

LAUREN CONNOLLY



WINNING

OVER A

WOODWITCH

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FOLK HAVEN

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## WINNING OVER A WOOD WITCH

**Blossom agrees to take part in an annual pumpkin-themed competition. She does *not* agree to play nice against a handsome, infuriating werewolf.**

Blossom left the small, magical town of Folk Haven to prove to herself and her family that a wood witch could live out in the human world on her own. But she's drawn back to her childhood home during the autumn season, which puts her entirely too close to the werewolf who has taunted and teased her for years.

Manny has loved Blossom since they were teenagers, but he pushed her away. That was the worst mistake of his life. Now the witch is back in town competing against him in the Pumpkin Wars. This could be his chance to win not only the crown, but also her heart...

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## **CONTENT WARNINGS**

*This book contains scenes with jumps off of dangerous heights, biting, bondage, and discussions of parental death.*





## BLOSSOM

WEDDINGS ARE A TIME FOR JOY, celebration, and resisting the urge to throw an elbow into the gut of the man standing too close to me.

*Ignore him. If he knows how much he's unsettling me, that'll only make him happier.*

To distract myself from the looming presence at my back, I stay focused on my sister and her beautiful mate-to-be as they exchange vows. Heather is a lacy masterpiece in a formfitting dress that flows into an elegant train and pools around her feet. The ivory fabric is a similar tone to her creamy skin. Light-brown hair—the same shade as mine—falls halfway down her back, the gentle waves stirring in the early fall breeze. Forget wood witch. She looks like a nature goddess with the flowers weaved into her strands. Helps that we're all standing under two towering oaks for this handfasting.

“Jenny,” my sister says with a watery hitch to her voice, “I was never sure fated mates existed. But then I met you.”

Standing behind Heather, I can't see my sister's expression. But if it's anything like Jenny's, her face wears wonder and love and a touch of tears.

Everyone is getting misty-eyed. Jenny's parents sit next to my father in the front row, and the three pass tissues to each other. The small gathering of family and close friends fills a handful of benches in this forest beside Lake Galen, and I hear sighs and sniffles from the group.

My heart swells along with them—and then my errant brain wonders if *he's* crying.

*Don't look. If you look, he'll know you're thinking about him. Best to never acknowledge his existence.*

“Have you rings to exchange?” Selena, leader of the ceremony and head of the Folk Haven witch coven, asks the two women.

Heather slips her manicured hand into a pocket—because of course she would insist her wedding dress be equally breathtaking and practical—and pulls out a rose-gold band. The metal looks warm as it settles against Jenny's bronze skin. In return, the human presents my witchy sister with a silver band that cradles an emerald, the shade of the stone darker than the sage green Heather requested my dress be. I smooth my hands over the velvety fabric of my skirt before fiddling with my own ring.

The delicate piece of jewelry I wear isn't from a mating or human marriage, but instead was a gift from my father the day I left for college. The circlet is simple, without any stones, but beautiful with its intertwining tree and root design.

*To remember where home is,* his note said.

I had known my family wasn't overjoyed about me going to school hours away. But back then, I needed space. Papa and Heather had gotten into the habit of babying me and never seemed to grow out of it. I wanted to prove to myself I could survive on my own.

And I did.

Now, I've come back to Folk Haven. Sort of.

A year ago, I accepted a position as a faculty member at Ramla University, which sits a half hour south of my hometown. But I decided not to live in Folk Haven. Instead, I rent an apartment in Athens, Georgia. A slightly longer commute, but it's the space I need to maintain my independence. To show that despite being the coddled younger daughter, I'm not a child anymore.

No matter what some people might think.

*Don't look at him.*

I do my best to focus on the ceremony. The happiest moment of my sister's life. The joining of her with the amazing woman she loves. Our family growing by one as I gain a sister-in-law who is perfect for Heather.

Just as the coven leader drapes a light-green ribbon—the color matching my outfit and the floral arrangements—around the couple's wrists, I feel a brush against my back.

A slight tug.

And that's when I recall this beautiful dress Heather picked out for me, an outfit I loved the moment I slipped it on, is held up by two bows. One around my neck and one around my lower back.

And the latter is currently being tugged on.

*He wouldn't.*

Logically, I know the man behind me loves my sister like his own. They've been best friends since she found him sulking in Papa's apple orchard a week after moving to our magical town. She asked him to stand up here as the only other member of her bridal party. He wouldn't do anything to ruin her special day.

But another part of my brain panics.

*If that bow comes undone, I'll look ridiculous. He won't be able to resist himself.*

Trying not to draw attention to myself, I hold Heather's bouquet with one hand and reach behind me with the other,

seeking out the bow on my lower back. My touch brushes warm, rough fingers.

I grab them in a death grip and dig my manicured nails into the sensitive skin of his palm, wishing I'd gotten stiletto acrylics so I could do some real damage. Still, there's the softest grunt behind me, and he lets go of my dress.

But I don't trust him, so I keep his roaming fingers in mine as Selena calls for the blessing of The Dark One—the witch goddess we all pray to.

Luckily, Jenny comes from an open-minded family. She and her human parents accepted the knowledge that witches were real with excited curiosity rather than fear and disdain.

“Under her dark eyes,” the coven leader intones, “I declare you two mated.”

Heather whoops before lunging forward to wrap her non-ribbon-tied arm around Jenny's neck to drag the blushing woman in for a heated kiss.

In the joy of the moment, I briefly forget the nuisance at my back and cheer with the rest of the crowd. Heather and Jenny break apart and hold their bound hands up for all to see as the clapping and celebrating continue. On the other side of the forest clearing waits a cluster of tables full of food, a live band, and a dance floor. Time for the fun to begin.

Heather's cheeks might rupture from how wide she's grinning when her eyes meet mine.

*I love you*, I mouth, once again overwhelmed with happiness that she's found her life partner.

She blows me a kiss. Then, her gaze flits up and over my shoulder, and she sends another kiss through the air to the man at my back.

The one whose wandering hand I'm still clutching.

I drop it fast and whirl on him, allowing my fury forward now that the quiet part of the ceremony is over.

Much to my annoyance, I have to lift my chin to meet a set of slate-gray eyes. A stare that always seems hungry.

The eyes belong to Manuel Ramirez. Werewolf, Heather's best friend, and my nemesis.

"I'm about to rip your twig and berries off and feed them to you," I snarl, low enough so only he hears.

Manny tilts his head, smiling slow, the leisurely action pairing entirely too well with his crisp white shirt, dark dress pants, and ivy-patterned suspenders. His brown hair is neatly combed back from his tan face, showing off a strong jaw and dangerous cheekbones. He is all Southern gentleman in appearance and all Southern devil at heart.

And even after years of his subtle tormenting, my body still tingles, just standing near him. If only annoyance could eradicate attraction.

"You had a bee. On your back. Landed on that pretty little bow. I was protecting you, Blossom."

The way he says my name, practically purring the word, should not be allowed. He says *Blossom* like the flowery moniker is an endearment rather than what's printed on my birth certificate.

Product of having a wood witch father. Root Fernmore loves plants as names.

*Couldn't have given me something slightly more mainstream though, could he?*

"I didn't feel a bee," I snap. "What I felt was a handsy werewolf trying to untie my dress in the middle of my sister's mating." With a jerk, I wave toward the crowd that's rising from their seats to meander over to the party area.

Manny's brow dips. "I'm not about to strip you in front of an audience." A smirk pulls at his mouth. "I prefer some privacy for that." Then, he leans down, mouth next to my ear, warm breath teasing the short brown curls I've neatly arranged. "Maybe you should try to be less tempting to dangerous things. How's a bee meant to ignore a flower that smells so good?"

Heat flushes through my body.

*What is this? What is happening?*

It's almost like Manny is flirting with me. But that is impossible because we hate each other.

We have for years.

This must be some new kind of mind game. I refuse to fall for it.

I turn until my mouth is inches from his. "Maybe I want to tempt dangerous things." I watch his nostrils flare. "It's the best way to lay a trap."

Then, I twist my hand in a practiced gesture, tugging on my magic—the strands of power that constantly thrum just under my skin—and I wait a second in relish.

Only to watch as Manny whips his hand up in time to catch the shiny red apple hurtling through the air toward his dense head. He straightens and palms the fruit projectile I commanded a tree to chuck at him with a little mystical urging.

The wolf grins. "My reflexes have improved since high school, *Bud*." He emphasizes the annoying nickname he granted me years ago with a large, taunting bite of the crimson flesh.

I long for our younger days where he never saw the apples coming and I got to watch them nail him, the impact resulting in an explosion of juicy mush.

"Have they?"

I ram my fist into his gut, then whirl on my heel, sauntering away with the lovely sound of him wheezing blending perfectly with the opening strains of the wedding band.

I should've known Manny would expect the apple attack. It was my go-to revenge when we were teenagers anytime he would taunt me. I'll have to think of new methods to knock that smirk off his face. Because I can count on one thing: I'll never escape Manny Ramirez.

Not as long as he and Heather are best friends.

And the only thing the wolf loves as much as my sister is making me furious.



## MANNY

GETTING a fist to the gut shouldn't leave me hard, but that's what Blossom Fernmore does to me. To be fair, I deserved it.

There was no bee.

What there was, was a witch who smelled like warm apples and cloves, draped in soft fabric, with two tempting bows inches from my fingers.

I wasn't *actually* going to untie them.

I just wanted to feel the knots. Make sure they were sturdy.

Then store the sensation of my grip on them for later tonight when I'm in my bed and I take myself in my hand with fantasies where the sassy-mouthed wood witch lets me unravel her in all ways.

*Keep it in your pants.*

During my best friend's beautiful wedding reception, I should be focused on celebrating the happy occasion and not on how much I want to fuck her sister.



Although Heather would probably find my pining and failed attempts at flirting hilarious. She knows about my infatuation with Blossom. Two years ago, after Heather told me her sister moved in with a new boyfriend—some human asshole named Teddy—I got roaring drunk. My friend hauled my wasted ass home from Local Brew—the town’s werewolf-owned bar—and on the car ride, I confessed my yearslong obsession with her baby sister.

The next morning, once I was sober, Heather told me she wouldn’t mind if Blossom and I ended up together. Only she doubted it would happen since I’d spent a good portion of my life making the little wood witch hate me.

Not the best pep talk despite the fact that Heather was only speaking the truth.

During our teenage years, I had done exactly as she said. Tried my hardest to make Blossom think I was a prick so she’d keep her distance. It was a form of self-preservation.

At least, that was what I had convinced myself of at the time.

When I have my arousal under control, I join the rest of the wedding party. The gathering is small but lively. Everyone invited to this ceremony knows about magic and the mythical creatures who live in Folk Haven. When Jenny moved to our small town for an engineering position at the Folk Haven Dam three years ago, she wasn’t aware mythics existed. But then things got serious with Heather, and the witch decided to share the truth. Luckily, everything went smoothly.

My eyes catch on a flash of green velvet, and I wonder what words I could say to Blossom to untangle the mess I’ve made of our relationship over the years.

*I need more time around her. She’s always leaving before I can get my brain to work right.*

“Manny!” There’s a hand on my wrist, and I turn to find the smiling face of my best friend.

“Heather!” I shout back, then scoop her up in a twirling hug, which only works because she’s no longer tied to Jenny.

“You did it! You tricked someone into mating you!”

She laughs, and when I put her down, she punches me in the shoulder, but it’s only a playful tap compared to her sister’s sledgehammer.

I feel a spark of pride at how well Blossom walloped me. I’m the one who taught her how to swing a good right hook in the first place. She only agreed to learn when I offered to be the one she practiced on.

“Dance with me.”

The bride tugs me onto the temporary wood platform next to the band, and I lead her in a dramatic waltz to a lively country song. Heather hasn’t stopped grinning since the ribbon was wrapped around her wrist, and the sight is as satisfying as a chilled glass of sweet tea on a hot day.

“You’re happy?” I ask, my tone taking on a rare note of seriousness.

She nods hard, her green eyes sparkling. “So much that I think I might explode.”

“Let me know when that’s gonna happen. I’ll lay out tarps.”

Heather chuckles and pulls me closer, just as I spy a mischievous light in her gaze. “I want you to feel this way,” she says.

I smirk. “Sorry, not into the polyamorous thing. You and Jenny are on your own.”

She keeps on wearing her *I’ve got a secret* smile. “Oh, no, Manny. Jenny and I wouldn’t make you feel like this. I know that. But I know who would.”

Suddenly, I find it hard to swallow.

*She can’t mean ...*

“Things are in motion,” the wood witch sings, and I watch as the tiny buds weaved into her hair begin to flower, her joyful magic spilling into them. “You just need to go with it.” Heather pulls back to hit me with an intense stare, eagerness

and concern warring in her eyes. “This might be your one shot. Don’t mess it up.”

“My shot at what?” I rasp. “What are you talking about?”

But Heather doesn’t answer me, only takes the lead and whirls us to the edge of the dance floor, her concentration coming to rest over my shoulder. “Papa! I’m mated!”

As Heather’s arms slip from my shoulders, I turn to meet the steady gaze of Root Fernmore. He’s a short white man with ruddy cheeks, thinning brown hair, and an easy smile.

After my parents died in a hunting accident—two werewolves mistaken for real wolves, lurking near livestock—I had to move from New Mexico to this small Georgia town and live with my uncle. My father’s brother was not a caregiver and had no idea what to do with an angry, heartbroken ten-year-old boy. When Heather found me wandering alone, she dragged me home with her and told her father I needed some apple pie. Root took one look at me, then slipped his apron on and started baking. That first bite was the first time I felt something other than devastation since I’d learned about my parents’ deaths.

Heather forced me back into the world of the living.

Root comforted and supported me as I grew.

Blossom ...

Blossom tormented me with her mere existence.

Now, she stands next to her father, looking like a fantasy in her green gown. The little witch also looks ready to sneak off, but Heather is too quick, looping her arm through Blossom’s to keep her in place.

“I’m mated! Blossom, are you aware that I’m *mated*?” Heather holds up her hand, showing off the rock she now sports.

“New rule,” Blossom deadpans. “Every time you say *mated*, you have to take a shot.”

I snort, and the younger witch throws me a glare.

“Fine.” Heather lets her hand fall, but her grin stays firmly in place. “I won’t say the M-word anymore. I don’t want to be hungover on the first day of my honeymoon. Not the best way to start off my mating.”

“Mating. You said it. That counts.” Blossom scoops up a glass of champagne. “Don’t have a shot on me, so you’ve got to chug this.”

And Heather—wild witch that she is—does as her sister demanded, letting out a burp when the bubbly is gone.

“You are the embodiment of grace,” Root says, smiling at his two daughters. “We’re going to miss you. You’ve never left for this long.”

Heather and Jenny are departing soon to spend a whole month in Europe, country-hopping and sightseeing.

I agree with Root. I’m going to miss my best friend.

