

The Witch

On the girl's twelfth birthday, the Dianas come for her.

They send the usual crow with a locket in its beak to her window because there is a chance that, like the girl's sister, she will want to join them. The witches are about three weeks too late, though, and when the girl sees the crow outside, she doesn't open her window. She doesn't take the locket.

As much as she hungers for the flames of magic to burn through her fingertips, she has no interest in trading one controlling society for another.

Culture runs thicker than blood. Her best friend's father used to say that, and the girl knows it's all too true. Suffocatingly so, like coffin walls burying you alive.

She doesn't need them, the witches or the Luminaries, because she has the spell her sister left behind before she was betrayed. And she has a plan. A careful, meticulous plan that will take her years to finish...

And that will finish anyone who dared hurt her sister.

One by one. Insects wriggling in a web.

One by one, payback for the pure heart of the forest.

The Nightmare

The boy awakens beside a hemlock tree in the forest. He doesn't know how he got there or how long he has been lying there. He still wears his pajamas—the ones with Wolverine on them—and his feet are filthy and frozen.

His heart drops to his bowels. He yanks in his legs to stand, but terror stiffens his joints, his low back, his skull.

The forest, the forest, *why* is he in the forest? And what if someone finds him here?

His bare feet knock something as he grapples upward. It is a wolf's jawbone. *The* wolf's jawbone that first appeared in his bedroom four days ago and told him the forest would be coming for him.

The boy knows now exactly what it must mean, exactly *how* it came for him. He doesn't understand why, he doesn't understand the mechanics, and he can't remember anything of what came the night before. Yet he feels the truth of what he has become dwelling deep inside of him.

He is no longer a sparrow, he is a wolf.

He is no longer a boy, he is a nightmare.

He snatches up the jaw. It is slick with something that might be blood or might just be forest mist mixed with the red clay beneath his toes. Then, with the curved bone clutched tight in his grasp, he runs east toward the rising sun.

He prays this is the right way home.

CHAPTER ONE

This story begins with a funeral in a town where the locals don't bury their dead. The forest nearby has a nasty habit of waking the bodies back up again.

This particular corpse is a stranger to Winnie Wednesday. She knew *of* Grayson Friday, of course. He was the person who first busted into the old museum on the south side of town and turned it into The Place to Party. He also regularly snuck into the clans to steal banner sigils just to show that he *could*. And then there was that one time when, according to local legend, he stole a Tuesday Hummer and drove it right off the dam—while he was still inside.

Yet for all that Winnie knows of Grayson, she never, not once in her life actually talked to the guy, with his peat brown hair and his bright green eyes.

Now, she never will.

“You okay?” Mom asks, squinting at Winnie’s face. She and Winnie are in the forest, walking toward the Big Lake’s western shore.

“Yep,” Winnie lies. “I’m fine.” It’s not a good lie, and Mom definitely doesn’t believe it.

“You don’t have to come.”

“I do.” Winnie avoids her gaze. For Jay, she needs to come. She is his friend again, so she should be here. Grayson Friday was *his* Lead Hunter, after all.

“You can go home,” Mom presses, “and I’ll get a ride with Rachel—“

“No.” Winnie snaps this harder than she intends. People are coming up the path from behind; she doesn’t want to deal with them. She’s as close to a local celebrity as Hemlock Falls gets these days thanks to Johnny Saturday calling her *The Girl Who Jumped* on a news segment five nights ago. Everyone wants some of her shine.

Because ten nights ago, Winnie completed her third trial; saved Emma Wednesday's life with a banshee claw; jumped off the Big Lake's waterfall; and got bitten by a werewolf while somehow not absorbing the werewolf's nightmare mutation and turning into one too.

It's exciting stuff, worthy of a penny dreadful (or a repeated slot on the nightly news)...

Except half the story is missing.

Emma wouldn't have been in the forest if she knew how bad Winnie really was at hunting. Winnie only jumped off the waterfall because the Whisperer—a nightmare *no one* believes in—chased her there. And as for the werewolf bite... Well, Winnie can't remember that part. Almost everything from after she'd plunged into the water is forgotten, erased, missing.

Which just makes this whole celebrity thing even worse. It's a *constant* reminder of the gaping hole inside her brain.

