thing.

I watched Grayson from my vanity as he and Alexa started a new game. The hunter had her jaw set tightly as she suggested a totally new game, one that she hadn't lost to him in yet. Whatever he and I were to each other, a part of me hoped it would continue. I'd never dated anyone before, but I was considering what Grayson and I were to each other would be serious. Or, at least, more serious than anything Edgar and I had been.

I wasn't sure if Grayson would be open to it, especially after learning about werewolves having a soul mate. I turned back to my vanity, resolved to let whatever it was he had together grow naturally, without any added pressure.

My phone dinged, and I pulled up a message from Hailey. It was a short and simple message that they were on their way, and it was all I needed to confirm that they had been fighting. Also, they most likely would continue while at the party.

I pushed down my rising annoyance. I'd considered this possibility and had the perfect distraction planned for them.

"Alexa," I called as I strolled into the living area. She was busy trying to stay alive while Grayson's cartoon character continued to smash hers to pieces.

"What." She ground out.

“I have a favor to ask,” I said, leaning over the couch.

Her character now dead, she turned to me with a look of reproach. “Oh?”

“My friends are on their way over. They’ve been fighting since yesterday.”

She quirked a brow, looking intrigued. “The cute ones?”

“Yup. Could you arrange a nice romantic something for them?” I asked, batting my eyes.

She smiled like a Cheshire cat. “Oh, you want me to remind them why they are so desperately in love, right?”

I nodded.

“Done.” Alexa disappeared, her remote control falling to the couch.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Grayson mused.

“If anything, Alexa will whip them back into shape,” I answered. “Now, let’s get going to this party.”

Chapter 33

I'd expected the manor to be decked out for Christmas in gaudy red and green colors with cherub Santa and snowmen dotting the halls.

I should have known better. Grandmother had more elegant taste. They had set a giant tree up in the main foyer, the top nearly brushing the ceiling of the third floor. A simple silver star glowed above us as I entered the foyer. Silver and gold bulbs were the only decorations on the tree, the lights a warm golden color hidden beneath branches heavy with the scent of pine.

Party favors in the guise of gifts sat under the tree, wrapped in shiny gold or silver paper. A quick glance around the room and I realized the Christmas theme was understated, with gold and silver accents and wreaths strung about the manor with warm golden lights. Not a snowflake in sight.

If anything, the decor only served to make the dark and gloomy manor appear more haunted.

"It's like if Christmas and Halloween had a baby," I grumbled, plucking a flute of champagne from a passing tray.

Grayson hummed in agreement, his golden eyes roaming the room with naked interest. "We usually hung popcorn

strings and stockings.”

I smiled into my flute, sipping the sweet liquid as I remembered how Simon and I spent Christmas in the past.

“My dad - Simon,” I corrected myself with a cough, “We would buy the smallest, ugliest tree left over at the last minute from those tree lots. We’d decorate it with really ugly ornaments I’d made in grade school, then we’d bake gingerbread cookies and watch reruns of black and white holiday specials.”

“Sounds like the perfect way to celebrate,” Grayson said softly, wrapping an arm around me.

He grasped his own drink, sniffing at the cup. “Mulled wine?” He questioned, sipping. He grimaced, “Spike apple cider.”

I chuckled, “Let’s go find some of that eggnog.”

Grayson winced. “That stuff is terrible.”

“Scared?” I teased, and he gave me a challenging look.

Guest were trickling in from the front, filling the dark corners of the manor with laughter and light as they spread out. The ballroom held a banquet table laden with turkey, ham, and prime rib. A dance floor had been set up with a string quartet playing softly as guests meandered to the wet bar.

I ignored the side-eyed glances our outfits earned us as we approached the eggnog station. I handed Grayson a crystal goblet, brimming with the thick, spicy drink. Catching his golden gaze, I started to chug my own drink, my eyes silently

daring him to follow. A smile played on his lips. Then the werewolf downed his own.

“Another?” He asked, eyes crinkling as he tried not to cringe.

“Do you think you can handle more eggnog?” I challenged, pouring us each more.

He took the goblet back, chugging it. I nearly choked on my own as I watched his eyes watering.

“Just admit you are normal and you hate this drink like everyone else,” I said, pouring more into my goblet. He eyed my drink, his cheeks turning a pale green.

Just as I was about to usher him to the restroom before he hurled everywhere, I heard a voice like smoke and darkness behind me.

“Well, aren’t you both festive?” I turned to see Wesley, wearing a long black knitted sweater. He held a champagne flute in one hand, his other in his pocket as he eyed us both.

“You’re looking green around the gills there, wolfie. You alright?” He asked, quirking a brow.

“Fine,” Grayson muttered, looking away as he took a deep breath.

Wesley noticed the eggnog in my hand and smirked. “Please tell me you aren’t forcing him to drink that?”

Before I could answer, I felt a slight chill as someone walked past me. Wesley’s expression went blank as he

schooled his face into an expressionless mask.

“Miss Rosenbay. I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure.” A man extended a hand to me. I looked up, seeing a mirror image of Wesley, only older.

I looked from Wesley to the man, noting how stiffly the hunter stood in his shadow. “You must be Alexa’s brother,” I said, keeping my hands to myself. His hand hung between us for a moment before he retracted it, his smile still plastered to his lips, but I could see the annoyance licking in his eyes. They were dark, not the light turquoise Wesley had.

“I am. Baron Hargreaves. I do hope we will get better acquainted before you take over for your family. We will, after all, be working closely.”

“Will we?” I countered, sipping my drink.

He quirked a brow. He wore an elegant three-piece suit that fit him perfectly, but hid his powerful hunter physique beneath. If it wasn’t for the light scar that ran on the side of his head, visible only because he wore his hair short, I would have thought he was a normal guest.

Baron’s lips stretched out into a thin line. “Our families have worked together for centuries. That has never changed, no matter who is in charge-” His dark eyes flicked to Grayson, then went still.

