



# THE NIGHTMARE

**T**he forest comes for the boy on his thirteenth birthday. He is not the first to catch the forest's notice. He will, however, be one of the last. Others have received bits of woven twine from a banshee or a shiny snail from a melusine, but he finds a wolf's jawbone on his pillow when he opens his eyes at dawn.

He was having the nightmare again. The one where his father has a face and his mother is still alive. It always begins a happy dream, until the shadows arrive. First they claim his father. Then they claim him too while his mother weeps and screams and begs the forest to change its mind.

But the forest never changes its mind. Not in the dream and not in real life either. Which is why, when the forest calls for the boy, he enters. And when the forest is done with him, he leaves. No longer a boy. No longer entirely human, but rather a ticking time bomb waiting for the forest to one day spark his fuse.





## C H A P T E R

# 1

**T**hey say that spring never comes to the forest by Hemlock Falls. It isn't true, of course. Spring comes right after winter like it's supposed to. What *is* true is how different the spring is in Hemlock Falls from the rest of the world. It's quiet and lethal. Lonely and inevitable. It sneaks up on you, shaded by winter gray that doesn't like to let go.

Even now, a month into the season, frost still clings to the north side of trees. And though the sun might rise momentarily, it won't reach this dirt road. It won't reach Winnie Wednesday as she muscles a clunky four-wheeler with no assisted steering toward the Wednesday clan meeting point.

Mist exhales from the forest like smoke from a censer. The four-wheeler lights flash and reflect, making shapes where Winnie knows there are none. It's only the maple and fir saplings of last year's spring, skeletal in the predawn darkness.

Her front teeth click together as she drives. Today is her sixteenth birthday. And today, everything is going to change.

When her headlights beam over six black SUVs, Winnie rumbles the four-wheeler to a hemlock—the tree, not the poisonous plant, although those grow here too and no one knows for which the town is named.

She flips off the lights, pulls up the hood of her sweatshirt, and waits.

Fog coils around her, an octopus embrace. She imagines what tonight's trial will be like. How it will feel to hunt a nightmare instead of just read about it.

Her mom won't talk to her about hunting—at least not anymore. Not since the *incident*. But Winnie has read the Nightmare Compendium a thousand times. A thousand thousand times. She has sketched every creature in the forest, every nightmare the American Luminaries must face. And she has pretended to face them herself, stabbing a droll in the fleshy part at the base of its neck or a manticore where the cephalothorax and abdomen meet. She has jumped and rolled and jumped and rolled so many times her body does it without thinking.

She'll be ready.

She has to be ready.

Minutes tick past. A wolf howls. A real one, she thinks, although she can't be too sure. The Compendium does describe a few nightmares that look like wolves or sound like wolves or briefly become wolves entirely.

Winnie shoves her glasses up her nose and keeps waiting. And waiting. Her stomach grumbles; she wishes she'd eaten breakfast. She also wishes she'd slept more, although she ought to be used to the insomnia after three weeks of it. Ever since her birthday month began and the reality of what she has been planning these past four years settled in, sleep has been elusive.

The wolf howls again, though it's farther away this time. It sounds lonely, lost. Winnie hates that she understands the feeling.

She hasn't told anyone she's going to attempt the first hunter trial tonight. If they find out, they won't let her. Aunt Rachel will lose her mind; Mom will lose her mind; the Council will lose their collective minds; and they'll find a way to intervene. But what they don't know, they can't stop. Plus, nowhere in the rules does it say an outcast can't enter. Nons are forbidden, sure, but there's definitely no mention of outcasts.

All Winnie has to do is show up with the other hunter applicants tonight, and the Thursdays in charge of the trial will let her in.

They *have* to. Winnie really doesn't know what she'll do if they don't.

Eventually, she can't hear the wolf anymore, and eventually, the sky begins to lighten. The night is over. The forest's slumber is complete.

Wednesday hunters emerge from the trees on silent feet. A few hunters

from other clans mingle within the ranks, replacements for anyone who's hurt or sick or just has a kid in the Hemlock Falls drama troupe. Ever since a Saturday hunter died two months ago and a Tuesday hunter died three weeks ago, the Council has beefed up hunter numbers each night.

All around the world, the Luminaries live near fourteen sleeping spirits. Each night, when the spirits dream, their nightmares come to life. And each night, the Luminary hunters guard the world against those nightmares, one clan for every day of the week. Last night belonged to the Wednesdays—Winnie's clan.

Or it *was* Winnie's clan until the incident, when her family was sentenced to be outcasts.