"Take these," Mom says, cutting into the spiral that consumes Winnie's thoughts almost hourly these days. She slides the Volvo's key from her pocket. "If it gets to be too much, just leave, okay?"

"It won't be too much," Winnie counters, although she does take the keys and push them into her pocket. If for no other reason than to end this conversation.

Like Mom, Winnie wears all black underneath her jacket, although her black jeans have faded more to heather gray at this point. Her feet, bound in the combat boots she wore on her second trial, stomp out a steady and graceless rhythm down the path. Mom's tread lands more lightly behind her.

Eventually, she and Mom clear the trees and the entirety of the Big Lake opens before them. The waters are dark at this morning hour, the surface rippling and writhing like basilisk scales—all moving south, toward the waterfall. Spindrift rises off the precipice like flies off a

dead body.

“Hey,” Mom says, gripping at Winnie’s bicep. Winnie flinches. “Let’s go back.”

Winnie has stopped walking. She hadn’t realized it. Her feet just...aren’t moving.

“No.” She wags her head. This is weird. She, Winnie, is being weird, and she needs to get a hold of herself.

It’s not like she’s never been to a hunter’s funeral before.

Twenty steps bring Winnie and Mom to the amorphous cloud of people clustered at the Big Lake’s silty edge, two bacteria sucked into a colony. It’s more Luminaries than Winnie would have expected at a funeral for the smallest clan, although Tuesday scorpions do inflate the numbers. They cluster around the edges in their camouflage fatigues, weapons strapped across their bodies.

Winnie can’t tell if they’re here for the ceremony or because this is where their daily route just happens to take them. Their faces are hidden in the glossy brown, carapace-like helmets they always wear.

Menacing helmets. Little shields meant to hide something.

These are the Alphas—a special branch of the martial Tuesday clan who deal with any nightmares that escape the forest. Or, as the Alphas have been deployed lately, to surveil the forest for daywalkers.

Conversation drones around Winnie. She hears someone mention the werewolf and how it must be brought to justice. Then someone else complains that the Council can’t get its shit together—and hey, did you see Johnny’s interview with Dryden last night? What a disaster. But at least the Masquerade hasn’t been cancelled.

Winnie gets whiplash just from listening. *Werewolf, werewolf...Masquerade!*

Werewolf, werewolf...Masquerade! Darkness, darkness, light!

She should be used to it by now.

It has been eight days since she told the truth to Aunt Rachel about the banshee head. Eight days since Aunt Rachel told Winnie not to tell anyone. And eight days since Winnie was forced to accept that no one—absolutely *no one*—in this town cares that she and Emma Wednesday almost died.

People have even asked Winnie if it was fun jumping off the waterfall.

Fun jumping to her almost death. *Darkness, darkness, light!*

Winnie yanks off her glasses and frowns down at the lenses. They're clean, but she scrubs at them anyway until Lizzy Friday clears her throat. Then Winnie shoves her glasses back on to watch the funeral. Her heart beats faster than it should.

Lizzy stands at the lakeshore, waves lapping gently a few steps behind her, tiny tentacles feeling for their next meal. She wears a simple black button up tucked into functional black slacks, and she looks more like a traffic cop than leader of the Friday clan now mourning her lost. In one arm, she holds a ceramic urn.

“Thanks for coming,” Lizzy says, and the crowd goes silent. Now there is only the waterfall’s roar to fill the afternoon sky. “Grayson would have liked knowing he was this popular.” She smiles; a few people laugh.

“Grayson died doing what he loved,” Lizzy continues. “He died a hero protecting us from the forest. And although no one outside Hemlock Falls will ever know it, he died protecting them too.”

Grayson’s mother chokes at those words. She stands at the front of the crowd, her back ramrod straight like she’s still bracing for bad news. Like she hasn’t yet heard her only son is dead, but she’s knows the message is on the way.

Mom and Ms. Friday went to school together; Grayson is only a little older than Darian.

Was only a little older than Darian.

For two years, Grayson has been Lead Hunter for the Fridays. Now he will be one more name among the thousands hammered into a wall in city hall downtown, and on the next Friday night—just six days from now—the new Lead Hunter will take his place in the forest.

The new Lead Hunter stands near his aunt on the shore, his head bowed. He doesn't move as Lizzy speaks. He is still as the forest. Still as a corpse preserved in the morgue.