Something in the air shifted. I watched as the older hunter’s body tensed, his hips shifting to the side as his long fingers itched at something under his suit. Wesley noticed the

change as well, stepping slightly closer to me as he kept his eyes on his father.

But I stepped away, placing my body between werewolf and hunter. I held my shoulders back but cocked my head to the side with a lazy smile.

“Is something wrong, Baron?” I spat out his name, making him look back at me.

“You have filth behind you.” He growled.

Grayson huffed, but it came out more like a cough. I was suddenly regretting egging him on with the eggnog.

“I have a guest behind me. One that you will show respect to.” I spat back.

Baron glared down at me, his fingers flexing at his side. “You keep mutts as pets? I did not realize the barrier was broken.” He countered.

“The barrier does not keep out my friends. It, unfortunately, allows small-minded bigots through, though. Pity.” I sipped my drink again, my eyes never wavering from the hunter. I knew I was playing with fire. If he wanted to, Baron Hargreaves could throw me to the side and attack Grayson whenever he wanted. Though I doubted he wanted to openly have a fight with a werewolf among a bunch of humans during a Christmas party, I wouldn’t put it past him to try.

As if he could read my mind, Wesley reached out, placing a hand over his father’s arm. “Father, there are eyes here.”

Baron blinked slowly, his eyes turning to the packed ballroom. His hard expression melted away as he chuckled softly.

“Your soul, your issue.” He said, holding his hands up.

“Not your monkey, not your circus.” Alexa’s voice came from my side. I held back my look of surprise as she took a step forward, powerful arms folded over her chest. She was a head shorter than her brother, but her body was built just the same. Now surrounded by a circle of Hargreaves, I could see how the family had managed to survive centuries of hunting monsters.

Baron quirked a brow, looking mildly amused. “Little sister, are you claiming ownership of this circus, then?” He asked.

She shrugged. “If this is what Willow wants, then so be it.”

“Do we have a problem, Baron?” I asked, honeying my words with a self-satisfied smirk. I was emboldened by Alexa’s presence. I’d just seen her take down a vampire all by herself. Baron stood no chance when faced with the spirit of his little sister.

The side of his lips dipped slightly as he shook his head. “As my sister has so aptly reminded me, this is not my place. If you would invite such a creature onto your property, it is not for me to raise the alarm.”

He picked at some invisible lint on his suit, his brow knotting as he worked the spot. “However,” his dark eyes

snapped to Grayson behind me. “The swamp is another story.”

I felt my body run cold with the silent threat. Even Wesley had the decency to look shocked.

“Father,” he warned, but Baron threw up a hand to silence him.

“We are hunters, are we not? And it’s been such a long time since we’ve had a good hunt.” The cruel smile that hung on his lips sickened me.

“Try it, Hargreaves.” I hissed. “Try it, and see how quickly my family drops you.”

He shrugged, looking nonchalant. “Your family isn’t the only rich family cursed out here.”

“Maybe not. But we are the only ones with the power to bankrupt you.” Grandmother mused. We all turned, stunned to see her behind Baron. She had a golden silk blanket over her legs and a velvet dress laced with silver beads.

“Dahlia, you can’t possibly allow this to go on,” Baron said, shaking his head.

“My granddaughter may do as she pleases. This is, after all, her inheritance.” She flicked her gaze at me. “I know I am not alone in my sentiments.”

Something grazed against my arm, soft and warm. I turned slightly to see Simon by my side. His young features were twisted with resolve as he took my arm protectively. For a fleeting moment, I saw the man I had grown up thinking was my father.

“You would do well to leave the pack in the swamp in peace,” Simon warned his tone low.

“Especially since one of them was responsible for bringing my son to rest.” I had to crane my head to see Griffith and his father standing behind us. In fact, as I glanced around our group, I noticed more and more spirits appearing from the shadows. Many I’d seen in passing on the ground, mistaking for staff or guests over the last few months.

Guilt punched me in the chest as I realized how self-absorbed I’d been lately that I couldn’t even tell who was my family.

I searched the growing crowd of my ancestors for my mother, but still, she would not appear. Pushing down my rising disappointment and frustration that she wouldn’t appear, I turned back to see the dark look on Baron’s face.

“Looks like you’ve been outvoted,” I said, much to his chagrin.

“Father, why don’t you go dance with Sylvia?” Wesley suggested gently, motioning to a woman watching them from the dance floor. I quirked a brow, recognizing her from the Thanksgiving dinner. I’d assumed she was Wesley’s mother, but the way he used her name instead made me second-guess myself.

Tucking the information away, I waited for Baron to leave us.

“I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised.” He said, adjusting his suit as he prepared to take his leave. “A filthy monster like you would need a woman to save your skin.”

Heat spilled over my neck as my rage piqued. Even now, outnumbered and cowed, he had the audacity to insult Grayson.

Before I could respond, the werewolf brushed by me, facing the hunter. Wesley watched, warily, as Grayson only smirked at the hunter and held out his hand.

“Merry Christmas.” He said.

Baron turned up his nose, looking disgusted, but before he could say something insulting, Grayson’s cheeks turned a sickly green. Wesley saw but made no move to push his father out of the line of fire.

With a terrible cough and a wet squelch, Grayson hurled up eggnog all over Baron’s three-piece suit.

Chapter 34

Music drifted through the open doors, the sweet tunes muffled by the snowfall. The back gardens were covered in a blanket of new snow, the fat, lazy flakes falling around us slowly.

Grayson took another swig of champagne, swirling it around before spitting it out into the snow.

“I swear I will never touch another drop of that God awful stuff.” He grumbled.

Guilt chewed at my gut, but my heart was too full of satisfaction to let it sour the moment.

“His face was worth it,” I said, watching as he tossed the dregs in his mouth, swallowing.

“True. Though I had half a mind to rip him apart.”