The bride’s expression softens, but then I spot the spark of mischief again. “I’ll miss you too. But we’ll send pictures every day. And I expect a play-by-play of how Blossom does as Pumpkin Princess.”

The witch in green stills at her sister’s words, and my heart stutters.

*Blossom is going to be the Pumpkin Princess this year? She’s competing in the Pumpkin Wars?*

The silly-sounding event was invented years ago by Root. The wood witch owns the most popular pumpkin patch in Folk Haven, and when Heather and I became friends, he decided to ring in the season by setting up a series of games for us to play against each other. Apparently, it was an attempt to burn off some of our endless kid energy.

He called it the Pumpkin Wars with Heather as Pumpkin Princess and me as Pumpkin Prince. Whoever won was the Pumpkin Queen or Pumpkin King for the year.

What started as a silly activity has grown into a full-blown, widely attended event in the Folk Haven mythical creature community. Mainly witches and wolves show up—the former

rooting for Heather, the latter cheering for me. I didn't consider how Heather's honeymoon would have her gone for this year's event. Root always holds the Pumpkin Wars the last weekend in September to mark the opening of his pumpkin patch for customers.

Blossom has never competed.

As far as I know, she's never asked to. Root always gave his younger daughter special duties for the competition, but it was only ever just Heather and me battling it out.

"What?" Blossom croaks the question.

"You didn't tell her, Papa?" Heather asks, blinking her long-lashed eyes innocently.

Root wears his normal, pleasant, relaxed expression that gives nothing away. "Not yet."

"I can't." The youngest Fernmore shakes her head so hard that some of the flowers in her hair fall out. "I-I don't live here. And everyone is expecting *you*."

Heather scoffs. "It's only one weekend. And they don't care who the princess is. Everyone is expecting a fun time. A good show. Witch versus wolf." Heather clutches her sister's wrist and lets her gaze go soft and pleading. "Come on. You have to do it. The Pumpkin Wars is one of Papa's best business days. You want the patch to do well, don't you?"

I press my knuckles against my lips to hide a smirk. Heather will do anything to win, and that means playing on her sister's hidden heartstrings.

Blossom throws a wide-eyed glance her father's way, but the wood witch merely offers a gentle smile.

"Could really use your help this year, Blossom. If it's not too much trouble. Don't want your sister feeling bad when she and Jenny are away."

Oh gods, the guilt trip is piling on from both sides, and I love it.

Because I'll take anything that requires Blossom to interact with me.

My friend's words from the dance floor replay in my head. *"Things are in motion. You just need to go with it. This might be your one shot."*

Is this what Heather meant?

The witch bride meets my eyes and gives the subtlest of nods.

I scoop up the gauntlet but take a different tactic. "Guys, don't pressure her." I keep my voice smooth, as if I don't care about the outcome of this conversation. "If Blossom doesn't want to embarrass herself in front of half the town by losing to me, then that's understandable. We can figure something else out."

The scowl she throws my way could peel bark off a tree.

"I'm in," she snaps.

*Success.*

The younger witch mutters something about getting food and slips away from our group, and soon after, Heather sprints off to her mate's side. For the rest of the evening, I enjoy the festivities, keeping my distance from Blossom so I don't accidentally ruin my turn of good luck.

But she's always in my eyeline.

When I spy the little wood witch kissing her sister on the cheek, then grabbing her purse, I make my move.

A candlelit path leads through the trees, guiding partygoers back to the field, where a shuttle is running periodically to take tipsy guests back to town. Blossom is deep into the forest when I catch up to her.

"Aren't you going to say good-bye?"

At the sound of my voice, she whirls around, frowning deep at the sight of me. I'd rather have her lovely smile and some heated eyes, but I'll take this over cold indifference, which is what Blossom tries to affect around me most times.

"It's been twelve years," she spits. "When are you going to let this go?"

*Absolutely fucking never.*

“Hmm. Sounds like someone wants to go back on their word. I mean, if that’s how you choose to live your life, Bud.”

I swear she growls, and the noise does things to my gut.

Still, Blossom doesn’t move to fulfill the bargain she made with me back when we were teenagers. The bet she was so cocky about.

An important thing to know about the Fernmore sisters is that they are both extremely competitive. Heather had been on a three-year Pumpkin Wars winning streak. A Pumpkin Queen unwilling to give up her reign. And Blossom loved poking me about it. Trying to get a rise out of the wolf, not knowing that simply being near her and that delectable scent of hers put me on constant edge. Young Blossom made a remark about how excited she was to watch me lose for the fourth year in a row, and I couldn’t help myself.

I dared her to place a bet.

She scoffed with all the cocky confidence of a fifteen-year-old who thought her older sister was the coolest person on the planet and unable to fail at anything.

“Fine,” Blossom said, her smirk taking on an evil twist that made me want to drag her against my body and tongue her lips. “If Heather wins, you have to lend me your car whenever I want.”

“You’re fifteen,” I pointed out. “I’m not breaking the law for you.” False. I would have broken tons of laws for her if it meant Blossom kept paying attention to me.

The sassy little witch rolled her eyes. “Obviously, I mean when I get my license.”

I loved my Jeep.

But I loved Blossom Fernmore more.

Also, I had no intention of losing.

“Sure,” I said with a shrug, enjoying her glaring response to the unconcerned note in my voice. “If Heather wins, you

can borrow my Jeep whenever you want *after* you get your license. But ...” I dragged out the statement, partly to watch her mossy-green eyes narrow, but also to give myself time to think of the perfect prize to request.

One that straddled the line. That would give me a taste of her, but wasn't too much to have her running. One that was disguised as torture when, really, it was a desperate plea for her to want me back.

Inspiration struck, and I pasted on a mocking grin. “If I win, every time we part ways, you have to kiss my cheek and say, ‘Good-bye, darling. I’ll miss you.’”

The way the wood witch gaped at me was glorious. Before she could outright refuse, I offered another insolent shrug.

“Stakes too high for you?” I asked. “I’ll have to let Heather know how little faith you have in her.”

“It’s a deal,” sweet little Blossom snarled.

That was the first year I gave the games my one hundred percent. And when the pumpkin crown sat on my head, my eyes sought out Blossom, who stood on the sidelines, scowling. Because I was an eighteen-year-old asshole, I made sure to tap my cheek as a reminder.

And true to her word, for twelve years, Blossom has given me the good-bye I asked for.

Though never with the sweet intent the words alone might convey. She tends to wrap her fingers around my throat in a subtle threat as her soft lips barely graze my cheek.

“Good-bye, darling.” She likes to hiss the words. “I’ll miss you.”

Sometimes, she’ll lick my cheek after the kiss. Or give me a wet willy. Or pinch my side. Or yank my hair.

Every little attack coaxes my wolf to the surface in a way I doubt she intends.

And I always make sure to keep track of when she’s visiting town. I’ve sprinted across Folk Haven to make it to her dad’s place in time to claim her good-bye. It’s a rush to



drive up and see Blossom stepping off the porch, keys in hand, ready to leave, and a scowl on her face when she spots my approach, knowing what she has to do.

And despite the thrumming anticipation of her mock affection, I always have the urge to point out the obvious.

*You wouldn't have to do this if you just stayed.*

“I want to make a bet.” Blossom’s tart voice brings me back to the present moment and her current scowl, perfectly reflecting all the ones she’s given me in the past.

“So confident you’ll win?” I saunter closer, looming over her, even as I bend at the waist to put my cheek in range of her lips.

A subtle reminder she can’t leave just yet.

“You’ve never competed against *me* before.” Her finger jabs my chest. “And if I win, this is over. No more good-bye ritual.”

*Never feel her lips on me again?* My wolf wants to howl in denial.

But I’ve been competing in the Pumpkin Wars for years. There’s no way Blossom will beat me.

Which means this is an opportunity to get another boon from her. To draw her closer.

Closer. That’s what I want. Not these random visits.

“Fine. And if I win, you have to move back to Folk Haven.”

Blossom’s mouth pops open, putting her pretty pink tongue on display. By The Clawed One, I want to suck on that tongue.

She clicks her mouth shut, as if hearing my thoughts. “Ridiculous. You hate me! Why would you want me around more?”

Frustration shoves all of the teasing out of my brain. “Why do you think I hate you?”

She sputters, waving her hands, as if the evidence were floating in the air around us, “Because you do. You always have!”

I grunt, dipping my chin to my chest to hide the sudden anger in my eyes. I’m not pissed at Blossom. I’m furious with myself. Of course she sees me as the enemy. That’s how I acted when we were younger. The only way my adolescent brain knew how to keep distance between us.

But I’m grown now, and I’m done repeating the mistakes of my past.

I’m done driving Blossom away. I need to repair the damage I’ve done so I can woo her. And the only way I can do that is if she stays put in Folk Haven for longer than a few hours.

“That’s the deal.” I meet her bewildered stare. “Take it or leave it.”

She studies me, her expression shut down so I have no idea what thoughts flick behind those glittering eyes.

“Fine,” she snaps. “I’ll take it.”

Blossom steps forward, into my space, and I tilt my head and brace for the teasing torture that is her parting peck.

But then a set of cool, strong hands cup my cheeks and turn me to face her. I only have a moment to suck in a breath before her mouth smashes against mine.

The witch tastes like apples and spices, and I groan in hunger, wanting to devour her. But just as my arms reach to gather her close, there’s a sharp sting against my lip and an unexpected force shoving me away from delicious perfection. I stumble back a step, one hand going to my mouth, one hand reaching for her.

But Blossom is already out of my reach, a triumphant grin on her red-stained lips.

Blood transfers from my mouth to my fingertips.

*She bit me.*

“Good-bye, darling. I’ll miss you.” She sings the words, a taunt beneath them.

Then, she’s gone, disappearing into the woods.

And I know there’s no way I’m ever letting her leave me again.



## BLOSSOM

“WELCOME to the twentieth annual Pumpkin Wars! Where two combatants battle for the coveted pumpkin crown. Witch versus wolf. Who will win?” Root Fernmore, normally a quiet man, always finds the voice of a circus ringmaster on these weekends.

In response to my papa’s intro, the crowd gathered in his pumpkin patch roars their predictions. There are shouts of, “Witch!” and, “Wolf!” and, “Where’s the pumpkin pie?”

That last one came from Owen MacNamara. The selkie grins as he holds a mug of spiked cider, steam rising into the slight chill of the sunny autumn day. From his silly comment, one might guess he has no stake in these games. But the seal shifter owns Clean Haven, the local recycling company Manny works for.

Which means he’s on the side of the enemy.

I gaze out over the collection of attendees, a number that has shot up over the years.

The first time my dad arranged this, I think it was to distract Heather from her melancholy. It was right around this time of year that our mother had left. I was barely two when she disappeared from our lives, so I don't remember her. But Heather was five and had formed a connection with the woman who decided a magical small-town life and motherhood weren't for her. Cornelia Fulmer didn't completely disappear on us. She's head of a law firm in Boston, and she responds to texts and calls if we make them.

I don't. Papa is the only parent I've ever needed. The man is creative and loving. Hence the pumpkin-themed tournament he set up for my sister and her best friend.

An event that has become an annual tradition in Folk Haven. Attendance is only open to mythics and mythic mates due to the magic sometimes utilized, and the crowd largely consists of witches and werewolves. When the coven and the pack caught wind of the playful battle years ago, spectators started to show up and cheer for Heather and Manny.

Over the years, I kept score, cheered for my sister, ate delicious fall treats, and tried not to let on how much I longed to join the games.

This year, I get my childhood wish.

But I'm not sure I want it anymore. Especially when competing means being within close proximity to a certain werewolf all weekend.

"Seems we have support for both sides!" My dad grins wide at the crowd. "And I'm glad to announce we have a special treat this year. Because Heather is away on her honeymoon, my equally talented youngest daughter, Blossom, has offered to take her sister's place and battle the veteran contender and last year's victor, Manny Ramirez. I present to you your Pumpkin Princess and Pumpkin Prince!"

*Goddess save me from theatrical fathers.* I silently send the comment to The Dark One as I step forward.

As corny as all this is, I've decided I'm going to embrace the festivities as fully as Heather does every year. In that vein,

I'm dressed in neon-orange leggings and matching sneakers, paired with a pumpkin-patterned sports bra. Luckily, there's padding so no one can see how the cool air is making my nipples into icy points.

I spread my arms and accept the wild cheers from the gathered witches. Meanwhile, Manny is dressed in all black, and he grins toward the howling pack members here to support him.

*Cocky asshole.* I can't wait to rub a win in his face.

"The first test is one of the mind," Papa calls out when the crowd settles. "Bring forth the mega gourd!"

Behind my father, I spy a figure moving through the pumpkin patch. The creature looks massive and ungainly, but as they near, I realize it's only a man carrying a pumpkin.

A very large pumpkin.

"Here you go." My dad passes me and Manny each a small whiteboard and marker. "Whoever guesses the closest to the pumpkin's weight, without going over, wins the first round," he explains loud enough for the gathering to hear.

Suddenly, there's a roar of noise from the crowd as everyone starts shouting out numbers. None of it is helpful, seeing as how their guesses vary so widely, and I don't know if the witches are calling out to help me or to hinder Manny.

So, I let the clamoring fade to white noise and study the gigantic vegetable.

This isn't a new challenge. Dad has twenty or so he cycles through, using a different combo for each year. Some are brainteasers, some are physical, some are both. There also tends to be an artist challenge and maybe a food thing. But we can all count on the fact that every challenge will be fall-themed. The autumn equinox might have been last week, but this is how my family truly welcomes in the new season.

I see now that the pumpkin carrier is Heath, a local bear shifter and co-owner of Coffee & Claws. The bear is a baker and has a contract with Papa for local produce. I wonder if that

signed agreement includes a special clause, stating, *Must carry very large pumpkin for seasonal festivals.*

Admittedly, there aren't many others in town who could haul that thing around on their own. Dad must have worked some spells on that gourd to get it to grow to the gigantic size.

He puts more and more planning into these games each year.

And that—even more than the urge to defeat Manny—is why I agreed to be Pumpkin Princess.

As much as I'm proud of how I've done out in the world on my own, more and more, I realize the extent to which I miss my sister and my father. Being apart for weeks at a time has given me time to remember all the things I love about them both. The way Heather laughs with her whole heart and hugs me like she'll never let go. The way Papa always makes time for me and smiles as if I bring him nothing but joy.

When I was younger, their love felt stifling. Like a too-tight life jacket when I wanted to swim unencumbered.

But now that I'm free to float on my own, I long to enfold myself in their caring orbit again.

And if being here means I get to defeat an annoying, *too handsome for his own good* werewolf, then that's just a sweet bonus.

“Write down your guesses. Reveal your answers in ten seconds.”

Papa begins a dramatic countdown, and the crowd joins him. Meanwhile, I concentrate on the height and width of the pumpkin while also taking in the strain of Heath's biceps.

Confident with my answer, I write out my guess.