His suit jacket is too short in the sleeves, suggesting he borrowed it, and Winnie doubts Jay has slept in over twenty-four hours. Grayson only died last night after all, his body so mangled Jay had to identify it by the ring on a nearby finger.

Winnie wonders who gathered up the pieces of Grayson for burning. Funerals have to happen fast in Hemlock Falls, before the forest can make a revenant.

She hopes no parts of Grayson got left behind.

“Integrity in all,” Lizzy says, ending her eulogy with the Friday clan's motto.

“Honesty to the end. May Grayson Alexander Friday find peace in his long sleep at the heart of the forest.”

Everyone murmurs those words back.

Everyone except Winnie.

Because Grayson Friday isn't sleeping. He isn't finding peace. And whatever he was two days ago, now he is nothing more than fish food floating in an aquarium.

CHAPTER TWO

Winnie waits until all the eulogies are over and Grayson's ashes have sunk into the unfeeling deep. Only then does she go to Jay. He has moved away from the lake and tucked himself into the shadows of an old hemlock. If Winnie hadn't watched him shuffle from the shore, she might never have noticed him hiding there.

He looks like he often does, eyes bloodshot and face haggard. If Winnie didn't know he'd just been on the hunt, she would assume he'd been out all night drinking. His hair is still damp—as if he only just left the shower, where he scrubbed off all the remains of forest and death.

"Thanks for coming," he tells her. His eyes are misty gray today, rimmed with red. She suspects he has been crying.

Questions boil inside Winnie: *Please, tell me you saw the Whisperer. Please, tell me it wasn't the werewolf and I'm not crazy. A werewolf didn't do this. Please, tell me it was the Whisperer.*

Winnie swallows those words, greasy and hot. She can't acknowledge them right now, not when Jay is simply trying to survive a day that weighs too heavy.

"I'm...really sorry," Winnie says instead. "If you need anything, you, uh...you know where to find me."

Jay nods, distracted, and fidgets with his dad's watch. His gaze skates behind Winnie, to where a line is forming. Hunters and clan members wanting to offer their sympathies...but also to offer their congratulations. After all, when one Lead Hunter leaves, another must step in.

Jay's shoulders sink half an inch. The boy who does nothing but shirk responsibility is now faced with a metric ton of it. He has to manage clan training; he has to coordinate

schedules and gear and safety; he has to guide hunters into the forest every Friday night, knowing they could end up like Grayson.

And that he could end up like Grayson too.

“Jay,” says a new voice, creaking and thin. Winnie turns to find Jay’s great aunt Linda pushing in and reaching for Jay’s hands. So Winnie offers him a tight smile and moves on.

A quick scan reveals Mom in conversation with an Alpha named Isaac Tuesday who graduated when Darian did. Mom’s eyes shine. She’s glad to be here, even if it’s for a funeral, because she believes in the long sleep and the balance and the death that’s a part of life.

And don't I believe in that too?

“Hey, Winnie.”

Winnie twists around to find Aunt Rachel has pushed through the crowd to stand beside her. She is dressed almost identically to Mom, and Winnie can’t help but wonder if maybe they bought their outfits at the same time—back when they’d not only hunted together, but had been best friends.

“Hi.” Winnie tries for a smile. It falls flat.

“Did you know Grayson?” Rachel cocks her head toward the lake, as if the ashes somehow still contain bits of him.

They don’t.

“No,” Winnie admits. “I just...thought I should support Jay.” *And what a great job I’ve done at that.* “I guess you knew Grayson?”

“Yeah. Lead Hunters—we consult pretty regularly.” Rachel sighs and stuffs her hands into her coat pockets. “He was good. *Really* good. It’s, uh...scary how fast things can turn on you.” As she says this, Winnie can practically see the nightmares in Rachel’s eyes. All the times when she—like Winnie—really should not have made it out of the forest alive.

After a few seconds though, Rachel rolls her shoulders, curt efficiency taking hold of

her posture. As if her very skeleton is saying, *There is no time for the shadows; compartmentalize and move back toward the sun.*

“Listen,” Rachel begins, “it’s totally fine if you don’t want to join the Wednesday hunt right now—“

The way she says this does not make it sound totally fine.

“—but the clans need help with corpse duty. We’ve got a lot more dead nightmares to deal with these days, given the amped up hunter numbers each night. Think you can join on Thursday morning? You don’t have to be in charge again, but we could really use the help.”