I winced. “I don’t blame you. Your history with the Hargreaves-”

“Is in the past,” he sighed. “I mean, he was so rude to you. It made my skin crawl listening to him disrespect you like that.”

My cheeks warmed as I watched his eyes heat with anger. I was touched, not only that he felt protective of me, but that he had the maturity and self control to not act on his impulse.

“I hope one day I am as wise as you are,” I said softly. He glanced over at me, his brow raised in surprise. “You think before you act,” I said with a shrug.

He gave me a lopsided grin, setting down his empty flute on a stone bench.

“Not always.” He breathed, running his thumb across my bottom lip, sending shivers skating down my neck. I felt a low rumble, deep within me, rise up to greet the heat of his touch. His eyes were hungry, stitched to the sight of my mouth as I lifted my lips in a sly grin.

He sucked in a breath, gliding the soft pad of his thumb down to my chin. “That smile threatens to undo me.”

We stood at the precipice of night, somewhere between the shadows and the warm light coming from inside. One step into the darkness and no one would see us. His golden eyes flicked to something behind me as if he was also thinking of seeking out those dark corners of the garden. There was no moon, and the sky hung heavy with clouds. The only light that could touch us came from the manor.

He lifted my chin a fraction, pulling me closer to the heat of his body. I knew if I took one step into the light, he would let me go and we’d go back to the party. I knew I probably should. Anna and Hailey could be waiting for me. They might have another fight if I took too long.

But my feet were like lead. I did not want to go back to the warmth and light of the manor. Behind me, the darkness of the

cursed graveyard called, whispering of cold dead things in the night.

My pulse quickened as I felt the darkness calling to me, urging me to take that step into it and give in to my impulses. But I'd let those impulses take me to dark places before, and it usually ended badly.

While I had a momentary internal crisis, two figures burst through the open doors and onto the patio. Grayson and I were too close to the shadows to be seen, but we watched as Hailey spun on her heel to face Anna, who appeared out of breath.

Hailey spoke in low, rushed words that I couldn't hear, but it was apparent they were still not on good terms. Whatever Alexa had had planned to soothe over their spat had failed.

Grayson's eyes flicked back to me, still holding my chin up as I gazed up at him. My mind had been made up for me. I weaved my fingers through his and pulled him into the darkness, careful not to be seen as we made our way through the garden. I followed the hedges to one of the greenhouses tucked in the corner.

Inside, it was warm and humid, the scent of roses and herbs thick as I fumbled to close the door behind us. The second it was, I found myself wedged between it and Grayson's body. He pressed himself flush against me, pulling my chin up as he crushed his lips against mine.

I groaned, deepening our kiss as I weaved my fingers into his hair, pulling him closer. We broke away, gasping in the sweet, humid air. I drank him in. His disheveled hair, his

lopsided grin as he licked his lips. I ached to hear him moan in pleasure again.

I dragged my nails lightly over his body as I brought them to his pants. His golden eyes became molten when I popped his button.

“Willow,” he breathed, “I don’t know if I can control myself.” He placed a hand over mine, stopping me from pulling off his pants. “I want you, so badly, but werewolves-” he dragged in a ragged breath, shaking his head.

“I can take it,” I said, batting his hand away. “I told you. I want you, all of you, just as you are. The wolf does not scare me.” I pulled down his pants and underwear, then grasped his already rock hard cock in one hand. He shuddered as I teased the velvety heated head.

“You do not scare me,” I said, stroking him.

He cursed, throwing both hands out on either side of my head, leaning into me as he rocked against my hand. “Fuck, yes. Squeeze my cock.” He growled.

I obeyed, squeezing my hand around his hard length as I stroked him.

“Yes, just like that. I want to feel your pussy squeezing my cock like this.”

“Take off my pants, then.” I challenge.

With a low growl, he dragged his hands down the wall. I could hear his nails scraping against the wood, leaving jagged

trails behind. Those same claws tore off my tights, ripping them to tatters before he tossed them to the side.

My underwear, soaking wet, is next. He gently teased a nail under it, pulling it from my hip, his sharp claw tearing it away. I carefully took off my sweater, draping it over a rose bush close by.

He did the same, and suddenly we were both naked in the darkness of the greenhouse.

He pressed against me again, his cock firmly against my belly. I wiggled, teasing it until I felt the beads of his pleasure dripping onto my skin. Grayson groaned, digging his claws into the wood behind my head. He tore a hand away, sheathing his nails before he took up my leg and hoisted me up.

I yelped, grasping onto his shoulder while he positioned my hips to his, his cock laying against the seam of my pussy.

“Do you like teasing me?” He growled, sliding his cock along my pussy until it was drenched with my juices. “Watch me tease you until you beg me to fuck you.”

I groaned as electric heat snaked up my legs. He rocked himself back and forth, teasing my clit with his cock until I felt my pussy aching for him to be inside, to be stretched out and filled.

“Come for me, or beg to be fucked.” He ground out, pressing the tip of his cock against my clit, lighting a fire in my core. I gasped, trying to press myself against him, trying to

rock my hips with his rhythm, searching for that building pleasure.

But he was relentless. He held my hips in place, teasing my clit and stroking himself over me until I was on the brink of breaking into a thousand pieces.

“That’s it,” he breathed. “I can smell how close you are. Come all over me, Willow.”

I broke, shattering into jagged shards of pleasure as my body was thrown over the edge. I threw my head back, my lips parted as I cried out but was silenced when he covered my mouth with his, swallowing my cries of pleasure.

His tongue skated over my mouth, tasting my screams as I rode out the orgasm. He paused only when my legs went limp against him. “Say it.” He pleaded against my lips.

I swallowed, catching my breath. “Fuck me, Grayson.”

With one motion he was in, and I whimpered as my pussy adjusted to his cock. He waited a moment, our shallow quick breaths the only sound in the darkness. Then he pulled back until his cock was almost out, pausing briefly before gliding back in. I gasped, digging my nails into his back for leverage as he began his long, hard strokes.