*510.*

Manny is the type to write 501, in hopes that I'd choose a whole number. But he knows that *I* know he would do that, so I bet he expects me to write 502 or 505.

I figure 510 is safe.

“Time’s up! Show us your boards!”

I hold mine aloft and glance over to see the werewolf’s guess.

403.

I snort. Knew it. Only I’m sure he’s wildly underestimated.

Then, Heath sets the pumpkin down on a scale, and half the crowd groans when the number pops up on the digital display.

“Five hundred six pounds!” Papa roars, throwing me an apologetic smile.

It’s all I can do not to snap my whiteboard in half. When I see the triumphant grin on Manny’s face, I can’t help twisting my hand in the well-used gesture to tug on my magic.

And as if sensing my intent, the wolf’s hand flies up in time to catch the apple hurtling toward his head.

The arrogant asshole sinks his teeth into the crimson flesh as he saunters my way.

And I recall how I dug my own teeth into his lip only a week ago. Manny’s blood should have tasted metallic, but instead, it was full-bodied, like an expensive, dry red wine. I licked the droplets with relish and wanted more.

Then, I reminded myself that I was a witch, not a bloodthirsty beast, and admitting I liked anything about this wolf would only lead to disaster and mockery.

“If it had been closest guess, I would’ve had it,” I snarl at him.

“But it wasn’t.” Manny holds the half-eaten apple out to me, as if I might want a bite. As if I might be tempted to put my mouth where his just was.

I *am* tempted, but he doesn’t need to know that.

“The next challenge starts in a half hour in the east field,” my dad calls out. Then, he throws Manny and me an eager grin before trotting off.



“Hear that?” I cross my arms over my chest and glare up at the aggravatingly attractive werewolf. “You have a whole thirty minutes to pretend like you’re smarter than me.”

Manny slips closer without seeming to move his feet. “Hmm,” he rumbles deep in his throat. “Then, what?”

“Then,” I hiss, pressing up on my toes to shove my face into his, “I will destroy you.”

Instead of being cowed by my very frightening threat, Manny keeps on smirking. The expression only fades when his stare drops to my mouth, then lower to my heaving chest.

*Wait, why is my chest heaving?*

“You get so worked up,” he mutters, his slate eyes finding mine again. “It’s adorable.”

“Adorable?” I grit my teeth when he goes to take another bite of the apple.

I can’t handle seeing his perfect white teeth dig into that crisp skin again. Can’t watch the sweet juice coat his lips. Can’t listen to the pleased hum he makes after every taste.

I snatch the fruit out of his grasp and wing it into the pumpkin patch, watching the Red Delicious soar an impressive distance.

*Maybe apple chucking will be one of the challenges. Looks like I’d dominate.*

“I wasn’t done with that,” Manny says, his expression disgruntled.

“Good.” Now, I’m the one smirking, enjoying seeing the grown man pout about his lost snack.

No need to dwell on my level of maturity. I will be an adult come Monday, when I have to go back to work as a college professor.

“That was quite a throw. Love this spirit of competition.” The delighted comment comes from Owen as he strolls up to us with a collection of other people.

Everyone wears relaxed smiles, and most hold steaming mugs of cider. For them, this is a fun outing.

But they don't have a werewolf to conquer and a bet to win.

"Blossom is all about intimidation." Manny gives his boss a one-armed hug hello. Then, the wolf turns to me and points people out. "You know Griffith, right? He bartends at Local Brew. Then, this is Jack, newest member of the pack, and Ame Shelly, one of the witches who opened the library on the lake. Jack, Ame, this is Blossom Fernmore."

I'm thrown off-balance by Manny introducing me in his easy way. I was in verbal sparring mode, not *meet the new townsfolk* mode.

"Hello." I give them a jerky wave. "Welcome to The Patch."

Technically, it's called The Fernmore Pumpkin Patch, but everyone just calls this field of orange gourds The Patch. Papa loves the fact that his place has a nickname.

Manny slips up beside me and drapes an arm over my shoulders. As if this is the most normal thing in the world. As if I didn't recently try to assault him with fruit and make him bleed after kissing him.

"Nice to meet you." Ame returns my wave with a small smile of her own. "That was a good guess."

I try not to grimace, knowing she's just being nice.

"Yeah, but not the winning one, huh? Like to think I hire the best brains in town." Owen taps his knuckles on Manny's shoulder and puffs up his chest.

I'm tempted to poke the selkie right in his stomach to deflate him, but I tend to keep my physical assaults aimed at Manny.

Speaking of, I pinch his side in an attempt to extricate myself from his hold.

But the infuriating wolf only winces, then tugs me closer. And damn him, he smells good. The same way he tasted. Like

a rich red wine that gets me drunk too fast.

“Just in case it wasn’t clear”—Griffith, the bartending werewolf, offers me an apologetic smile—“Owen and I are Team Wolf.”

And that’s when I notice their custom orange T-shirts that read, *All hail the Pumpkin Prince!*

Now that I acknowledge the design, I realize a decent portion of the crowd has them on.

“And I would like to make it clear,” Manny says, “I specifically requested you *not* make shirts this year.”

Owen shrugs, grin unrepentant. “I had to. If I ordered more than fifty, they gave me a discount.”

“That’s terrible logic.”

Ignoring his Pumpkin Prince, the selkie turns his attention on Ame and Jack, the witch and the werewolf couple.

“What about you, newbies?” he asks. “Who are you rooting for?”

Jack fixes his dark eyes on the redhead whose hand he holds. “Who are we rooting for?”

Ame offers him a sweet smile. “Well, I’m a witch. So, go, Blossom!”

He nods, as if that decides everything. “Go, Blossom.”

“Now, wait a minute, Jack,” Griffith chimes in. “You’re a wolf. You’ve gotta root for Manny.” He points to the man at my side, who’s currently running his thumb gently along my collarbone.

*Wait, what is he doing? When did this start? Why is he touching me like this? Why am I letting him?*

*Why does it feel so good?*

My nipples pebble again, but this time, it’s not from the cold.

Jack’s hard stare flicks between Griffith, Manny, me, then back to his mate.

“Go, Blossom,” he repeats.

The show of loyalty—to his mate, not to me—has me smiling.

Then, the wolf, who’s still manhandling me, opens his annoying mouth.

“Eh, can’t blame you.” Manny laughs. “If I didn’t like seeing her in a temper so much, I’d be rooting for Blossom too.” The hot fingers of his free hand pinch my chin, holding my face in place as he presses a loud kiss to my forehead.

A rush of emotion blots out all rational thought, and in self-preservation, my hands dance through conjuring motions before I consider the consequences.

Manny slips away fast, catching and dodging three separate apples I rocketed his way. Unfortunately, one misses its target and instead knocks Owen’s cider out of his hand, sending the spiced beverage spraying through the air. Jack turns his body in time to shield Ame, blocking any of the splatter from hitting his witch.

“Damn. I was enjoying that.” The seal shifter scoops his empty mug off the ground, voice mournful.

I’m not in the apologizing mood. “Well, that’ll teach you to root for the wrong competitor.” Nose in the air, I stalk away from the group toward the next challenge, where I plan to ignore the unwanted reactions my body has toward Manny Ramirez as I dominate the rest of this competition.

“Go, Blossom!” Ame cheers at my back.



## BLOSSOM

CORNSTALKS STRETCH TALL ABOVE US, their towering heads swaying in a light breeze. The corn is a wall with a single opening.

“Corn maze,” I mutter before shooting a glare toward the grinning werewolf.

Of course he’s happy. Speed is going to be a huge component in this next challenge. Sure, I go jogging a few times a week. But that hasn’t prepared me to race a werewolf.

Maybe if I’d known I was going to be the Pumpkin Princess a year in advance, I could’ve joined a gym and practiced my sprinting.

But, no, I got a week to prepare myself, and now, I’m looking at the second L of the day.

*Don’t think like that. Mazes take speed but also brainpower. And Manny has always been shit at directions.*

One time, he grudgingly agreed to drive me to my friend’s house on the other side of Folk Haven, and he made the wrong

turn at least five times. Practically doubled the travel time. I never thought I'd get to leave that car.

“Thank you, everyone, for joining us once again.” My father claims the crowd's attention. “I hope you enjoy the spread! Make sure to fill your plates and settle in because we're about to say good-bye to our combatants. Who knows when we'll see them again?” Papa shares a grin between Manny and me from his temporary hay-bale podium. “This corn maze is full of twists and turns that could fool even the best puzzle master.”

My father faces me with a delighted expression. The man loves a good game. Whenever I come home for a visit, he always has a new board game for us to try out. Usually, it is Papa, Heather, and me playing. But they often invite Manny to join, and I have to sit across from the wolf and tolerate his teasing taunts, cocky moves, and intense stares.

Now, the board game is life-sized, and Papa is giddy.

“Hmm. Alone in a maze with Blossom Fernmore. What could happen?” Manny smirks my way.

“Most likely, I'll beat you so bad that you'll be too ashamed to come out,” I sling back, voice full of pure confidence that I don't feel. “Better get cozy in there. It's gonna be your new home.”

The wolf's rumbling laugh disappears under the boom of my father's voice.

“Now, here's the tricky part, pumpkin competitors. You're not simply finding your way out. You have a goal.” Papa taps his nose, eyes twinkling, and I think he could have done well as a TV game show host. “Inside the maze, deep in the twisting alleys of corn, are two scarecrows. They sit equal distance from this entry point.” He waves at the break in the stalks in front of us. “To win, you must find a scarecrow and bring it with you on your exit journey. The winner is the first to return here with your scarecrow companion. However long that takes.”

“Take your time!” Owen calls out from his spot by the cider keg. “We’ve got plenty to drink while you’re away.”

A cheer goes up from the crowd as they raise their glasses in a toast.

“I’m sure Manny would give you time to kick a keg. But I’m planning on getting back before the next round is poured,” I shout back, grinning at the cackles from my witchy supporters.

Manny scoffs. “Think you can outrun me, Bud?”

At first, I was sure I couldn’t. The man is part wolf after all.

But now, my magic thrums to life as my gaze glides over the field of corn before me.

This isn’t some paved road in the middle of the city. I’ll be running over dirt and roots and the living earth that sings to the power under my skin.

“We’ll see.” I crouch down to untie my shoes. The soles of my sneakers suddenly feel too thick and clunky on my feet. I need my skin against soil. My wood witch magic wants to touch the growing things of the world.

“Contenders,” Papa bellows, “please approach the starting line.”

There’s a white line spray-painted on the grass ten feet from the entrance to the maze. Manny and I step up to the marker. I can feel the wolf’s eyes on me, but I refuse to look his way.

“On your mark ... get set ... GO!” The shout is accompanied by the blare of a horn.

We dive forward. Manny reaches the entrance a step before me and immediately veers right. I choose the left route, wanting distance from him. Besides, there are two scarecrows to find. No reason for us to stay close.

With the sun starting to dip low in the sky, I have a good sense of direction, heading northeast toward what I believe is the middle of the maze. Sometimes, I have to make a series of

quick turns, and sometimes, there're long, straightaway stretches. I prefer the latter because I can let my muscles loose and fly.

My hands dance in the air, calling out magical greetings to the corn. It's as though the very earth is moving my legs for me, powering me forward at a speed I've never reached before.

This—a wild running—might be what I've missed most about Folk Haven.

Living among the human population means adhering to certain social standards. Like *don't run barefoot in the woods*. I've had to train myself not to loathe jogging down a neatly paved path. One where everything is curated on either side, as if nature was always meant to be organized.

But when I run like this, there is no structure. Only exhilaration.

As much as the sensation threatens to intoxicate me, I maintain my focus on the branching paths, always on the lookout until—there! From the corner of my eye, I spot a flash of red. I turn my eager feet toward the break in the stalks where I spied the color, leaping into the small clearing to find a hay-filled scarecrow, dressed in a red flannel shirt.

“Got you!” I lunge forward and yank the straw-filled man off its wooden post before turning back the way I came.

There's no sign of Manny. Which could mean that he's still wandering aimlessly in this tangle of corn-strewn walkways.

*Or maybe he found the other scarecrow and is already on his way back to the entrance.*

Unwilling to let him claim victory, I gesture with my free fingers, seeking out the teasing magic within my soul, drawing on more of nature's power to give my feet gas. Sprinting, I choose paths that lead me southwest, my eyes on the sun and the gaps in the corn ahead of me.

Then, I hear it.

The steady *thump, thump, thump* of pounding feet.



I round a corner and almost collide with a sweaty Manny. The wolf is breathing hard, pieces of corn sticking to his glistening skin, long brown hair tangled around his chin.

And in his right hand, he clutches a floppy scarecrow of his own.

“Hey, Bud.” When his eyes drop to my inanimate companion, a grin takes over his mouth. “Well, look at that. You’re keeping up.”

“Get out of my way.” I dodge around his hulking form and push my legs to go faster.

But just like at the wedding, I sense his presence looming behind me. Only the wolf doesn’t overtake me, but instead keeps pace. After multiple turns and him not making any move to pass me, I can’t put up with my annoying shadow any longer.

I whirl on him with my most seething glare. “What are you doing?”

Manny attempts an innocent expression. “Nothing.”

“You’re following me.”

“We’re headed to the same place,” he points out.

“Well, get there on your own!”

The wolf tilts his head, wearing the most infuriating smirk. “Why would I do that?”

And as much as his answer enrages me, his strategy also makes sense. There’s no point for him to break off from me, not when he can beat me in an all-out sprint. If we part ways, I might happen upon the exit before he does. But if Manny stays by my side, he can overtake me the moment we find the break in the corn.

The wolf wants me to solve this maze for him.

“You’re such an asshole,” I hiss.

“Am I?” He leans toward me with something in his eyes that I can’t interpret. “Maybe I’m just doing everything I can to get you to stay.”

The bet. Of course that's on his mind.

“Why? So you can torture me on a daily basis?”

Manny lets out a huff that sounds exasperated. “I can think of a lot of things I want to do with you, Blossom Fernmore. But torture is not one of them.”

I narrow my eyes at the wolf the same moment he reaches out to catch a lock of my hair that's come free from my ponytail to tease my cheek. Gently, he tucks the strand behind my ear.

“What are you doing?”

*Is that my voice? Why do I sound so breathless?*

*Must be from all the running.*

He gives me a rueful smile. “I'm trying to figure out how to convince you to want me the way that I want you.”

I choke on my next breath, shocked by his confession.

*Manny Ramirez wants me?*

*No. This can't be real. He's up to something.*

That's when I see his other hand out of the corner of my eye. Reaching for me.

No, wait. He must be reaching for my scarecrow. No doubt he's planning on chucking it over the closest wall of corn so I have to scramble to find it while he sprints off to victory.

And he thinks I won't notice because of this half-assed seduction attempt?

Well, two can play at that game.

And I don't do anything half-assed.

“Manny.” I groan his name, trying to sound needy, and I swear there's a spark of fire in his eyes. Triumph at fooling me most likely.