There are forty-eight hunters right now, several of whom are second cousins or cousins of cousins. They've definitely forgotten it's Winnie's birthday and wouldn't have cared even if they'd remembered. Dressed in matching black Kevlar and matching frowns, some are now bloodied, some have broken bows, a few limp.

Only Aunt Rachel speaks to Winnie, leaving the rest of the hunters to approach with a map in hand. SUV headlights beam over her like a stage light. She is gruff and perfunctory in her movements, as is Winnie's mom. But where Mom's hair is fully gray, Rachel's is still glossy and black.

They have the same hooked nose, though. So does Winnie.

"Here." Rachel holds out a map, a bad copy of a copy of a copy. "The nightmare bodies are marked, and we've got two nons this time too. Though fair warning: this one near the high school is just a halfer."

*Halfer.* Half a human corpse. Not common, but not uncommon in the forest either. Rachel hands the map off to Winnie, already glancing toward the SUVs and forgetting her niece is standing there.

This is how it usually goes. Aunt Rachel says a handful of words and then, like every other Wednesday and every other Luminary, she goes back to pretending Winnie doesn't exist. She even walks away before Winnie has fully grasped the map, leaving Winnie to swipe it from the air as it falls.

Once Rachel joins the other hunters, they all cram into their SUVs. Electric engines hum to life. A slurp of tires on fresh mud marks their exit.

Winnie doesn't watch them go. She has been doing corpse duty for

three years now and even if today is her birthday, even if her stomach is as knotted as a harpy's braid, the familiarity of routine soothes her.

Corpse duty might be a job no one else likes—cleaning up the nightmare bodies left behind in the forest each morning, as well as any human bodies—but Winnie has always enjoyed it. Her brother calls her morbid; she calls him boring.

Sure, it's a grim job, but someone has to do it. Otherwise, the corpses that don't magically vanish at dawn will reawaken as revenants, and that's *always* nasty. Besides, corpse duty is the only time Winnie gets to flex her knowledge of the Nightmare Compendium, and each new body is a riddle to be solved.

She studies the map, her front teeth clicking. There's the halfer, not far from the Friday estate. And then a second human is marked about a mile away from the first, by the lake. Two is a lot for one night. There's been a definite uptick lately.

*Click, click, click. Click, click, click.*

"Winnie?" comes a voice, and Marcus, Aunt Rachel's son, steps out from under the hemlock. An eighth grader who has only just started corpse duty, he is nice to Winnie when no one else is around. But get him outside of the forest, and he—like everyone else in the Luminaries—delights in calling her *witch spawn*.

Winnie dreams often of punching out his front teeth. They're just the *perfect* size for smashing and would add some much-needed color to his olive-pale skin.

Behind him are two other teenagers: the pretty Wednesday twins, Black girls with rich amber skin and dark tourmaline eyes. The dimples in their cheeks are the envy of everyone in town.

Their family moved to Hemlock Falls the year before, transplants from the world outside because their parents are networkers—that special variety of Luminary who live in the non world, working to ensure no one ever learns of the Luminaries or the forest.

Like most people in the Wednesday clan of the American Luminaries, the twins have no blood connection to Winnie or Marcus, and as sophomores like Winnie, they're easily the most popular girls at school. Which of course means that Marcus has it bad for them. Like, real bad. He doesn't

seem to understand that they're only nice to him because they're nice to everyone. Including Winnie, no matter how much she frowns.

She *wants* to be nice back—she really does. But if she lowers her guard for even one minute, there's a risk someone might slip in. *Witch spawn, witch spawn.*

"Happy birthday!" they sing in unison.

"We got you a present." Emma offers a box with perfectly wrapped edges and a perfectly curled bow.

"Uh, thanks." Winnie takes the box; it's heavy. "I'll open it later."

A flash of disappointment crosses their faces. Their smile dimples smooth away, and Bretta, who currently wears corkscrew curls (while Emma has long braids), says, "Oh, but we want to see your reaction."

Winnie tenses at those words. Fear spikes up her arms, as if the box is made of banshee tears. They've pranked her. It's probably dog poop inside, and when she opens the box, they'll snap a video with their phones to show everyone at school.

Except no. Winnie shakes her head. The twins aren't like that. Besides, contrary to the rest of Hemlock Falls, they have always been genuinely nice to Winnie. The Luminary rules are pretty clear on how to treat outcasts: *ignore them*. Yet the twins never have.

Winnie pushes her glasses up her nose, inhales a steeling breath, and finally tears into the wrapping paper. It rips loudly across the silent dawn, and in less than a second the name *Falls' Finest* peers up at her in the same swirly gold lettering as the store windows wear downtown.