“Deeper.” I gasped, aching to feel him tearing into me.

He grunted, ramming his cock to the hilt, stretching me out even further. But not enough.

“More.” I pleaded, needing to feel him rip me into pieces.

With a primal growl, he let me go, dropping my legs to the ground. I cried out in frustration as his cock left me, only to gasp when he spun me around.

He shoved me against the wall, pressing my naked body to the smooth wood as he forced my back to arch.

“You want all of my cock?” He growled against my back, teasing my pussy with his tip.

“Yes.” I cried out, wiggling my hips against him with unabashed need.

“Good girl,” Grayson grunted. His cock slammed into me, forcing my face against the wall as I struggled to keep my balance. He was so deep now, filling me with a torturous pleasure as he picked up his pace. I could feel my orgasm building somewhere deep inside, and I feared I might break open at the seams as he used me.

He grasped a handful of my hair, pulling my head back a fraction. In the darkness, I could see his golden eyes clouded with pleasure as he came close to the edge.

“Where do you want me to come?” He ground out.

I barely had time to consider his question before I felt his free hand on my clit. He rolled his fingers over the already throbbing bud, sending me over the edge. My pussy clenched around him, and before I could think, I cried out, “Inside. Come inside me.”

His cock twitched and he let out a roar as he came with me, still riding me until I felt my thighs slick with both our

come.

He collapsed against me, and I nearly fell to the floor, trying to hold both of us up. We sank to the earth, our limp limbs entwined in the darkness, the heady scent of roses and herbs surrounding us, mingling with the scent of sex.

“Best Christmas, ever.” Grayson breathed.

Chapter 35

My tights were ruined, but the sweater was long enough for me to wear and still be decent. We returned to the party, where I earned a few raised brows at my bare legs, but otherwise, no one noticed or commented on our absence.

Hailey and Anna were huddled close to one tree in the ballroom, still arguing, but in low, hushed tones now. Grayson offered to return to my room, where I'd left their gifts, and find me some new tights as well.

I made my way to my friends, plastering a wide, hesitant smile across my face as I neared. They hadn't fought this badly for this long in years, and I was beginning to worry this time it was going to be different.

Hailey noticed me and stood up straighter, snapping something to Anna who swiveled around with surprising speed.

"Willow!" Anna called, her voice cheery and light, but I could see the shadows under her eyes and the way she was rubbing her hands together, nervously. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," I said, giving them both a hug. "Grayson will be back with your presents. I forgot them upstairs."

“What in God’s name are you wearing?” Anna asked, looking me up and down.

“An ugly sweater, nice.” Hailey tipped her champagne flute towards me before taking a swig. Anna threw her a quick glare, then handed me a small bag.

“It’s not much,” she started, but I waved her off.

“You guys didn’t have to get me anything. Having you here is enough.” I threw my arms around her, pulling her close while Hailey sidestepped out of my reach with a sly grin.

Grayson returned with their gifts and we all opened them at the same time. Anna squealed with delight at her new makeup sets, and Hailey gave me a pat on the back as thanks for her books.

I pulled out a set of rose shaped earrings, smiling. “These are beautiful.”

“I made them,” Anna announced proudly. I raised a brow, stunned. She’d never expressed an interest in making jewelry before, but the set she gave me was exquisite.

“That’s amazing, Anna,” I said, then caught the look Hailey was giving her. Anna was writhing her hands again, a nervous tick she could never get rid of since grade school. Suddenly the pieces started falling into place and I felt my stomach clench.

But before either of us could say something, Alexa appeared.

“Anna, could you mind helping me with something?” She asked. Anna blinked back at her in surprise, looking like a deer in headlights. “It won’t take long, I just need your opinion on something real quick.” Alexa offered her hand, and Anna took it.

“I see Lucien has found the spiked eggnog.” Grayson chuckled, expertly handing me my tights where no one could see, along with the last gift I had to give out. “I will be right back.”

I motioned for Hailey to follow me as I made my way to a hidden corridor. “Keep a look out for me?” I asked, pulling my tights on.

Hailey leaned against the corridor wall, her eyes on the hall.

“I’m sorry about all that,” she sighed. “I wanted to get you a photo album. But she insisted-”

“It’s alright,” I huffed, pulling my tights up. “If it’s something she’s really serious about, I won’t hesitate to help her.”

Hailey shook her head, a grim look in her eyes as she said, “That’s just the thing. She’s not serious about anything.”

I paused smoothing out my sweater, cocking a brow. “What do you mean? She loves you. She’s serious about you.”

Hailey folded her arms over her chest, her lips flattening into a grim line. “I don’t doubt her feelings, Willow. I never have. I just-” She took a deep, shuddering breath.

My heartbeat quickened. I'd never seen her look so forlorn before. In that moment I realized we stood at the edge of one of those life-altering moments, one that would leave us all changed.

She knew it too, by the haunted look in her eyes I could see how much she was fighting it. But if I knew anything about moments like this - and I'd had a few of them in the past month - it was that we couldn't fight them for long.

"You can say it, Hailey," I said, sounding way more confident than I felt.

"We've been together for so long that I don't know who I am without her anymore." She said, her voice barely a whisper. "And now I'm not sure she even knows who I am, either."

I leaned against the wall adjacent to her, mirroring her stance as she spoke. I wasn't entirely surprised that this was the root of their problems lately. "I am sad to hear that, Hailey."

"But not surprised," she stated, giving me a rueful look.

I couldn't lie, not to her, one of my only normal friends left in the world. "We've known each other for years, Hailey, and if the last few months have taught me anything it's that people need the chance to grow. I love you both, but you both deserve the chance to live the life you want."

"Even if that means living it alone." Hailey sighed, tears welling in her eyes. I reached out across the hall, grasping her

hand in mine.