Then, I lunge forward, wrapping an arm around his neck and pressing my mouth to his, as if all I want in the world is to devour his intoxicatingly delicious tongue.

I don't, of course.

This is all a ploy.

A ploy I'll put into effect in just ... a moment.

The wolf, who's been teasing and tormenting me since I was a teenager, grunts in surprise.

Then, he kisses me back. Hard and heady. The sensation so intense that my calculating brain is almost overwhelmed.

But not quite.

After taking a longer-than-planned moment to sup on his savory, warm mouth, I force my focus to get through the haze his solid body and hot kisses have cast over my brain.

Behind Manny's neck, where the wolf can't see, I twist my hands in the pattern of coaxing. Magic is an interesting thing. Part instinct, part trained direction. Some witches use words and substances to manipulate the powers of the world. Fernmore witches use our hands, speaking to the growing things through intricate finger movements.

The tingle of my magic surges, and my palms glow green, drawing the nearby roots to me. I feel them respond in the ground, rising through layers of soil to do my bidding.

"Gods, Blossom," Manny groans against my mouth. "I want you."

The moment he breaks contact enough to speak the words, I fully regain a handle on myself.

Well, *mostly* regain a handle. My pulse is still hammering in an erratic rhythm.

I shove away from the tricky wolf, skipping back a few extra steps to make sure I'm out of his reach.

"You almost had me. But I'm not falling for it," I taunt. "Have fun detangling yourself. I'll see you at the finish line."

I stick around just long enough to watch as Manny's wide eyes drop to his lower half.

While he was distracted by my awesome kissing skills, I had roots carefully but firmly entomb his legs from his thighs down.

“What the fuck?”

He barks out another few curses, but I have trouble hearing them over my laughter as I sprint away.



## MANNY

THAT GODS-DAMN SNEAKY WITCH.

I stare at Blossom across the fire, where she chats animatedly with Ame Shelly, pretending she doesn't feel my eyes on her.

It's been a few hours since the last challenge, but I'm still not over her trickery in the maze. She kissed the hell out of me, got me hard as a rock, then ran off to claim her victory while leaving me tied up.

I knew she could get competitive, but the duplicity is downright sexy.

*Fuck, I want you so bad, Blossom Fernmore.*

But the question is, how do I convince her my interest is real? What do I need to do to prove I'm not trying to pull one over on her?

Heather thought Blossom taking her place in this competition would give me a good chance to woo her sister. Before she left on her honeymoon, she sat me down and spelled it out. Blossom's passion rose to the surface when she

was chasing a win. And Heather claimed, by some sisterly bond, she could tell that part of the reason I was so good at pissing Blossom off was because I mattered to her.

But it's my job to turn that mattering into something good.

Something monumental.

Twice now, Blossom has kissed me on the lips. Both times with the aim of dealing me a blow.

And maybe I have an improperly flipped circuit in my brain because every time she ends a kiss with a menacing act, I only want her more.

“Attention, everyone.” Root steps up onto an overturned log, gaining the crowd's notice.

There are at least ten fires spread out around this large forest clearing as we all congregate under the night sky, a half-moon shining down on our celebration.

“It's time for our third and final challenge of the day. A task that will require finesse and an understanding of your fellow mythic.”

From the corner of my eye, I spy Blossom leaning forward, gaze rapt on her father, as if she thinks she can win simply by hearing him first.

“And like it or not, your fates will be decided by a single judge this next round. A special guest you both will try to impress. Everyone, please welcome our illustrious Mayor Nightson.”

The crowd claps and whoops in approval as Belinda Nightson steps forward. Choosing a casual look for this gathering, our town mayor has her waist-length braids swinging loose and wears jeans and flannel, much like the scarecrows left for us in the maze. But even in her dressed-down attire, she still has an air of authority. The woman sits with a straight spine, a wide grin, and power rolling off her ebony skin. I've heard, in her griffin form, she's as large as a grizzly bear.

But when Belinda speaks, her voice is kind and welcoming. “Thank you so much for having me. I’m honored to take part in this Folk Haven tradition.”

“And we’re lucky to have you here.” Root turns his attention back to his daughter and me. “You two will have ten minutes to fashion the best, most delicious s’more you can create.”

He waves toward a table, where I spy the normal s’mores ingredients stacked. Graham crackers, chocolate, and marshmallows.

But there’s also so much more. There’re at least five different types of chocolate, a jar of peanut butter, multiple jellies, different candy bars, a container of caramel, a collection of fruits, and a variety of spices, like cinnamon, nutmeg, and cayenne pepper. There’s even a package of bacon.

*Mmm, a bacon s’more? Sounds perfect to me.*

“You’ll want to be inventive. Or maybe you want to go classic.” Root wears a teasing smirk. “But what you *need* to do is make the perfect s’more for Mayor Nightson, who will sit with her back turned, unaware of who is making what. And, Mayor, I expect you to judge based on your preference rather than mass appeal.”

She offers a solemn nod. “Understood. I swear to be the pickiest of eaters.”

“Love to hear it!” The wood witch returns his attention to us. “Once again, you both have ten minutes to create the perfect campfire treat and present it to me. I will then deliver the finished products to Mayor Nightson.”

*Interesting.*

I glance over in time to see Blossom’s brow crinkle in concentration, her expression thoughtful, her eyes locked on the mayor, as if the griffin is a puzzle that simply needs to be solved.

“Your time starts now!”

Immediately, the gathered wolves and witches start calling out suggestions, but I ignore them as I lurch to my feet, eyes scanning the table of ingredients. If I'm going to win or lose this, it'll be on my own ideas. I know I'd like to try a chocolate-coated bacon s'more, but would the mayor? I grab the package of meat and a collection of other ingredients, deciding to experiment. Ten minutes should give me just enough time for at least one practice round.

As I arrange food items with one hand and hold a skewer over the fire with a marshmallow, my eyes keep trying to watch Blossom instead of my food. The witch seems to be eating more than she's cooking. But her face still holds that focused expression that tells me a lot is going on in her mind.

If only I could read her thoughts. But I don't care about insight into her s'more plan.

I want to know if she thinks about *me*. If there's a single positive pondering about the werewolf who's secretly loved her for years.

"Three minutes!" Root calls out just as I'm hit with inspiration.

I don't know if it'll appeal to the mayor, but the combo can't be denied once I have my mind set. I hurry to re-create my mental image. And just as my marshmallow turns the perfect level of gooey crispiness, Blossom snaps her fingers and lets out a whoop of triumph.

Then, she sprints into the trees.

I pause, shocked by her abrupt departure.

"One minute!" Root calls out, the man also appearing confused, his stare on the shadowy trees where his daughter disappeared.

But she returns a moment later, a wide grin on her face. The witch runs back to the fire in time to scoop up her marshmallows before they scorch.

Needing to finish off my presentation, I can't watch Blossom's final arrangement.



As Root counts down from ten, I situate my top graham cracker and hurry up to him, offering the plate with my dessert.

Blossom is a step behind me, and I catch a flash of melting chocolate and golden-brown marshmallow before her father whisks the plates to the waiting mayor.

“One!” Root shouts, and the assembly hollers their excitement.

“What was that about?” I whisper to her as she saunters back to her seat.

Blossom’s smile is pure cockiness, the expression tightening my groin.

“You’ll see.”

Root clears his throat, gaining the attention of the murmuring crowd. “If you would be so kind, Mayor Nightson, please describe the flavors for us all once you’ve taken a bite.”

“Of course.”

There’s a crunch of teeth breaking through graham cracker, and the whole crowd seems to hold their breath in anticipation.

“Oh, yum,” Belinda says after a moment. “This is delicious. There’s cinnamon, apple, and caramel in addition to the classic milk chocolate and marshmallow. A great fall s’more.” She takes another bite and swallows with a happy hum. “I could eat more than one of these.”

I sit up straighter in my seat, chest swelling with pride. I tried the bacon, and it was delicious. But then Blossom’s spiced apple scent teased my nose, and I couldn’t think of anything other than tasting her.

I made the s’more version of my wood witch.

“That’s going to be hard to beat,” the griffin claims. “But let’s see about this next one.”

Another crunch and chewing moment.

Then, Mayor Nightson laughs.

Witches and wolves exchange glances, and Blossom worries her lower lip between her teeth. I want to drag her into my arms, press a comforting kiss to that lip, and tell her it's okay if she doesn't win every challenge—

“I love it!” Belinda exclaims, cutting off my thought. “Dark chocolate and mint. My favorite combo. Is this a fresh mint leaf in here? Goddess, that's divine. Sorry, competitor one, I have to go with option number two.”

*Well, fuck me.*

I guess we know why the witch ran off. She went to find some fresh herbs that must have been growing nearby.

Blossom jumps up from her seat, fist-pumping both her arms in the air with a whoop before turning her taunting grin my way.

“Two to one, sucker.” She leans toward me as she rubs the score in, eyes alight with her win.

*Gods, she's beautiful.*

“How'd you know?” I try to keep my voice unaffected as I fight the urge to lunge forward and steal a kiss from those sassy lips.

“Peppermint patty latte. I was behind the mayor one time at Coffee & Claws when she ordered.” The witch taps her temple as she names Folk Haven's local coffee shop. “It's a steel trap in here. Don't forget a thing.”

Don't I know it? As I watch Blossom saunter away, off to chat with Belinda about her creation and accepting congratulations from fellow witches, I wonder if not forgetting means never forgiving as well.

*Two to one.*

I stare at the ground between my feet, watching shadows from the dancing bonfire flames flicker across the flattened grass. Time passes as I try not to panic. Try not to think about losing and Blossom leaving again.

This time, without the requirement of saying good-bye to me.

As if conjured by my thoughts, there's a gentle press of lips against my cheek and the scent of spiced apples in my nose. The witch snuck up on me, and I turn my head so fast that my mouth brushes hers before she can fully retreat.

Blossom gasps in a breath, her pupils dilating when they meet mine, and we pause there, staring at each other until she whispers ...

“Good-bye, darling. I'll miss you.”

Then, she's gone.

And I'm left wondering why those words didn't sound like a threat.

They sounded like an invitation.



## BLOSSOM

IT'S WELL PAST MIDNIGHT, but I can't sleep. The woods call to me.

I slip out from under the covers in my childhood bedroom, grab a blanket off the foot of the bed, and wrap it around my shoulders as I tiptoe downstairs to keep from waking Papa. Just because I can't get any sleep doesn't mean he should suffer and be drowsy tomorrow.

*I need to rest, I remind myself. How else am I going to beat Manny?*

The memory of his face from the corn maze comes back to me, and I allow myself a grin as I shuffle through the dark kitchen. The werewolf never should have doubted my devious nature.

The night air is cool against my bare skin, smelling of freshly fallen leaves and carrying the sounds of bats chirping, bugs humming, and the occasional hoot of an owl. Papa has cushy chairs set up on the screened-in porch, but I don't settle in one. The restless energy that has kept me awake draws me

through the screen door and across the yard, toward the tree line.

Halfway there, I spy a shadowy form leaning against the thick trunk of a towering oak.

“Manny,” I greet him, knowing immediately who the nighttime visitor is. “You’re being a major creep. Do you lurk like this all the time?”

He lets out a deep, rumbling chuckle that makes me aware I’m not wearing a bra under my T-shirt. I pull my blanket tighter around my shoulders.

“What can I say? I’m a creature of the night.” The last word rides a low growl.

“Is that supposed to scare me?”

“No.” The shadows hide his eyes, but I still feel his gaze on me. “I know I can’t scare you. Not that I’d ever want to.”

I scoff, hiking the blanket higher to disguise the way my body shivers in response to him. “Why are you here? Missing your running buddy?”

The wolf tilts his head, as if confused.

I roll my eyes. “You and Heather might have thought you were being stealthy, but I always knew when she sneaked out to meet you in the woods. I used to think you were hooking up.” I fight a smile at his grimace. “But after she came out, I realized you all must have just been enjoying the night together. Going for a run.”

And damn if I wasn’t wildly jealous of them. From my window, I’d watch Heather shimmy down her trellis, dressed in black and wearing her sneakers. When she reached the ground, my sister would sprint across the yard to the edge of the forest, where a wolf awaited her.

I wanted to follow them. The need to be free in the forest was a painful song in my body.

And I wanted to have a handsome werewolf waiting for me.

I wanted Manny.

But I didn't get to have him or to sprint through the woods with my sister at my side. Back then, Heather babied me and would have sent me back to the house like a misbehaving child. And Manny was always a surly beast to me.

No one invited me on secret nightly excursions.

So, I stayed in my room and tried to stifle my envy.

"We didn't go running," he says, surprising me. "Not together anyway. Heather is more of a climber. She'd scale some tall tree to study the stars, and I'd chase some unlucky rodent."

They never ran together? Apparently, my imagination got away from me. That seems to happen a lot around Manny Ramirez.

"If you want to go for a run," he says, "let's go for a run."

My body sways toward the trees, ready to take him up on his offer. My mind holds me back.

"Why? So you can prove you would've beaten me in the maze today if I hadn't tied you up?"

Manny leans forward, and I realize I drifted into his personal space at some point. His lips hover close to my ear. "Tie me up whenever you want to."

All the saliva in my mouth dries up, and I have to clear my throat. The taunting wolf straightens just enough for me to meet his eyes. To see the heated glint in them.

"What do you mean?" I rasp when, really, I want to say, *Why are you doing this to me?*

Did Heather finally spill the beans on me? After she came out and introduced Papa and me to her first girlfriend, I realized she wasn't in love with Manny. That they weren't destined to be together. After that, I guess I got lax about covering up my attraction to him. She caught me staring at the werewolf one day when he was shirtless and helping Papa haul pumpkins out of The Patch for a large order.

Heather can be relentless when she wants, and my sister badgered me until I admitted that I'd always thought Manny was handsome. Too handsome for his own good. And that I knew he didn't see me the same way, so I refused to let him know how I felt.

Did she break our sister pact and tell her best friend that I'd had a crush on him the entire time I claimed to loathe everything about him?

I do loathe Manny. Hating the fact that, even while he teases me and growls at me, I want to strip him down, cover him in melted caramel, and lick his chest.

At least, in high school, I could claim adolescent hormones were the issue.

What's my excuse now? Misfiring horny spell that makes me want the closest asshole?

Whatever the reason, my body still responds to Manny in inappropriate ways. My skin heating in anticipation of his touch. My brain convincing itself that kissing him is the perfect kind of revenge.

Manny reaches out to tug on a lock of my hair before I can swat his hand away. "It means that I want you to truss me up, peel my clothes off with your teeth, and have your witchy way with me." His devilish grin slowly curls across his lips as I choke on my breath. "But only if you catch me first."

He's gone. Turning so fast that he seems to vanish into thin air. But deep in the shadows of the forest, I hear a pained grunt.

*He's changing. The wolf is coming out.*

He wants me to chase him when he's in his wolf form? So I'm guaranteed to lose?