She gulps, hating that she's suddenly excited. Hating that the twins have probably gotten her something expensive, judging by the box's heft, and that she's probably going to like it. She almost prefers the dog poop.

But she can't stop now. Emma and Bretta are bouncing with excitement.

She pries off the box's lid and discovers a leather jacket. The sort of item that Winnie will never be able to afford unless it's *very* used. And the sort of style that will look good no matter its age, no matter the decade.

She gulps a second time. It's the perfect shade of cinnamon brown to complement her auburn hair.

“Because you’re always cold on corpse duty,” Emma explains. “This will keep you warm!”

Though she doesn’t say it and definitely doesn’t mean it maliciously, the subtextual reality is inescapable: *You’re always cold and will continue to be cold because while we will stop doing corpse duty soon, you, Winnie Wednesday, will keep doing it forever.*

“Try it on!” Bretta urges, dimples returning. “We’ll exchange it if it doesn’t fit.”

Winnie obeys, and of course the jacket fits perfectly. Even over her green hoodie that says *SAVE THE WHALES*. She bends her elbows. The new leather squeaks. She tries the zipper. It slides up and down like a scalpel through vampira viscera.

She should refuse this. Yes, she should refuse this. Thank the twins politely, but say it’s too nice a gift for her to ever accept.

Winnie doesn’t refuse it. She feels too badass, like a photo her mom has of Grandma Winona, bow in hand, nightmare viscera splattered across her body, and a wide, vicious grin bright as the sun rising behind her.

Winnie summons a similar smile, one with actual teeth, and says: “Thanks. This is really . . . well, nice of you. Thanks.”

Emma beams, Bretta claps, and not for the first time Winnie wishes they were the stereotypical mean girls they’re supposed to be. She knows where she stands with the rest of the town—with brats like Marcus. With the twins, though, who are *almost* her friends, but not quite . . .

That uncertain “between” makes her gut twist uncomfortably.

She clears her throat, unzipping the jacket. Then zipping it again. And again and again, because for some reason her fingers won’t stop. It just moves so easily.

“When’s your birthday?” Marcus asks the twins with an eagerness that suggests there might be awkward flowers in their future.

“Next week,” Emma replies—at the exact same moment as Bretta. They laugh, a bubbly sound that erupts whenever they speak in unison.

Winnie’s fingers freeze on the zipper. Next week doesn’t give her much time to find them a gift in return.

“We’re hoping to have a party,” Emma continues. “You’ll both be invited.” Marcus looks like he might swoon with joy. Winnie just feels



faintly nauseated. Outcasts aren't exactly welcome at the various Luminary parties.

So she changes the subject. As the oldest of their group, Winnie is in charge of corpse duty. "We've, uh," she begins. *Zip, zip, zip*. "We've got a halfer near the Friday estate. Let's start there?"

"Aye, aye, Captain." Bretta pops a little salute. Then she, Emma, and Marcus pile into the flatbed. Winnie cranks the engine. Exhaust puffs, melting into the fog.

Dawn has arrived, pearly gray above the trees. Winnie flips on the headlights for good measure. Forest shadows scatter. The winter gray does not.





## C H A P T E R

# 2

**W**innie's plan is a simple one: pass the three hunter trials, restore her family's status in the Luminaries, and become a nightmare hunter like she has always been destined to be.

Her mom was a hunter.

Grandma Winona was a hunter.

Great-Grandma Maria was a hunter.

And if not for the *incident*, Winnie would be fully trained and welcomed to the first trial tonight with open arms. But as she knows in all-too-intimate detail, it turns out that having your dad be a spy for the Dianas, the Luminaries' ancient enemy, doesn't go over well—even if you, your mom, and your brother had no idea what was going on.

*You should have known*, the Council said four years ago. *A true Luminary would have known. A true Wednesday would have known.* Then they laid down a punishment of ten years as outcasts for Winnie, Mom, and Darian.

And that had been that. Dad was gone, having fled as a spy, and the old life as respected Luminaries was finished. Ten years as outcasts. The end.

Winnie hadn't thought it could possibly get any worse . . . until she realized that her sixteenth birthday would arrive during her ten-year

sentence—the *hunter trials* would arrive, and she would miss her one shot at taking them.

Which meant that if Winnie wanted to do this—and oh god, she wanted it then and she wants it now—then she couldn't let her sixteenth birthday slip by. She was going to have to attempt the first trial. She *is* going to have to attempt it.

It's her only chance to make everything right again and her only chance to go after the thing Dad tried to take away.

She just prays this new leather jacket will bring her luck.