“You are never alone,” I said, softly. “If you’re having second thoughts about asking her to marry you, then maybe take some time to think. There’s no rush.”

“Thanks, Willow.” She smiled back at me, but I felt how weak her grip was on my hand.

“Don’t worry about Anna offending me with her business venture,” I said.

Hailey stood up, dropping my hand in the process. Her shoulders squared, and she plastered a look of indifference over her face.

“She has no shame,” she said, shaking her head.

I shrugged, “We should all be a little shameless once in a while. Live a little.” I gave her a gentle nudge as we made our way back to the party.

“Speaking of shameless, where did your other tights go?” Hailey tossed me a sly grin. Heat raced up my neck, settling into my cheeks.

“I lost them in a rose bush.” I grumbled.

A deep belly laugh rumbled from her as we entered the ballroom.

Alexa had Anna with her, piling food onto their plates as Anna waved her hand around with an air of energy that could only mean they were discussing something to do with fashion or makeup.

Hailey's brows furrowed, but quickly smoothed out when she noticed I was watching her.

"Just enjoy the time we all have together right now." I said softly, spotting Grayson herding a wobbly Lucien away from the crowd.

Hailey's shoulders relaxed a fraction. "You're right. I'm going to grab something to eat."

"I'll be there in a second." I said, making my way to where Grayson was holding Lucien in a corner.

"You alright?" I asked. Lucien cackled, then took another swig from his stein. I raised a brow. "Where did you get a stein?"

"I vaguely remember taking it from a pub." Lucien chuckled.

"A pub? Did they happen to have electricity when you stole it?" I asked, eyeing the worn looking wood.

Lucien's glazed eyes clouded for a moment, then he shrugged. "Maybe. But I do remember they sold the best fish pie in town."

"Delightful," Grayson said, suppressing a smile.

"Lucien, have you had anything to eat?" I asked.

He snorted in response, chugging the rest of his drink. "More nog, my good sir." He sang, shoving his stein into Grayson's face.

I snatched it away, grimacing at how filthy it was. “Is this dirt?” I asked, flicking a chunk of something off the handle.

“Or blood. I think I might have smashed someone’s face in with it.” Lucien shrugged.

“I know what to get you for Christmas now,” I muttered, filling his stein with some punch. “Go sleep it off.”

Lucien took the stein, wobbling off to the gardens where I was sure he would pass out for the night.

Finally alone with Grayson, I handed him a small box wrapped in bright red paper. He raised a brow, gently taking it.

“I was wondering who this was for when you didn’t give it to your friends.” He commented, pulling the top off. His golden eyes brightened as he pulled out the silver chain. A silver wolf dangled at the end, encased in Celtic knots.

“This is beautiful.” He said, his tone warm.

“I got it from a local artist. He said it’s supposed to be a symbol of protection, but I thought you would like to add it to your wolf collection.”

“Thank you.” He took my hand, his skin warm against mine as he pulled me closer.

“You can thank me later, in bed,” I said low enough that only he could hear me. His golden eyes flashed with heat, his lips curling into a devious smile.

We plated our food and joined the others at a table on the outskirts of the dance floor. As the night went on Alexa

dragged Anna and Hailey to the dance floor, enticing them with her lithe body and quick movements. Grayson pulled me along with them, and we danced the rest of the night away.

Chapter 36

Christmas morning brought more snow. I snuck out of bed, leaving Grayson snoring beneath the warm sheets, to grab my mother's journal and take a seat by the windows.

I watched the snow falling rapidly, so thick and heavy I couldn't see a foot ahead. I'd had plans on visiting Anna and Hailey in their cabin, but by the amount of snow piling around my windows, I figured it would be best to wait.

Instead, I decided to spend some time looking over my mother's journal. I'd read the first few pages, then skipped to the end where I'd learned about the tree and the spirits attached to it. With everything going on since then I hadn't had the time to read the rest, and Edgar's attempt to throw it away had sparked some deep suspicion in me.

Why would he try to get rid of it? He knew how important it would be to me. Was it simply his way of getting back at me for leaving? Or was there more to it?

I hadn't seen him since I'd returned with Grayson, and whether that was because he was steering clear of me or simply because he was too busy with his work with my grandmother, it didn't matter. I didn't want to confront him without reading the journal first.

I flipped to the last passage I'd read before skipping to the end. My mom had filled the pages with entries of spirits she'd help cross over, and some she couldn't. I made a mental note to write down the graves of the ones she wasn't successful with, so that I could avoid them for now. Even though I believed the crooked tree was the key to our curse and my mother's death, I didn't want to entirely stop helping spirits move on.

I read through each passage as the morning waned on, gaining a better perspective on how I could help each spirit. My mother was a pro at it, sussing out what it was that held them back from reaching the other side.

Halfway through I stumbled upon a short passage that had nothing to do with digging up graves. My heart stopped. Quite literally, stopped. My skin went cold, then flushed with so much heat my upper lip became slick with sweat. I had to read the passage a few times as my vision seemed to come and go as I struggled to breathe.

As short as it was, only three paragraphs, it took me nearly fifteen minutes to process what she was saying.

And then the rage, the undeniable rage exploded in my chest.

I ran out of my room, my bare feet pounding against the floor as I made my way to the main foyer. The staff had left for the day, but the manor had been cleaned after the party, so I stood in a spotless foyer, screaming in front of a Christmas tree.

“EDGAR!” My voice echoed throughout the manor, the fury I felt carrying it far and wide. I only had to yell it once, before he appeared before me.

His ocean blue eyes were furrowed, a feigned bored expression on his face as he held his hands behind him.

“I am busy, Miss Willow. What do you need help with?” He asked, his tone sharp. I hadn’t seen him since the vampire attack, and there was an ocean of unsaid things between us, but none of it mattered now. In fact, as I cranked my arm back and threw the journal straight at his chest, I would have wagered none of it would ever matter again.