Maybe that's why he made those suggestive remarks. Because he knows they would never come to fruition.

I grit my teeth, annoyance sparking through my veins that Manny might know about my crush and be using it against me. Suddenly, I want to catch him more than anything in the

world. I want to toss his body to the ground and strip him like he said. I want to bind him to the forest floor with thick roots.

Then, I want to leave him there. I want to walk away as he pleads for my forgiveness.

Pajamas aren't the best for a middle-of-the-night sprint. Neither are bare feet.

At least for someone who isn't a wood witch.

I bend one knee, then the other. Rubbing my bare soles before twisting my fingers in coaxing gestures. My power unfurls under my skin, a light-green glow emanating from my pores, and I feel my body respond to the spell. My feet touch the ground, and the connection is instant. This is more than my spur-of-the-moment conjuring in the corn maze. My magic is full of intention.

I am one with the earth.

It cannot cut me. Cannot bruise or harm me. Nature is a gentle cradle under my soles.

I don't know if this will make me any faster, but it'll keep a stray thorn in my heel from slowing me down.

"Ready or not, here I come," I mutter, dropping my blanket and taking off into the dark woods at a sprint.

My plan was to listen for the soft, thumping footfalls of a loping wolf, but the moment I start running, the race fades from my mind as I'm overwhelmed by the joy of finally letting myself go wild.

Letting myself run free.

Where I live, there are paths and trails in local parks I can jog on. And I do. But never with true abandon. Never with laughter bubbling from my throat and my arms stretched wide to brush my fingers against the foliage.

I wonder if this is what wood nymphs feel like when they dance through the woods. Those mythics commune with nature in a way I could only hope to achieve. I've seen them fully disappear inside trees as easily as stepping into the waters of Lake Galen.



That's a feat I haven't managed, but with my hand gestures and a force within my spirit, I can coax the natural world to move and respond to me.

We are friends of a sort, and now, I flow among them.

*I'm supposed to chase the wolf*, I remind myself.

But I don't know where to start, and I'm having too much fun, driving myself forward.

I whoop and keep going.

In the next moment, I feel a presence at my back. Imposing, but not threatening.

Just like at the wedding.

*Manny is here.*

"I'm not chasing you, wolf," I cry out, my legs pumping, my lungs sucking in the cool night air that smells like damp earth.

I swear I hear a huff, and then there's the slightest brush at my heels. With a squeak, I step higher, glancing back to find a massive black wolf loping behind me, his head ducked low. He gives a playful snap toward my feet.

"Are you herding me?" I intend for my voice to sound scathing. Instead, I giggle the question.

He offers me a fang-filled grin.

For some reason, I find his playful response hilarious, and I leave a string of chuckles in my wake as I fly forward. Like in the maze, I allow the power of the plants around me to infuse my limbs with extra energy.

The boost makes me faster, but not fast enough to outrun a werewolf. Manny sticks close, sometimes skipping in for another snap, as if he likes the way I hop and laugh.

Then, he slows and lets out a sharp bark of warning. Pointing my gaze forward, I realize there's a cliff fast approaching.

I more than see it. I *feel* it. The abrupt ending to the trees.

But I also sense where the forest restarts, far below.

The oaks and pines and yellow woods wait at the base of the cliff for me. Beckoning me toward them. Cheering me on.

I don't slow down.

Manny barks again, then snarls when I don't heed his warning. The ground shakes with his pounding paws. But he hesitated for too long. Too late to catch up.

"See you at the bottom!" I shout as the branches in front of me part to reveal the wide expanse of the Chattahoochee National Forest, lit by the half-moon.

My feet push me into a running swan dive, and I scream in pure delight as I free-fall through the air.

An animal's roar follows my plummet.

But I'm too busy calling to the woods below to concern myself with Manny.

Leaf-covered branches stretch toward me like my father's arms used to when I jumped from my bunk bed into his waiting hold. And just like then, I'm caught in an abrupt yet cushioned embrace.

"Thank you!" I call to the trees, my green-glowing hands stretched out in thanks.

They shiver their limbs in response, slowly depositing me on the ground. I sit there for a moment, grinning wide and panting. But as my heart rate begins to slow, I realize I'm not done.

I want to keep going.

"Blossom!" My name is bellowed through the trees.

*Wow, he made it down fast. And he changed forms.*

"Are you running naked through the woods, Manny?" I yell the question while rocking up to my feet.

"Thank the fucking gods."

I think I hear him groan, but I don't wait to check, setting off at a fast jog.

*Will he turn back to his wolf so he can catch me?*

There's the sound of crashing branches and crunching brush behind me.

*Does he even need to change to run as fast as I do?*

“Blossom! Get your ass back here!”

I almost pause. Almost. More because of his tone than his words.

He sounds pissed.

The last time I remember Manny getting truly angry was when Alvin Carter spray-painted a gay slur on my sister's locker. The guy was lucky he was a merman. A human wouldn't have healed from two broken legs so quickly.

Maybe I shouldn't have cannonballed off a cliff without warning Manny first. I guess that could scare a guy if he wasn't properly prepared.

*Oh well. It's done now.*

I pick up the pace, heading toward a familiar group of trees that isn't too far off. They call to me like old friends.

Two steps into the orchard, I'm lifted off my feet.

“Hey!” I yelp, my fingers scrabbling against the strong set of arms wrapped around my waist.

Next I know, my back is on the ground, and there's a glaring werewolf on top of me, pinning my body in place.

And the answer is, yes, Manny was running through the woods naked in his human form.

“What the hell were you thinking?” he growls.

“That you're heavier than a boulder.” I jab a finger into his bare side, but he doesn't flinch.

Truthfully, the man isn't crushing me. But he's also an immovable force.

“I'm talking about that stunt you just pulled. You could've died.”

I roll my eyes. “I knew the trees would catch me.”

“I didn’t know,” he snarls.

And instead of my anger rising in response to his, I spy the fear in Manny’s eyes, and the sight allows me to soften. Reaching up, I push the wild strands of his hair off his sweaty forehead.

“Poor little wolf. Did I scare you?” I tease gently, waiting for him to respond in kind. To bring us back to what we’ve always been. Two enemies who’ve established a fragile truce because we love the same people.

Instead, Manny’s big body sinks closer to mine, his shoulders curving, as if to shield me. “I was fucking terrified.” His face presses against my neck, lips on my skin as he speaks. “I think I could live with you leaving me. But I wouldn’t survive *losing* you, Blossom Fernmore.”

Once again, I’m left shocked by his words, blurting out the only question I can manage. “What does that mean?”

Manny presses a hot, open-mouthed kiss to my racing pulse before answering in a calm voice, “I want you.”

This makes no sense. None at all. He’s talking complete nonsense. Maybe he dived off that cliff after me and whacked his head on the landing.

Whatever the cause, I’m not about to put up with his teasing.

Or these neck kisses that threaten to unravel me.

“Manuel Ramirez.” I’m proud of the stern tone I manage despite how breathless I suddenly am.

“Don’t call me that,” he rumbles, his lips brushing over my ear, hot exhale making me shiver. “Only my uncle uses my full name. I hate it.”

“Fine,” I snap, using annoyance to cover the effect he’s having on my body. “Manny. I’ll call you Manny.”

“No.” His voice is rough yet gentle. “Call me your wolf.”

“My wolf?” I try to keep my voice hard, but it quivers.  
“You’ve never wanted to be mine.”

Suddenly, Manny braces himself on his elbows, raised far enough to meet my eyes, his sharp gaze boring into mine.

“I’ve always wanted to be yours. Too much.”

I shake my head. This is a game. It has to be.

But I find myself repeating my earlier question, this time with a tinge of desperation. “What does that mean?”

“It’s not complicated, my infuriating little wood witch.” He cups my face with one hand, tracing the curve of my cheek with his thumb. “I want you. I want inside you. And I want you to want me.”

My body flushes with heat, every inch of me straining toward the wolf and his tempting words.

Words I’ve never admitted I’ve always wanted to hear.



## MANNY

WITH FEAR still coursing through my veins after Blossom’s plummet off a cliff, I can’t find it in me to evade the truth a moment longer.

I listen to the ragged cadence of her breath, her chest pressing into mine with each inhale. As much as I want to claim her mouth and kiss the hell out of her—make her want me—that’ll only drive the witch away.

And I don’t want to force Blossom.

I want her to choose me.

With a shift of my muscles, I flip us over, rolling onto my back so Blossom is straddling me.

Giving her every inch of the high ground.

Not that I mind how the core of her is only inches from my half-hard cock.

“As you come to terms with the fact that I want you,” I say, attempting a teasing tone, “I’d like it noted that I’ve confessed this in the middle of an apple orchard. I hope you

take this as a sign of submission. The amount of ammo available puts me at a great disadvantage.”

Blossom gazes down at me. “You’re joking.”

“I’m not.” Carefully, I lay my hands on her thighs. Kneading the thick muscles with my fingers and trying not to think about how they’d flex if she rode me.

Blossom sits up straight, crossing her arms over her chest. But she doesn’t climb off me, and I take that as a promising sign. As the beautiful, infuriating witch studies me, I pluck a few stray leaves off her cotton sleep shorts.

“So, this is a new thing?” she asks with narrow eyes. “You wanting me? You saw me clutching that scarecrow tight and were like, *Damn, I wish I were the straw-filled doll?*”

I snort and grin up at the sassy witch and fall for her a little more.

“No. I mean, don’t get me wrong; I’m definitely jealous of every inanimate object you’ve ever held tight against your boobs like that.” As I speak, I let one hand creep up to her rib cage and risk my thumb by brushing it over the lower curve of her breast. “But wanting you isn’t new.”

Her brow furrows in the most adorable scowl. “Explain.”

“Happy to.” Especially with her like his, astride me, as if I were her own personal mount, not protesting my sneaky, roving hands. “When you turned thirteen, you hit puberty. And you started to smell good. *Really* good.”

Like *warm apple pie* and *teenage fantasies* good.

“Are you serious?” Blossom gapes.

I nod. “I realized it was the mating scent. That you and I had ... potential.”

My parents had explained how mates work for werewolves. How when someone smells amazing, that means The Clawed One is identifying them as a potential partner. Unlike some mythics, werewolves can scent more than one possible mate, which means a potential partner doesn’t mean they’re the only option.

But it's hard not to at least pay them attention.

“When I hit puberty ...” Her eyes widen, and even in the low glow of the half-moon, I spy a blush darkening her cheeks. “Oh my fucking goddess! Are you telling me you smelled my first *period*?”

Blossom's embarrassment has me wanting to strip her bare and do all manner of depraved things with her until she's burning alive with blushes.

But I settle for a shrug. “I smelled all your periods. It's a natural part of having a uterus. Nothing to be ashamed of.”

The little wood witch presses her palms to her cheeks, as if that could cool the inferno radiating off them.

“I need you to shut your mouth,” she groans. “Teenage Blossom is dead. Literally. I just felt the ghost of her leave my body, murdered by mortification.”

“You're cute when you get dramatic.” I drag my hands up and down her sides, enjoying this simple act of touching her.

And Blossom doesn't bother to stop me. Or to magically chuck an apple at my head.

This feels like progress.

“And am I the only potential mate you've met over the years?” she asks after a few beats of silent contemplation.

Not sure how she'll respond, I slowly shake my head. “There've been two more. Both times, I tried dating them. They were both nice. But ...” When an explanation doesn't immediately come to mind, I trail off as I reach for an answer that won't send her running.

“But what?”

I slip my hand up her chest, pressing flat against her pounding heart. “They weren't you.”

Blossom scowls, but instead of pushing me away, she flattens her palm over mine, holding me in place. “I don't get it. You've always been a dick to me. If you liked me, why didn't you *do* something about it?”



“I wanted to,” I admit. “But you were thirteen. I was sixteen. You were my best friend’s little sister. And you might not have realized this, but your dad was always more of a parent to me than my uncle was. I knew if I pursued you and messed it up—which I think we both know I would have because teenage Manny was a mess—I would’ve lost Heather and Root, along with you. So, immature kid I was, I decided to act like an asshole to keep you away from me.”

Blossom glowers at me. “You did that spectacularly.”

I can feel my rueful grin. “By the time you were old enough to date, you hated me. I’d screwed myself over.”

She slaps my chest. “You told all the guys I dated in school that I was high maintenance and whiny!”

I grab her palm and bring it to my mouth for a kiss. “I was a jealous asshole.” Needing a taste of her, I drag my tongue over the lines on her hand, like a horny palm reader.

Blossom gasps and squirms, which has her ass brushing my cock. A groan rumbles from my chest, and the witch freezes. Not that it helps when I can see how her nipples pebble against the thin cotton of her T-shirt.

“Can you forgive me?” I rasp, tense with restrained lust and fear of her answer.

She stares down at me, face unreadable.

As I wait for the final dictate, I catalog every piece of Blossom I can—from her round, flushed cheeks to the flare of her hips.

If she turns me down, what will that mean for the future? More avoidance? Will we be able to go back to our competitive banter?

I’d rather argue with Blossom for the next five decades than have her leave the room whenever I walk in.

*Don’t cut me off. Please. Don’t shut down—*

“I’m on birth control.”

Now, it's my turn to gape. Blossom is still glaring at me, so I'm pretty sure I misheard her.

“What?”

“I got the contraception tattoo. The spell. You know about it, right?” She tugs down the waistband of her shorts, and I see the small symbol.

“Okay ...” I draw out the word, worried about coming to the wrong conclusion.

She huffs out a sigh, shoves my hand off her chest, and tugs her shirt over her head, baring her glorious boobs to the starry night and my starving eyes.

“So, we doing this or what?”

My mind is set in slow mode as I try to keep up. “And by *this*, you mean ...”

“Come on, Manny. You're naked, and you just told me I smell like your mate. You going to ravish me or what?”

My fingers grab hold of the remaining fabric on her body, moving out of sync with my mouth. “You don't want to talk?” I ask, my voice a deep rumble in my chest.

Blossom holds up her hands as if they were a scale. “Talk, orgasms. Talk, orgasms.” She raises them up and down, as if considering both options, then lifts her right hand high. “Look at that. Orgasms it is.”

“I mean, if that's what the scale says.” With a fierce grin, I tear her shorts in half and then sit up fast to capture her mouth in an intoxicating kiss.

Blossom moans, wrapping her arms around my neck as she kisses me back and rocks her now-bare pussy against my quickly hardening cock.

This is everything I've hoped for and feared. A pivotal moment where she's giving me a chance.

*Don't fuck this up.*

Fisting my hand in her silky hair, I grasp the strands in an unforgiving grip as I drag my mouth from hers. Blossom

whimpers, her lips looking bee stung from my aggressive kisses. What I wouldn't give to see them wrapped around my cock.

*Not tonight. This is all for her. To show her exactly why she should forgive me. Give me a chance.*

"You hold still, Bud," I growl at her.

Her wrist twists, and an apple pings off my shoulder, the magical assault more surprising than painful.