The journal bounced against his chest before he caught it with one hand. His expression did not change, but I could see his eyes flash when he recognized what he was holding.

“Where did you-” he started but I cut him off.

“You seduced her.” I snapped. His icy blue gaze finally met mine, and I knew with a sinking, disgusted feeling it was all true. “You seduced my mother, just like you seduced me. You knew she mentioned it in the journal, but you waited until I was gone to try and get rid of it.”

“Willow,” he started then faltered. “I did not know what was in this exactly, but I didn’t want to risk hurting you with this information.”

I scoffed, “You’re a disgusting liar. Did you fuck my grandmother too?” I snapped. “Is that what your ‘job’ is here? You service the women of this family?”

“No. Only the flighty ones.” my grandmother’s voice boomed from the top of the stairs. I glanced up to see her in her chair, a bright red silk blanket over her lap.

“I should have known you were in on it,” I growled.

“My dear girl, you will one day learn what it means to be a Rosenbay. To walk hand in hand with death, keeping the wolves at bay. I am not the first to utilize Edgar to our advantage.” She sniffed. Edgar cast his gaze down, rubbing his finger again as if something were there.

“And you just jump for them?” I asked. “You just do what they say?”

“He must,” Grandmother answered.

I glanced between them, then scoffed. “What nonsense.”

My grandmother smirked. “Since you have agreed to stay, it is about time I tell you some of our secrets.” She held up her right hand, tapping a simple silver band on her middle finger. I had never noticed it before, with all the other opulent rings surrounding it.

“This was a gift from the Swamp Witch before things went south with the family. Whoever holds this one on their finger has control of the spirit that holds the twin on their body.”

Edgar remained silent, his eyes cast down. I glanced from him back to her, my body running cold with the realization.

“So you made him seduce your own daughter? Me? That’s sick!”

She rolled her eyes. “I didn’t order him to do any such thing. I did, however, task him with keeping you both here. By any means necessary. It’s not my fault you both chose the harlot’s way.

“Harlot?!” I shouted in disbelief. “My mother was a young, scared woman, and he took advantage of that to worm his way into her heart.” I would know. Looking back, the signs were so clear to me now. He found my weaknesses, figured out where my insecurities lay, and used them to his advantage. It made even more sense how he reacted when I started to pull away. Tasked with keeping me here, he could see me wanting to leave, which meant he was failing.

“My daughter was not an idiot. She knew about the ring, and about his role in this house.” She sniffed in response.

“And that makes it all alright.” I spat. “You are a sick, vile old woman.”

“You will see, one day Willow, how this role changes you.”

I shook my head. “That’s where you are wrong. I don’t mind having my spirit trapped here for an eternity if it means I get to live my life as a decent person.”

“Decent?” She laughed. “You are just as cutthroat, as bloodthirsty and willing to do whatever you want to get to your goal. Your conversation the other day confirmed it.”

I shook my head slowly. “No. I only said those things because you pushed me to them.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night.” She said dismissively. “I am done with this conversation. Come, Edgar. There is no need for you two to work together. She has her wolf for comfort now.”

She left me, gaping up at her. Even after all this time, after finding my voice and standing up to her, she could manage to silence me while making me feel so small. Edgar didn't even look at me. He disappeared, my mother's journal falling to the ground as he left.

I stood there, staring at it in silence for a long while.

Then without warning, I began to laugh. It started off as a soft chuckle, then it bubbled into an uncontrollable cackle that shook my entire body. Tears rolled down my cheeks, but I could not stop.

It was all too insane. Too terrible. All I could do was laugh. So I did, for a decent amount of time, until my chest ached and my face was flush. Until I could barely breathe, and needed to sit down.

I collapsed to the ground, reaching for the journal, and gasping between unhinged laughs. I wanted to break into a thousand pieces, to sink into the cold ground of the graveyard, and stay in my own little world.

For the first time, I had a better understanding of why my mother refused to come out. Everything she'd been put through, all the deceit and lies, all the games and ways they used her, I would hide from the real world too.

But I couldn't. Not when I had Grayson's voice in the back of my head telling me to take control of my life. I took a deep, calming breath, and let the feeling grow inside me.

I would continue to do as I promised. I would go back to the tree when the snow melted, and try to break this curse. But I would be damned if I was going to let the Rosenbay family continue spreading their darkness around the world.

Chapter 37

Hailey kept to her word. She and Anna spent the rest of the week enjoying their time. I took them to restaurants and shows, and occasionally I brought them to the manor for lunch or dinner.

I was no longer concerned with them staying past dark without a crowd of people to hide the spirits. I had decided that in the New Year, I would tell them everything. I needed to be as honest with them as they had been with me, but I also knew deep down I needed people I trusted in the future.

I waited a few days to tell Grayson what I had learned about Edgar and my mother. He was understandably livid, but there wasn't anything he could do but support me. Strangely, out of everyone, I was most upset with Alexa.

She knew but never told me. She had no excuse, no cursed ring that bound her to silence. Alexa had chosen not to say anything about Edgar and my mother, even when she noticed him pulling the same stunt with me. She even lied to my face when she told me grandmother would be upset if she ever found out about Edgar and me.

But I chose not to confront her about it. Not yet. Not until I had time to process it all, in my own way. I was through with

acting without thought. Besides, I figured keeping her wondering when I would bring it up was enough of a punishment for now.

Until that time, I was intent on enjoying spending my days with my friends. Grayson had started work on repairing his cabin, which would take nearly a month at best due to the snow. We discussed him staying in the manor, with his own rooms, until his cabin was finished.

Grandmother gave him rooms below mine. They were smaller than my own but larger than his cabin. I found myself spending more and more time there with him, only returning to my rooms when I needed something. In the days leading up to New Year's Eve, we all found an easy, peaceful rhythm that left me feeling a glimmer of hope for the new year.

So much so that I agreed to a larger New Year's party than my grandmother previously planned. Everyone in the town received an invitation from the house to ring in the new year.

Grandmother even had the back gardens transformed for the events, installing warming tents and an additional dance floor, as well as a firework show to rival any in the past. I didn't care about any of it, but I figured I'd let my grandmother play the role of queen while she could.

I hadn't forgiven nor forgotten anything she or Edgar had done, but I was willing to wait and be patient, biding my time.

I let Alexa dress me for the evening. She picked a champagne-colored dress with tiny pearls stitched at the bottom in a beautiful twisted pattern that twirled up to my

chest. I sat at my vanity, watching her curl and pin my hair up. I caught the way her eyes would flick to meet mine in the mirror, ever so briefly, then turn back to my hair. I had not mentioned Edgar to her, and she hadn't brought him up, but we were both aware of what the other knew.

“You should wear the locket.” She said finally, setting in the last pin. “It will look wonderful with the earrings Grayson got you.”

“Sure,” I said, pulling the necklace and earrings from my drawers.

“Will your friends-” I stood abruptly, cutting her off.

“Excuse me, I need to make sure Grayson has his outfit.” I left without another word, making my way down to his rooms where he was finishing dressing in a black suit. I tried not to dwell on Alexa's betrayal, or the hurt look she had given me while I brushed her off. Space and time - that's what I needed.

“You look amazing,” I said, leaning against his doorway.

“Aren't I supposed to be the one saying that?” He retorted, throwing me a bright smile.

I shrugged. “You still can.”

“Well, you do look amazing, Willow.” Grayson came up to me, gently caressing the side of my face with his warm fingertips. “Though, you are looking a little pale tonight. Should I put some warmth back into those cheeks?” His tone turned to warm honey, wrapping me up in his breathy growl as his other hand slipped under my dress and between my legs.

The moment his finger found my clit I felt my entire body explode with fire. The heat snaked out to my limbs, burning against my cheeks, coiling in my center while he stroked me slowly.

“Grayson,” I gasped but lost my words when his free hand curled around my throat, gently tipping my head back until my neck was exposed to him.

“That’s right, baby,” he nipped at my nape, “Say my name again.”

“Grayson,” I moaned, inching my thighs apart to give him more access. His fingers glided across my clit, diving into my pussy with such fury, such need, I nearly collapsed against him.

I rode his fingers until they were soaking with my juices, dribbling down my thighs as he drove me to the edge. I cried out, feeling the coil of heat in my core explode, shattering me into fragmented pieces.

He planted soft kisses against my neck, and my chest, pulling those pieces back, putting me back together as I caught my breath.

“My makeup up-” I gasped, but he chuckled against my neck.

“You are as beautiful as when you walked in here.” I sank against him, letting him hold me up until I was able to stand.

“If you keep doing that, I might actually die one of these days,” I said, smoothing out my dress and making sure my hair

was in place.

“What? Pleasing you until you can’t walk?” He chuckled.

“Yes.” I took his hand, and together we joined the party. Hailey and Anna were in the ballroom with Alexa and Lucien, who was already a few drinks ahead of everyone else. Wesley had come with his family as well, but they stuck to the dark corners of the ballroom, their eyes ever watchfully on Grayson as he accompanied me.

We took our drinks and stood among our friends, and I tried to enjoy the last night that my friends had before I blew up their world with my revelation. So we drank, and we ate, and when the clocks struck midnight we watched the spectacular firework show from the gardens.

Hailey did not propose to Anna, and I did not question her. I figured she had decided to wait and talk to Anna about the future before deciding to make such a giant leap.

In need of drinks after the show, I sauntered over to a table laden with punch and champagne. Plucking two flutes, I turned to see Wesley behind me. He wore a light gray sweater, the color making his turquoise eyes pop.

He gave me one of his sinful, dimpled smirks, and I had to catch my breath as my pulse quickened at the sight.

“Happy New Year, Cherry,” he said. His eyes raked over me, making my skin burn. “I hope I see more of this Willow this year.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, flushing.

He pinned me with his gaze, making my entire body freeze. “Happy. You look happy.” he closed the space between us, tucking a stray lock of my mahogany hair behind my ear. “Nothing brings me more pleasure than seeing you smile.”

His scent cloaked me like a fog, making my head spin. “Even if it’s the werewolf’s doing. I still crave to see that smile of yours.” He dragged his fingers from my ear, down my cheek, leaving a trail of warmth in their wake.

I screamed at myself to move, to get away from him. Alarms were blaring in my mind, telling me I was in danger. I forced my lips to move, and my throat to work as I said, “Get used to seeing it, then.” I meant it as a jab - that he would have to accept my relationship with Grayson. But somehow, it didn’t sound like that at all.

A slow, sly smirk crawled over his lips. “I’ll count the days until I get to be the one to make you smile like that.” He left me, feeling suddenly cold in his absence as he strode over to where his family waited.

Baron was watching me, his eyes dark despite the smile plastered across his face. I shook my head, trying to dislodge the cobwebs Wesley had left as I made my way back to my group.

I danced with Grayson into the night, then we retired to his rooms. All in all, it was a fine, uneventful evening. That is, until the morning came.

I awoke to find my phone going off. Rolling away from Grayson’s warm embrace, I saw I had several missed calls

from Anna.

My stomach dropped, and I called her back, hoping, praying that this was just some issue with their tickets back home today.

“Willow! Hailey isn’t getting on the flight.” Anna shouted hysterically into the phone.

I groaned, sitting up in bed, trying to rub the sleep and drink from my eyes.

“What do you mean?” I asked, replaying the night back in my mind. Everything had seemed fine, they had both appeared in good spirits before Andrew drove them back to their cabin. They’d left shortly after the fireworks since they had a flight back home in the afternoon.