"Don't call me your buddy when you're trying to seduce me," she hisses, looking like she might bite me if I wasn't holding her head in place.

A slow smile steals over my lips. "Is that what you think that nickname means? Buddy?"

Blossom's lips pucker, and I let out a dark laugh.

"Oh, Blossom. You tasty little wood witch. I mean bud, as in flower." My cheeks ache with a grin as I watch her skin color. "That's right. A flower bud. Small, sure, but full of life and potential and beauty. Hiding all its secrets from the world until it's ready to burst forward in the most glorious bloom. Just waiting to blossom."

She bites her lip now, her eyes closed, as if she can't handle what I'm saying. But I plan to make it impossible for her to ignore my adoration.

"And how about this little bud?" My free hand slips past her intimate curls, pushing apart silky folds that remind me of petals until I discover that perfect bundle of nerves. "You want me to tell you how much I love this bud, don't you? How, most nights, I imagine you stroking this spot while I fuck my fist."

Blossom's body tightens, thighs gripping my hips. Chest rising and falling in a rapid rhythm with her pants. I can feel the puffs of her hot breath against the cool sweat on my skin. Each one brings the scent of her arousal, mixed with spiced apples, and I swear I'd never need another meal in my life if I could always breathe her in.

The delicate skin between her legs grows slick the more I stroke her. She wraps a clawing hand around my wrist, but not to pull me away. Instead, Blossom holds me in place as her hips rock. Each movement presses her ass against my cock, and I can't hold back my needy grunts.

“You close? You gonna be a good little witch and come for me?”

“Oh goddess.” Blossom stares at me through half-lidded eyes, and the flames in her cheeks scald me with erotic heat.

“Say my name when you come,” I demand. “Say it.”

Her throat bobs with a swallow, and she whimpers. But I don't go easy on her, keeping my grip tight in her hair. I refuse to let her hide from me in this moment. The animal in me wants to speed up my ministrations, but I keep steady.

I'm relentless.

I'm rewarded.

“Manny!” she groans as her body shudders and tenses, curling inward as the sweetest inarticulate sounds spill from her throat.

Releasing her hair, I tuck Blossom against my chest, holding her head under my chin.

But I keep my fingers on her clit, pressing down to encourage the orgasm to linger, enjoying the way her body grasps at empty air.

A wordless request to be filled.

“You want my cock inside next time,” I murmur against her hair, “don't you?”

Blossom's nails dig into my shoulders, but she doesn't say anything. Only drags in deep breaths.

And she nods.

“That's my good little wood witch. I've got what you want.” My fingers shake with anticipation before I dig them into her hips. Then, I lift the woman I love and carefully ease her pliant body onto my shaft.

Blossom's gasp mingles with my pleased growl.

Right. This is exactly right.

Her tight grasp threatens to undo me, but I grit my teeth and push the orgasm back. Just for a moment. Just long enough to revel in this reality I was never certain would occur. Blossom Fernmore softening for me. Wanting me.

The wood witch presses her body closer to mine, rocking her hips.

"You slowed down," she complains. "Don't slow down."

I let out a satisfied chuckle. "You want fast?"

With a quick shift, I have Blossom on her back, and I drive into her, every thrust deep, demanding, and unrelenting.

"You're going to feel me tomorrow, Pumpkin Princess," I growl with a toothy grin. "I know you're still going to try to win. Try to beat me. But with every move you make, you're going to remember that I had you pinned."

Blossom smirks up at me, even as lust drags a dark flush over her cheeks. "Big talk for a wolf who hasn't even reached the finish line."

Then, she wraps her legs around my waist, arms around my shoulders, and crashes her mouth into mine. Her heated kiss ends with a sharp sting on my lip and blood on her mouth.

The animalistic move does it. With a low groan, I spill everything I am into the witch, her triumphant laughter almost as beautiful as the way she moans my name.



## BLOSSOM

THIS IS IT. If I win this round, I win the whole thing.

True, there's still one more event after this, but it'll just be the final entertainment at that point.

After our world-altering sex in the woods last night, Manny and I didn't talk much. The orgasm made me sleepy, and after pulling on the clothes that survived the wolf's mauling, I got to my feet and swayed. The werewolf immediately scooped me into his arms and started to jog toward my childhood home. I would have protested if I hadn't nodded off, only waking up when he set me down on the porch, wrapped me in my discarded blanket, and nudged me toward the backdoor.

I slept well. Then, I woke up to a werewolf knocking on my front door with a mocha from Coffee & Claws. Turned out, I'd slept till noon, and I might have missed this next challenge if my competition hadn't wanted to caffeinate me.

I glance over to where Manny walks at my side, expecting to see a look of concentration on his face, an indication of his

competitive nature rising to the surface. Over the years, I've watched Heather and him get down and dirty on some of these bouts.

But he doesn't look determined.

He's just looking at me.

"What?" I wipe a hand over my mouth in case my breakfast bagel left behind crumbs.

Instead of answering, Manny sidles closer, scoops up my hand, and kisses the center of my palm. "Good luck," he says.

I snatch my hand back. "Is this a distraction technique?"

His brows dip, and then an evil smirk curves his lips. He hooks me around the waist, and the sneaky wolf presses my back against the closest tree.

"No, Blossom. *This* is a distraction technique."

Then, his mouth captures mine in a heady kiss that tastes like red wine and man. I moan and let my lips part so I can lick his tongue, wondering what terrible god gifted this wolf with such a tantalizing flavor.

Then, the terrible beast breaks the kiss, but uses his hips to keep me pinned to the tree and clasps my hands above my head, making manacles of his fingers.

"I'm not going to let you win," he says. "Not even if you say I can fuck you right here and now in exchange for me going easy on you."

I glare at him. "I'd never offer that!" I struggle to free myself, but Manny keeps me locked in place, nostrils flaring, chest heaving and pressing into mine. "I'm going to win because I'm awesome. And then *maybe* I'll let you fuck me again. But only if I have time between my Pumpkin Queen duties."

Manny firms his mouth in a line, trying to stifle a smile and failing. So, instead, he leans in and gently nips my lip.

But when he next speaks, his voice has lost its playful edge. "If you win, will you still stay?"

*Will I stay?*

The question is too heavy for our snarky banter.

*Will I finally come back to this town that calls to me?*

*Will I come back ... to be with him?*

But that's not what Manny asked.

*What if I say yes, move back to Folk Haven, and this sultry side of him vanishes?*

I couldn't stand to see him every day, only to get dismissed. Discarded.

With my life now, I'm the one who does the leaving. But that would be impossible if I set down roots in this soil that feels like part of my soul.

Can I trust the side of this wolf he's shown me since the mating ceremony? Do I believe the words Manny spoke to me last night?

It's hard to concentrate with his hard body between my thighs and the taste of him lingering in my mouth.

And the urge to battle him, to push back and never give an inch that isn't earned, rises in me.

"That wasn't the bet," I say.

Manny flinches, and his grip on my wrists loosens. When he backs away, allowing my feet to regain the ground, I spy a wounded expression on his face that has guilt spearing through my gut.

But he quickly clears the vulnerability away, replacing it with a smirk. "You're right. If I want Blossom Fernmore to stay in Folk Haven, I'll just have to win you."

Then, he stalks off toward our destination, giving me his back.

"That's not the bet either!" I call after him as I jog to catch up, feeling off-balance and defensive. "You don't win me." When I reach his side, I spy the tight set of his mouth.



“If you don’t shut up, I’m going to kiss you again,” he growls.

“I can talk if I—”

Manny hauls me into his chest and melds his mouth to mine. Without thought, I wrap my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck and kiss him back with equal fervor. When he breaks away, the wolf is panting, and I can see the animal in his eyes.

Then, the phone in my pocket starts buzzing, bringing my mind back to the present moment. Manny lets me slide down his body, and I pull out my cell to see my dad calling.

I answer it. “Hey, Papa.”

“Is Manny with you? Are you almost here? We’ve got an eager crowd today!”

Through the phone speaker, I can hear voices chattering away.

“We’re close. Be there in a minute.”

When I hang up, Manny slips his hand into mine and tugs me forward, his eyes focused straight ahead.

Guess the guy is done talking. And kissing.

And I refuse to focus on how much I’d like to revisit that second one.

Soon enough, we’re breaking through the forest edge to arrive on the shores of Lake Galen. The water glistens in the sunlight, and a short ways away, a group has assembled. But the spectators aren’t only on the land. Out in the waves, a few pontoon boats float, anchored in the shallow water of the cove.

“There’re our champions!” my father calls out, waving us toward the gathering.

I see now that there’re multiple firepits set up, and I expect people will get them lit in a few hours once the sun has set.

Hopefully, this challenge doesn’t last as long as all that. I’m competitive, but after last night, my stamina is questionable.

The werewolf beside me is probably doing just fine.

I tug my hand from his, not wanting to deal with questions and gossip. I swear I hear a soft, displeased growl from Manny, but I ignore him and hurry forward.

“Now that the Pumpkin Princess and Pumpkin Prince have arrived, we can commence the next round of the competition!” Papa, nimble for his age, balances on the top of a barrel as he holds the attention of the crowd.

There’s a tap in the side of the container, and once more, I see most everyone clutching a cup of cider. Papa brews a batch specifically for this weekend. A onetime-only tasting event.

“What do you have for the lucky pumpkin royalty today?” Selena calls out to my father, an easy grin creasing the witch’s cheeks.

She sits beside a white woman with soft brown hair and an air of dangerous power around her. Violetta Radeva, the sea witch who now lives on a lake. The two magical women hold hands where they recline on a set of camping chairs.

“So glad you asked. Blossom, Manny, please join me.”

My dad waves to the shoreline by his barrel, and we come to a stop beneath him. When we both face the crowd on land, searching for a clue to our next challenge, he laughs and points out to the water.

“Hope you two are ready for a dip!”

With growing dread, I rotate and watch as Heath steps up to the side of one of the farther pontoon boats and upends a basket over the water. A cascade of apples topples into the gentle waves.

My father’s voice booms overhead. “Next challenge ... bobbing for apples!”



## MANNY

TEN MINUTES. As many apples as we can gather.

The catch—as if we need another one—is that we have to use our mouths to bring them to shore.

Ultimate bobbing for apples.

Blossom has a furious frown on her gorgeous face as we line up where the water meets the red clay shore.

She knows I have the advantage.

And without her promise to stay even if I lose, I have no plans to go easy on her.

“Get ready!” Root calls out.

Blossom kicks off her sneakers and peels off her socks, left only in a matching set of green leggings and a sports bra.

Fuck, I want to drag her into the woods and peel the athletic gear off her and fuck her on the forest floor like last night, only in broad daylight this time.

*Not now, I reprimand myself. Win this. Get her to stay.*

“Get set!”

The wood witch crouches in a sprinting position. I leisurely strip off my shirt, enjoying the way her eyes flick to my bare chest, then to the water, then back to my chest.

*That’s not all I’m releasing, my beautiful Blossom.*

“Go!”

I drop my shorts, unabashed that I’m bare-assed in front of a good fifty mythics.

Blossom stumbles in the middle of her lunge toward the water before whirling on me with a heated glare. “Don’t you dare!”

But I only grin, the expression turning into a grimace as I coax out my wolf.

“Foul! That’s a foul!” the angry witch shouts.

“Sorry, Blossom,” I hear her dad say, the man not sounding contrite in the least. “You used magic in the maze. That means fair is fair.”

*Damn right.*

“Fucking wolves,” she snarls.

Then, there’s a splash, and I know she’s off, her lithe body arrowing toward the closest apple. My eyes can’t track her though, my sight blurring as I shift. I need another few breaths to push through the pain of the change.

Some of my kind can transform as fast as a blink with little more than a twinge.

Lucky bastards.

Still, even though the switch to my lupine form lost me half a minute, once I’m in my canine state, I charge into the water. The liquid parts easily as I paddle fast for the bobbing orbs, my strong strokes pushing me forward at a pace my human body wouldn’t have managed.

Blossom has already reached her first apple. She’s an adept swimmer, having spent most of her summers in this lake. The

problem is, the chill water drags at her muscles while I now have a thick coat to protect me.

And there's also the issue of grabbing an apple with that sassy mouth of hers.

My lengthened jaw makes it easy to snatch a bobbing piece of fruit from where it floats. I kick my legs in a quick turn and shoot back to the shore. After dropping off my first treasure, I don't bother shaking the water out of my fur before plunging back in. As I plow through the waves, I spy Blossom's powerful freestyle, her teeth clamped on an apple of her own.

She's not giving up without a fight.

We continue on, back and forth, cheering from the shore following our progress. When the horn goes off, signaling the end of our ten minutes, Blossom and I return to land.

She collapses on the red rocky beach, her chest heaving with pants, soaking wet sports bra clinging to her chest and revealing the outline of a rigid set of nipples.

I want to warm the peaks with my mouth, and if we didn't have an audience—one that includes her father—I'd do exactly that. Instead, I focus on the competition.

Her pile has three apples.

Mine has seven.

Root steps forward, grinning broadly at the gathering.

“The winner of the apple bobbing challenge is the Pumpkin Prince! Which means we enter the last round with a tie!” He claps his hands together. “The final competition will begin at sunset.”



## BLOSSOM

A TIE. Damn it. I thought I could clinch my win, but now, we're back on equal ground.

As the sun dips behind the horizon, anticipation of the final challenge grows to a palpable hum in the tipsy collection of witches and werewolves.

Ever since my loss at apple bobbing earlier, I've avoided Manny, not sure how to feel about the conclusion of this festival. These two days were supposed to be a lighthearted seasonal celebration. But with the bet, there's so much more weighing on this outcome.

*What happens if I win?*

*What happens if I lose?*

One thing for sure is, I know *I* want to be the one making the big decisions in my life.

I should never had made that bet with Manny. Never have given him the possible power to demand I stay in Folk Haven. The wager never would have happened if I'd admitted an extremely obvious fact to myself.

I like having to kiss Manny good-bye every time I see him.

If only I'd acknowledged that, sometimes, when I visit town, I drag my feet while leaving to give him an extra moment or two to arrive. Because my lips crave the familiar warmth of his cheek, paired with the rich wine scent of his skin.

And my heart longs for a moment when I matter to him more than anyone else.

I could have kissed him good-bye for years and not minded. Not really. All the animosity I imbued those partings with had been born from frustration. From anger and upset that he never saw me as anything other than his friend's little sister to tease.

*"I've always wanted to be yours."*

That's what he said. Is it the truth?

Anxiously, I fiddle with the ring on my middle finger and watch my father chatting with the mayor so I don't stare at the wolf who hovers near my side. Close enough that I can feel the heat of his body.

*"Will you still stay?"*

I want to decide that on my own. For myself. But now, because I've played the *I loathe Manny* role with such dedication, I'm stuck on the verge of being forced to move back to Folk Haven based on my pride alone.

*Would that be so bad? To live in this place again?*

"Gather round, everybody!" Papa hollers, and voices hush as we all surround two stumps of wood with sheets draped over them.

With a dramatic flourish, Root Fernmore tugs away the white cloth, revealing ...

Pumpkins.

Two of them. One for me and one for Manny.

"The final task is a carve off!" The glee is apparent in his voice. Nothing gets people more excited about visiting The

Patch than the idea of pumpkin carving. “You’ll have to fashion an image that pleases our illustrious judge, Mayor Nightson.” My father waves the woman forward as he sets out a range of tools beside each gourd. “If you would be so kind, Mayor, please tell our contestants what image you would like them to carve into their pumpkins.”

Belinda shares a smile between Manny and me, then addresses the spectators. “As I’m sure everyone here knows, one of my greatest loves is this town.” Her focus returns to us. “What I would like for you both to carve today is what you most love about Folk Haven. I think that would be the perfect way to ring in this fall season.” She claps her hands together, the sound a punctuation on the challenge.

Goddess, it’s like the griffin can divine the turmoil in my heart. It’s obvious which way she would vote on stay versus leave.

“That’s a fantastic theme!” Papa slaps his thigh and grins wide. “Can’t wait to see what the pumpkin royalty come up with. You both have an hour, starting ... now!”

The crowd cheers and calls out suggestions for the first few moments as Manny and I snatch up our gourds, but everyone soon refocuses on the booze and food. Folk Haven’s places and events they offer rattle in my head.

*Lake Galen ... Main Street ... The Halloween Ball ... the Gauntlet ... Ramla University ... Coffee & Claws ... Local Brew ... Marlin’s Marina ... the Public Mythic Library ...*

The list goes on.

And yet none of them ring true for me. They’re all wonderful things about this small town. But they’re not what I love most. They aren’t what had me staring at my soon-to-end lease agreement and wondering if I should let the claim on my townhouse lapse. They aren’t what set my pulse thrumming and my breath quickening every time I drive past the *Welcome to Folk Haven* town sign.

Hugging the pumpkin to my chest, I close my eyes and let my mind soften around the simple question ...



*What draws me home?*

The answers come slowly, but they live in vibrant color once I let them free from my heart.

*The forest.*

*Papa's cottage.*

*My family.*

*Him.*

With a deep sigh, I allow a silhouetted image to form in my mind. It's simple yet detailed. If I start now, I should be able to fashion what I want in an hour.

When I set my pumpkin on the ground in front of me and snatch up my knife, I spare a glance Manny's way.

He's staring at me.

My heart beats hard, my cheeks heat, and old defenses slip into place.

"No cheating," I hiss to cover the way his unwavering attention affects every cell in my body.

The wolf grins, undaunted by my feigned animosity, then drops his eyes to his own vegetable canvas.

We both set to work.

If this had been the first task assigned to us, laid out for me yesterday morning, when I still set Manny in the Enemy category in my brain, I would've hacked away at this pumpkin frantically, desperate to create an image that far surpassed any the wolf could contemplate.

But now, I ease into the task. After I scoop out the innards, the pumpkin ends up cradled in my lap as I slip my sharp tool into the soft rind. My fingers grow sticky, the nail beds staining orange. But slowly, the picture in my head translates.

"One more minute!" My father's booming voice tugs me out of an almost-meditative state.

When I jerk my head up, I realize the crowd has finished their eating, and they're all watching us with held breath.

I set my pumpkin in the grass and wipe off specks of pulp before reaching for the short, thick candle left for me. With the strike of a match, the teasing scent of smoke fills the air. I light the wick, then carefully set the candle inside my creation.

“Time’s up!” Papa claps his hands, and when I meet his gaze, I share his grin.

I’ve missed this. Being immersed in his fun. The past few years, I haven’t even attended the Pumpkin Wars as a spectator. Now, I’m part of the silly tradition, and I find that I love it.

Even with the bet looming over my head.

“Pumpkin Princess, if you would be so kind as to show your creation to Mayor Nightson.”

I stand and set my pumpkin on the wood stump where it first rested, turning the gourd so the crowd can take in all the details, though some might need to come closer to get the full effect.

“I call it *Home*,” I say, keeping it simple, not looking to sell my creation to the judge. Either she gets it and she likes it or she doesn’t. But I’m proud of what I made.

My pumpkin shows a small rendition of my father’s house and trees towering above it. The windows flicker with the warmth of the candlelight, revealing silhouettes of people, and though they’re indistinct, to me, I see my father and sister. A half-moon hovers above my carved forest, which resembles the pines and oaks that surround my childhood home.

Tucked in between the tree trunks—so small, almost impossible to see—is a set of eyes.

Wolfish eyes, though I might be the only one who knows that.

“Beautiful, Blossom,” Mayor Nightson offers, tracing a finger over my image, and I can hear the sincerity in her voice.

Witches call out compliments, and I drop my eyes and fiddle with my ring, feeling exposed yet pleased.

“Pumpkin Prince,” Papa prompts, “if you could show us yours.”

Manny nods.

“I call it *Home*,” he says, and I roll my eyes at his taunt.

Then, the wolf turns his creation to face the crowd.

His pumpkin is covered in flowers.



## BLOSSOM

AS MY PAPA places the crown on my head, I can't help the silly grin that overtakes my face or the way my eyes seek out the Pumpkin Prince.

Manny is off to the side, clapping like everyone else. The wolf even has on a smile.

But his gaze catches mine, and I spy the regret in them.

We both know what this win means.

He lost the wager. I don't have to move to Folk Haven.

And I never have to kiss him good-bye again.

Last night could be a onetime deal. I could shrug it off as a hate fuck and move on. Forget the way he touched me. Stroked me. Lay beneath me with my name on his lips and awe in his eyes.

*It was one night. One night can't rewrite years of animosity.*

Still, after accepting congratulations from what seems like hundreds of witches, I gravitate toward a shadowy space

between two trees, where he waits.

“You wear it well.” Manny tilts his head toward mine, and I reach up to finger the delicate metal construction.

“Told you I’d win.”

“That you did.” He stares at me. Into me.

I shiver under the weight of his attention. “Victory would have been sweeter if you’d tried harder on that last one. What even was that design?”

The smirk he gives me has a secretive edge. “You’ll figure it out.”

I squint my eyes at him, but then shrug. If the wolf wants to be elusive, then that’s his prerogative.

Manny reaches forward and hooks a single finger in the belt loop of my jeans. He uses his hold to tug me closer, into the shadows with him until we can hear the gathering, but not see anyone. Effectively alone, he cages me against the trunk of an oak tree, leaves crunching under the thick soles of his boot.

“What’s your plan, Pumpkin Queen?”

“My plan?”

He leans in to drag his nose up the column of my neck. “Now that you have the crown, will you conquer Folk Haven? Make this town yours?”

Having him this close, his heat surrounding me, makes my body tight and my voice hoarse. The tree at my back hums with life and encourages me closer to the man.

But my mouth sticks to old habits. “That wasn’t the bet.”

His fingers tighten, digging into my hips, almost hard enough to bruise, but not quite. “That’s true.” From the way he growls the words, I know Manny wants to add something. After sweeping his tongue over my pounding pulse, he snarls, “Fuck the bet.”

For a moment, I consider giving in. Doing as he suggested.

But again, I speak from a place of self-preservation. “One night doesn’t change everything.”

Lies. Last night changed a lot of things.

But I’m terrified the changes were huge for me and only passing for Manny.

The wolf pushes forward, crowding me, pinning me in place with his hips. “It changes enough.”

All I give him is a shrug, trying to keep the intense way I want him to myself.

Manny’s eyes glare into mine. “You belong here.”

“With you?”

“Yes.”

I’ve wanted that since I was thirteen. Since I started smelling good, apparently. I’ve ached for this man who always acted like I was a bother. He claims I’ve had the scent of a mate all along, but despite that, he’s only ever teased me.

And there are the other people who smelled like mates to him that couldn’t hold his interest.

Why should I trust that his longing reflects mine? Why should I tear down my defenses just because we had good sex?

*Really good sex.*

But the physical isn’t all there is. I need more. I need to trust him.

I need to know that my returning to Folk Haven, that letting myself fall for Manny Ramirez, won’t end in devastation.

But of course, instead of saying that, I go defensive, the way I always do around him.

I scoff. “Excuse me if you changing your mind yesterday isn’t enough for me to upend my life.”

Manny grasps the sides of my face, fingers delving into my hair, but he doesn’t dislodge my crown. “I told you I’ve wanted you since I was sixteen.”

“You *lusted* after me since then. I smelled good. But I don’t let my pussy make my life decisions.”

“If that’s the case, then maybe you should stop humping my thigh.”

*Am I? Shit.*

But he’s the one that shoved it between my legs, pressing up against my greedy clit. I glare up at him.

Manny sucks in a deep breath and lets it out slow.

Then, he rests his lips against my forehead in a gentle kiss. “I’ll be in the orchard again tonight. Come find me. Even if it’s to say good-bye. Even though you don’t have to.”

The wolf steps away, releasing me. His face is in the shadows, so I can’t read his expression.

“The crown was always meant for you,” he says.

Then, he’s gone, disappearing into the woods, leaving me behind, achy and confused.

No part of me wants to rejoin the festivities, so I turn my feet toward my father’s house instead, mind reeling with longing and doubt as I stomp through the dark forest.

Once I’m alone in my childhood bedroom, I stare at myself in the mirror. Ridiculous neon-green outfit. Hair dried in random waves after the dip in the lake. Skin still flushed from being so close to the man I want.

I can feel him, between my legs, just like he claimed I would. The frigid water numbed the sensation for a stretch, but now, the subtle soreness is back, and my body misses his.

My eyes flit up to the top of my head.

The silly crown that I was so proud of weighs heavy on my forehead now. I snatch it off, and for a brief, petulant moment, I consider chucking it to the other side of my bedroom.

But I get over that urge fast. Manny made this crown. I remember Heather mentioning once that he fashioned it one of the years he won and she was determined to win it from him

the next round. She did, flaunting her victory in front of the grumbling wolf.

From afar, I thought the headpiece looked beautiful. Twisted vines and amber beads twined into the thing.

But I never asked to see it up close, afraid that my jealousy of being left out of the competition would be obvious if I reverently cradled the circlet.

It's mine now. Won fairly.

*"The crown was always meant for you."*

What did Manny mean by that?

Instead of discarding the precious headpiece, I sink to the ground and hold it in my hands, letting my fingers trace over the metal. I follow the carefully crafted roots and spindly leaves hammered from metal into a perfect plant shape.

A familiar shape.

My ring glistens in the low light, the exact same shade as the crown. Side by side, it almost appears as if my ring was plucked from the larger piece.

As if they were a set.

*It can't be. Papa gave me this ring.*

*But ... did he?*

I found the gift box on my bedside table the morning I was leaving for college.

*To remember where home is,* the card read.

The note wasn't signed. I always assumed it was from my father.

*But what if it was left by someone else?*

What if this piece of jewelry I've treasured all my life, the reminder of home, came from the hands of a werewolf?

What if that werewolf has wanted nothing more than for me to come back?

*He was telling the truth.*



All this time, I've meant something to him.

Not just my body. This is not a means of seduction. If it were, Manny would have used it to his advantage. But this ring was a silent gift of love he never needed me to know about, only to have.

The pumpkin carving comes to my mind then, and the meaning behind the image is so obvious that I have to laugh.

The wolf covered it in blossoms and called it *Home*.



## MANNY

“THE THING you most love about Folk Haven is *me*. I’m *home*.”

Blossom’s snappish voice pulls a smile from my previously frowning mouth, and I lift my head, watching from my seat beneath an apple tree as the wood witch appears from the forest, striding toward me with the pumpkin crown still sitting snug on her head.

If Blossom competes next year, I don’t know that I could put in my all. I never want to see that adornment on a head other than hers. She looks beautiful in my creation.

“Figured out the secret message of my pumpkin, huh?”

She scowls and crosses her arms over her chest. “Could you be any more obvious?”

“I don’t know. Let me try.” I lean forward and hold my hands out, palms splayed in surrender. “Blossom Fernmore, I’m gone for you. Please know that as much as I love teasing you, this is the truth. Please believe me when I say, you’re all that I want, and your happiness means everything to me.”

She's silent for an agonizing stretch, then extends her hand.

On it, I see the ring. The one I made.

I wondered if she would ever realize who the gift was from. I half expected her to know the moment she opened the box.

And then to chuck it at my head.

But I overheard Heather ask about the ring once, her eyes on me. My best friend knew I'd grown interested in metalworking and that I'd convinced a local dragon artist, Dimitri Novac, to let me apprentice under him. He taught me until he passed away a couple of years ago. I still miss that grumpy old mythic.

Now that I work for Owen at his recycling company, I have access to plenty of scrap metal for my hobby.

The crown was the first piece I fashioned that Dimitri approved of.

The ring was the second.

But Blossom told Heather that their dad had gotten it for her as a gift. That was when I realized the story she'd made up for herself.

One that Heather didn't believe, but was a good enough friend to keep her mouth shut about.

Now that I think about it, that must have been Heather's first hint that I was in love with her sister.

"I can't believe you never told me. You're a sneaky wolf," Blossom chides with affection in her voice, and I preen under the hints of her caring for me.

*But will she stay?*

*Can I do anything to keep her here?*

The problem is, I don't want to force Blossom into the decision. No more bets or tricks. I want her to choose Folk Haven on her own.

I want her to choose me.

“Let me know if you want a complete set,” I tell her. “Necklace. Bracelet.”

The wood witch saunters up to where I sit in the grass, back braced against the trunk of an apple tree. I told her to meet me here because even if she didn't show, I'd still have the scent of her around me. Still be able to stare at the flattened patch of grass where I held her last night.

Blossom sinks down, settling in my lap as her legs straddle my waist. “Nipple piercings?”

I rear back in surprise, shoulders hitting the tree trunk. My wolfish libido roars to the forefront, taking the joke entirely too seriously.

“Yes.” I growl out the word, hands encircling her waist. “But I need to see the flesh I'm working with.”

Blossom snorts. Then, her face turns thoughtful as she speaks. “Jenny owns a house on the lake in the human section.”

Confused by the change in topic, I offer a confused nod. “She does.”

Blossom wraps her arms around my neck and fiddles with the hair at the base of my skull. “Heather was saying they were going to move into Jenny's place permanently. Not go back and forth anymore. Heather's going to sell her house.”

I remember my friend mentioning this too.

“She asked if I wanted to buy it.”

My lungs clench, and I have trouble inhaling. “When?”

“Before the mating.”

Before everything that happened between us. Did she tell her no and is now rethinking the refusal?

“I told her I'd think about it,” Blossom says.

“You did?”

The wood witch scratches her nails against my scalp in a gentle caress.

Even though she's straddling my lap, Blossom isn't close enough. I tighten my grip on her waist, dragging her flush against my chest, and bury my nose in her hair.