“We had a fight last night, after the party,” she sobbed, “I found the ring in her bags! I wasn’t snooping, I tried to tell her I was just packing her things, but she wasn’t listening! Then I asked why she didn’t propose last night - it would have been the perfect time!”

“I know, I know Anna, but what does-” she groaned, cutting me off.

“She told me she wasn’t sure if she wanted to ask me! So I told her she had to make a choice, right then and there - ask me or break up with me.”

I shut my eyes, taking a deep breath. I could only imagine what happened then. Hailey didn’t like ultimatums, or being told what to do.

“She said she was going to stay here, that she needed time to think, and she left. She just left Willow. I don’t know where she went, and she won’t answer my calls. Did she go back there?”

I glanced back at my phone, not seeing any messages or calls from Hailey. “I don’t think so. Someone would have told me if she came by. I am sure she just went into town to get some space, Anna.”

I stood up, trying to be as quiet as possible as I moved away from Grayson’s bed and up to my own room.

“She left all her stuff here! Where would she stay? Where would she go?” Anna was on the verge of hysterics, and I couldn’t blame her. Hailey could be stubborn and pig headed, but she would never just leave Anna in the dark like that to worry.

“Alright, let me get dressed and I will come down there. I am sure we will find her in town, probably in some hip coffee shop that is open all day.” It wouldn’t be the first time Hailey had sought out solace in a twenty-four hour coffee shop with free internet.

“Oh, thank you, Willow! I just have this terrible feeling something happened.”

I slipped into my room, telling her everything would be fine, when I noticed Alexa and Hailey standing in front of the TV. Hailey looked confused, her arms wrapped around her chest as she glanced around my room like she’d never seen it before.

Alexa's face was a mask of calm, but I could see in her eyes something was going on. My heart nearly fell out of my throat. Did Hailey come here and end up having a one-night stand with Alexa? By both their faces, I assumed that's what happened.

"Willow?" Anna called through the phone. I'd forgotten I was still on with her.

"Oh, Anna, it looks like she actually did come here. She's in my room right now." Alexa shot me a strange look, but I continued talking. "Yes, she's alright. Let me speak with her and I will call you back."

I hung up, giving them both a reproachful look. "This better not be what I think it is," I said, glaring at them.

"Why am I here?" Hailey asked, her voice so small and quiet it disarmed me. I faltered, looking between them.

"I was just about to ask you the same thing," I said, slowly approaching them.

"I remember going to the cabin, after the fireworks." She said, looking off into the distance.

Alexa moved to my side, her motions careful. I froze, fear seizing my limbs. Why was she being so careful, and why couldn't Hailey remember how she got here?

"You and Anna had a fight." I reminded her. "Anna said you left, but hasn't heard from you."

She knotted her brows. "That doesn't sound like me. Even if I was mad, I would tell her where I was." Hailey turned her

head to me, her eyes locking on me for the first time since I'd come into the room. "How did I end up outside, in the snow?"

I glanced over to Alexa, who nodded. "I found her wandering outside, in the gardens."

"Willow." Hailey's voice broke. "I can't feel the cold. I can't feel...anything."

"No." I whispered, horrified, but Alexa only gave me a slight nod, her eyes sad as I realized the truth. Hailey had died on the property in the night, and now her soul, trapped until the curse broke, was standing before me.



About the Author

CM Tillman is a lover of all things Zelda, books, and 90s anime. She can be found running book ideas by her Siberian Husky and two cats, while binge watching reality dating shows.

Her Instagram and Tik Tok handles are [c.mtillman](#)

Also by CM Tillman



Deal with the Demon

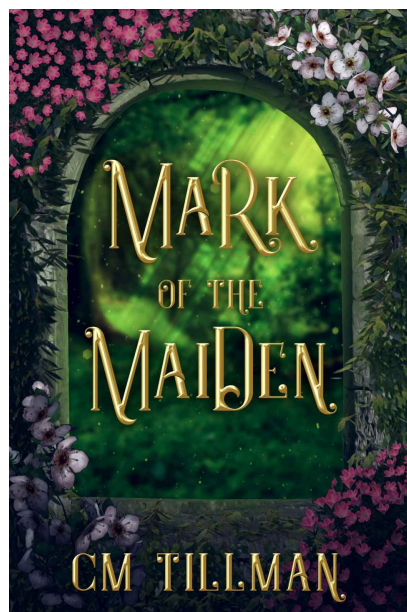
Since fleeing their home world centuries ago to avoid the rising Demon empire, the Blackwoods have been living among humans in a magicless world. Sage dreams of the day she will become the head of her family as the Blackwood Maiden and repair what the current Maiden, her mother, has broken with the help of her best friend Minx, the Orefell Maiden.

When the ceremony doesn't go as planned and Sage is viciously attacked by a Demon, she is forced to flee into the world she had thought to be lost to them forever. To make

matters worse, half of her soul was bound to the Demon, Kade, during the botched ritual.

As much as Kade would love to finish the job, their souls are now bound to each other, in life and death. Sage is only just learning her newfound powers, and she needs the help of another Maiden to break the bonds that shackle her to the Demon. But the only other living Maiden is Minx, and she is stuck back in the magicless world Sage came from.

Against her better judgement, Sage must now partner with the aggravating Demon to find a way back home, before her soul is lost forever.



Mark of the Maiden

Sage Blackwood is finally back in her own world after fighting her way through Demons and human alike. But her homecoming is short lived- she and her best friend Minx must return to Neviah, and find the Demon Prince, Kade. He is the

only one who can help them learn magic, so she can reclaim the part of her soul he tore from her.

But Neviah has become even more dangerous since she left. The Hands now know a Maiden still lives, and is on the hunt for her. The Demons want to claim her power and use it to free their trapped King.

Sage will have to trust the very Demon who stole her soul even more now, and find allies to help them in their quest to mend what he broke.

But a strange new girl appears and Sage is tasked with a new quest.

Find the other Maidens, once thought to be dead.