Apples, spice, and warm woman.

*Much better.*

"I think I've always wanted to come back here," Blossom murmurs. "Once I realized I didn't have to. That I could survive out in the world on my own. Without Papa and Heather hovering over me and treating me like the baby of the family, the town stopped feeling so suffocating."

Every syllable out of her mouth gives me hope. I don't need Blossom to move to Folk Haven for me. All I need is for her to give me a chance while she's here. I'll utilize this proximity to badger her into loving me. Craft jewelry for every part of her body. Race with her through every forest. Give her orgasms in every orchard.

"Made any decisions?" My voice is rough on the words as I keep my begging at bay. To distract myself, I focus on the soft press of her against my chest and the way her intoxicating apple-pie scent fills my nose and my lungs.

Blossom hums and fiddles with the collar of my shirt. "I have. But I'm worried about something."

My stomach dips low. "What's got you upset?"

She sighs, heavy and long. "That you'll be completely insufferable when you find out I'm going to tell Heather yes. And that part of the reason is because I'm in love with you."

She's right. I will never let her forget this.

Cradling her cheek, I guide Blossom's face so her eyes meet mine. So she sees the incandescent happiness spilling out of every pore of my being.

"Bud—"

“I said, *part* of the reason!” She tries to scowl and pounds a not-at-all hard fist against my chest. “There are other things I miss about Folk Haven. It’s not just you.”

I roll us into the grass, pinning her sweet little body against the ground.

“But I’m the biggest reason.” I pair the proclamation with a gentle, suggestive thrust of my hips.

My wood witch groans and digs her fingers into my hair, pulling until almost the point of pain. “See? This is exactly what I was worried about. You’re going to be impossible to be around.”

“Only when I open my mouth,” I argue. “There are plenty of ways to keep that part of me busy.”

Blossom’s cheeks go red, even as she smirks. “True.”

More snarky, teasing comments come to my mind, but I don’t let them out. There will be time in the future to get into verbal sparring matches with my witch.

Because she’s staying.

I hold her gaze, remaining quiet for long enough that understanding flashes in her eyes. She knows the next words from my mouth won’t be a joke.

“I love you, Blossom Fernmore.”

Her gaze softens.

“Please, let me be yours. I want to carry the heavy furniture into your new house, and feed you s’mores, and fashion you hundreds of pieces of jewelry, and run through the woods with you. Let me love you, whenever you’re ready. Let me in. Let me make up for every wrong I’ve done to you.”

“Manny”—Blossom releases the grip she has on my hair to trace her thumbs over my eyebrows and down to the curves of my cheeks—“let me put apples in a pie for you rather than chucking them at your head. Let me kiss your cheek, not because I’m saying good-bye, but because I want to have the taste of you on my lips. Let me be your home. Let me love you.”

The sneaky witch just plunged her sharp-nailed hand past my rib cage and gripped my heart.

But the hold, though it threatens to devastate me, is also a gentle cradle I can't live without.

“Okay,” I rasp. “No arguments here.”

Blossom's eyes sparkle. “None from me either. Look at that. I guess we *can* get along.”

As our mouths meet in a kiss, a happy growl rumbles deep in my chest. And when Blossom rolls me onto my back, I revel in the way she dominates me.

Suddenly, all her delicious warmth is gone, except for a tight grip around my wrists and ankles. I turn my head and realize vines have wrapped around my limbs.

“Bet you can't catch me, wolf.” Blossom crouches at my side only long enough to smack a quick kiss on my cheek. Then, she takes off running, disappearing between the dark trees with light laughter and the sparkle of green magic reflecting off the pumpkin crown.

I grin, tugging at my restraints. And when I finally break free, I release a night-shattering howl.

Warning my wood witch that in every race with her as the prize, I intend to win.

*The End*



Thank you so much for reading WINNING OVER A WOOD WITCH. I hope you enjoyed Blossom and Manny's love story!

Do you want to spend more time in the mythic-filled Folk Haven? Check out the following books for more small town, sexy, fated mates romances.

[SEDUCED BY A SELKIE](#)

*Folk Haven Book 1*

Delta Novac hates Folk Haven, and as soon as she's done cleaning out her father's mess of a house, she's giving the town her taillights. But after she dives into the lake to save a

drowning man that's not actually in danger, she finds herself with a sweet and sexy selkie shadow ready to do anything to get her to stay.

### [SUCKER FOR A SIREN](#)

*Folk Haven Book 2*

Seamus MacNamara refuses to believe in the selkie mating myth: that his one true partner will rescue him from great danger. So, when the adorably beautiful barista he has a secret crush saves his life, Seamus ends up insulting her instead offering heartfelt thanks. Now he just wants a chance to redeem himself...and he's willing to go down on his knees to earn her forgiveness.

### [SWEARING AT A SEA MONSTER](#)

*Folk Haven Book 3*

Moira MacNamara takes shit from no one, and that includes Levi Abadi, the enticing, infuriating monster who thinks he can dictate what she does with her own property. She makes a deal with him, sealed in blood. But now she can't help noticing how her veins thrum with heat every time he comes near...

### [SHELTER FOR A SHIFTER](#)

*Folk Haven Book 4*

Ame Shelly found a cat, but this is no ordinary stray. She's almost certain her feline friend is a man stuck in an animal body. After years of searching, she's finally found the correct spell to release him from his fuzzy prison. Only, the man who appears in front of her demands two things: his witch mate and revenge.

If you enjoyed WINNING OVER A WOOD WITCH, please consider rating and reviewing the book. Reviews help other readers discover my books, which helps me make a living and funds my ability to write more mythical romances for you!



Keep reading for a sneak peek of *Shelter for a Shifter*, Book 4 in the Folk Haven series. Join Ame Shelly, a powerful witch, as she tries to return her cat Bee to his human form. At least, she thinks he's human...

## SHELTER FOR A SHIFTER

### AME

I hold the door of Coffee & Claws open for Bee to make sure his tail doesn't catch when it swings shut. He immediately abandons me to go greet Gigabyte, an anxious dog that peers out the top of his carrier under a table near the window. Delta, Gigabyte's owner, smiles at my cat companion, then at me. Then, she goes back to typing on her computer, her nails—or more accurately, claws—filling the café with pleasant, repetitive clicking.

*Would like another academic article.* Her subtle desire slips into my mind, riding a current of my magic that brushed against the dragon, who is also a professor.

Despite the innocent nature of the want, I attempt to ignore the magical message by focusing on the stacks of colorful mugs behind the counter.

*The red one with the yellow leaf design is pretty. How many leaves? One, two, three ...*

The thoughts might be childishly simple, but I've found focusing on random objects, digging into every little detail

about them, distracts my mind from hearing the desires of everyone around me. An unfortunate side effect of my magical specialty. My siblings have learned to shield themselves, but everyone else unknowingly shouts their secret cravings the moment I'm within hearing distance.

As I keep my gaze on the mugs, I approach the counter and tug my phone out of my pocket, swiping open the Notes app. My sister is a creature of habit in many ways, but she constantly experiments with coffee. Every day, it's something new, which means I have no hope of rattling off a memorized order.

*"Iced coconut latte with almond milk and cinnamon on top,"* I read off to the barista. Belatedly, I remember to make eye contact—actually staring at a freckle on the bridge of her nose—smile, and add, "Please."

*Please don't accidentally share any dark desires with me.*

"Hi, Ame. That sounds yummy. Another Morgana experiment?" Sonya, the woman behind the counter and co-owner of the shop, gives me a smile that creases the copper skin around her eyes, reassuring me I haven't offended her with my distracted delivery.

*Want to stretch my wings.* The siren's silent longing is a quiet whisper I can easily ignore, like an overheard conversation.

"Hello, Sonya." I slide my phone back into the pocket of my overalls. The clothing piece isn't exactly flattering, but the depth of the pockets is worth the shapeless form. "Yes. She said she wanted her drink to taste like summer turning into fall."

With her so fully entrenched in the library, I was surprised that my sister knew we were approaching a change of seasons. Morgana only realized it was midsummer when I built a bonfire in our backyard.

"That's genius." Sonya raps her knuckles on the counter. "I might steal that and make it the drink of the week leading up to the equinox. I'll give your sister credit, of course."

I imagine it—the chalkboard sign outside this staple of Folk Haven, proclaiming the specialty drink was invented by a Shelly witch.

“Morgana would like that, I think.”

My sister doesn’t seek out notoriety—coffee-related or any other kind—but she might like the subtle approval of Coffee & Claws. After living in this small town for a year, she’s shared her frustration with how we’re both still seen as outsiders. I never expected to be an insider. People don’t like when I get too close to their insides, worried what I’ll do to them with my magic.

Can’t imagine how they’d feel if they found out I knew their secret desires too.

But I see Morgana’s point about fitting in when she wants to run a well-trafficked magical library.

Currently, the Folk Haven Public Mythic Library is only meagerly trafficked.

“You let her know my plan,” Sonya says. “She can object if she wants.”

“Will do.” I pass over the cash for the coffee, then drop the change in the tip jar before I wander toward the pickup end of the counter.

As I peer around the shop, searching for Bee, my eyes catch on a blue set that holds my gaze in place.

The intensity is uncomfortable, more so when I recognize the stare’s owner. And eye contact always opens a direct path into ...

*Want to bend her over a table, spank her ass. Fist her red hair. Have her moan and call me daddy.*

I tear my gaze away, drop it to the floor, and trace the grain of the oak hardwood. Anything to clear the man’s craving from my mind.

“Amethyst. I was hoping to run into you.” Hamish strolls up to me, his hands in his pockets and a wide smile on his broad mouth, no idea that I glimpsed his fantasy, starring me.

I don't blame him for being attracted to me or making a mental porno. Honestly, I've seen much more explicit desires than his. But it's particularly uncomfortable because I see Hamish so often, as he's one of the few frequent visitors to the library.

The selkie is a handsome mythic by many standards with his strong jaw, wavy and dark hair, and muscular build. Plus, there's the Scottish lilt in his voice, which hints at a life lived on a different continent.

But he's never inspired a hint of lust in me. He'll have to find another partner to bend over a table.

"Hi, Hamish." I give him a polite smile and examine the dark metal light fixtures on the ceiling to avoid hearing any more of his imaginary dirty talk.

The smell of freshly baked pastries is another pleasant distraction, and I glance toward the kitchen, wondering if Heath—the baker and other co-owner of Coffee & Claws—might be on the verge of bringing out some tasty creations. I never drink coffee—I've found caffeine makes me anxious—but I wouldn't deny myself a scone.

"It's been too long since I came by the library," Hamish says, still intent on speaking to me.

"Not too long," I murmur. "You came last week." And I might have snuck out the back door after seeing his car from my bedroom window.

From the corner of my eye, I see the selkie grin as he continues to watch me.

"Keeping track of my visits? I'm flattered." *Take me in her mouth.* "Why don't you let me buy you a treat to go with your coffee?" *Watch her suck me.* "We can grab a table and get to know each other better." The selkie gestures to the empty seats in the café as his imagination has me on my knees.

Normally, I don't mind lingering in Coffee & Claws, especially if it means I can sit on the floor near Delta's table and say hello to Gigabyte. Even though I can manipulate what

animals want, I never seem to sense them the same way I do with humans and mythics. They're a relief to be around.

But I don't have any urge to spend my afternoon with Hamish, dodging his desires. Luckily, I have a ready-made excuse.

"I'm here to get coffee for Morgana. To go. Need to get back to the house before the ice in her drink melts."

"Here you go, Ame. Tell your sister I said hi." Sonya slides my cup to me across the counter with perfect timing.

"Sure thing." I turn to find my path blocked by the selkie.

"You're eager to get back to that library of yours." He smiles down at me.

Thinking of all the texts that still need reviewing and sorting and translating, I wrinkle my nose, as if preparing for the future sneezing that comes with the work I do. No matter how many times I run a microfiber cloth over the lot, the dust returns. Dust loves old books.

I—please never tell my sister this or else she might perish on the spot—do not.

Leather spines, cracked with age. Yellowed pages with preservation spells wearing off. Plus, witches have terrible handwriting, making their scrawled spells uneven and almost illegible on the parchment.

Give me an eBook any day.

"In a way," I say. The way that going there gets me away from minds that can't help broadcasting into mine.

He laughs, as if I said something witty. "You know, I've only ever seen the lower level. I'd enjoy a look around. Maybe you could show me what you all are hiding upstairs in that old house."

I frown and wonder if the wetness on my palm is condensation from Morgana's drink or sweat.

"There're just bedrooms upstairs."

Hamish grins. “Even better.” He steps close, bringing the scent of seaweed with him.

In the coastal town I grew up in, there was a sea witch who would create a cracker-like snack out of the slimy green foliage and would gift batches of them to families around town. One night, I was hungry for dinner, but Morgana was at a friend’s house, my brothers were at the movies, and my parents were doing what they often did—working on spells that required zero distraction. The only food in the house were those crackers, so I ate the lot. Turned out, that much salt on an empty stomach didn’t settle right, and an hour later, I puked all over my favorite blanket. No washing machine or cleaning spell was strong enough to eradicate that level of stomach acid and half-digested algae. Morgana had to throw my blankie away.

The memory and the smell have my stomach churning now.

“What do you say, Amethyst? Want to give me a private tour?” Hamish leans toward me, his eyes a deep ocean blue as they try to snag mine. *Tie her up—*

A growl rips into the space between the selkie and me, followed closely by a small black body. Bee leaps onto my shoulder, rudely hooking his claws into my T-shirt to hold his perch. Somehow, the feline-man manages not to pierce my skin.

“Gods,” Hamish barks, stumbling back a step as his searching gaze connects with Bee’s dark, menacing glare.

The cat continues to emit a noise he shouldn’t be able to make.

I don’t know that I’ve ever heard *this* growl before. Or if I have, not enough times to assign a specific meaning to it.

Normally, I try to correct Bee when he’s overly aggressive. I assume being a man, stuck in the body of a cat, has him in a perpetual stage of confusion that makes it hard to distinguish friend or foe, so he makes it easy on himself by assuming everyone is foe.

This time though, I'm silently grateful for his intervention. The salty scent lingers in the back of my nose, coaxing a queasiness in my stomach.

"You are free to visit the downstairs part of the library. Because it is public," I tell the selkie as I step around him without letting his eyes snag on mine again. "Bye."

If Hamish has anything else to say to me, he chooses not to.

Bee's unbroken growling would have made the words hard to hear anyway.



## **BEE**

*Water man smells of fish and lust.*

*He wants my witch.*

*I will tear his face off.*

[Keep reading Shelter for a Shifter!](#)



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lauren Connolly is an award-winning author of contemporary and paranormal romance stories. She has lived among mountains, next to lakes, and in imaginary worlds. Lauren can never seem to stay in one place for too long, but trust that wherever she's residing there is a dog who thinks he's a troll, twin cats hiding in the couch, and bookshelves bursting with the stories written by the authors she loves.