Winnie has two thoughts in that moment. First, that she absolutely doesn’t want to spend any more time than she has to with Rachel’s son, Marcus, who will undoubtedly be there for corpse duty on Thursday morning.

Then second, that she isn’t sure she wants to return to the forest if it’s going to keep making her feel this way. *It won’t, though. You’re just being weird and this is just a one off.*

Except...was the waterfall always so loud?

Rachel clears her throat. Winnie realizes she has been staring into space. Possibly glaring into space too. She blinks. “Yeah. I can do that, Aunt Rachel.”

“Great.” Rachel rubs her hands together. “I appreciate that. And of course, whenever you’re ready to join me on the hunt, you just let me know. No pressure.”

But also definitely some pressure.

As Rachel strides away, Winnie is struck yet again by the utter polarity of it all. Rachel just nudged her niece to join in the exact activity that led to Grayson’s brutal death...*at* Grayson’s funeral. And right now, although Winnie is a whole thirty paces away from Jay, she can hear an unfamiliar voice booming out: “Congratulations, young man. Youngest Lead Hunter in Hemlock Falls. You must be so proud.”

No, Winnie thinks as she stomps away from it all to seek solitude in the parking lot.

He's not proud. And jumping wasn't fun. And Grayson isn't sleeping. And the Nightmare Masquerade should not be happening in two weeks.

Yet even as those thoughts slice through Winnie's brain one after the other, bright, burning meteorites, she knows the better thoughts—the better questions she really should be raising are: *What is wrong with me? Why can't I compartmentalize like everybody else?*

And why aren't I acting like a Luminary?

#

Winnie isn't at the Volvo for long before Mom joins her. One look at Winnie's face with her front teeth clicking and her cheeks flushed from too many emotions, and Mom opts to preserve her silence.

Thank god. Winnie doesn't know what she'll say if she has to speak right now. She feels as if a piece of Grayson Friday got stuck inside her. Like his ashes were grenade shrapnel and now they're wedged in so deep, she'll never dig them out again.

Or maybe it's just the growing realization that she isn't very good at being a Luminary.

Or maybe she's just hungry and she shouldn't have skipped breakfast.

“You're driving,” Mom says, pushing the keys into Winnie's hand, and though the last thing Winnie wants to do right now is concentrate on getting the Volvo into second gear without stalling halfway up the hill onto the dam, she also needs the distraction.

And to her surprise, it's actually sort of soothing. *In goes the clutch. Change gears. Out goes the clutch.* There's a rhythm to it that slows her heart. *In. Change. Out.*

Fallen branches litter the side of the gravel road that leads south out of the forest. Then they're passing the Tuesday estate, all bare bones practicality—more bunker than fancy mansion.

“You want to talk?” Mom asks when they successfully make it past the Monday estate

without any gear shift problems, a morning fog weaving through the college campus-like grounds.

“Yeah,” Winnie answers eventually. “Everything’s okay. It was just...a lot.” She hopes Mom interprets this as the funeral in general; she really doesn’t want to talk about Jay’s misty eyes or the way the waterfall sounded too much like death.

Fortunately, Mom does misinterpret. “I would be lying if I didn’t say I’m relieved you’re not hunting yet, Winnebago. If your trial had gone just a little bit differently...”

Mom doesn’t finish the thought, and she doesn’t need to.

“Until this werewolf is killed,” Mom continues, “I’ll be grateful you’re not in the forest. You’re still not planning to hunt any time soon, right?” She fastens Winnie with a laser-eyed stare, and Winnie’s fingers tighten on the steering wheel until her knuckles turn white.

Because there it is, right there. One more piece of festering shrapnel: Not even her own mother believes her about the Whisperer, and it’s thoughtless little comments like this one that keep giving her away.

God, I hope they catch this werewolf, she said last night after Dryden’s interview on the news.

To think, it’s just out there walking among us. That comment came last Thursday.

And: I am so, so glad the werewolf didn’t get you, Winnie. That was from last Sunday, Winnie’s third day home from the hospital.

Winnie doesn’t turn her head. She doesn’t meet Mom’s eyes. “No,” she says with as little inflection as possible. “I don’t plan to hunt any time soon.”

Winnie and Mom clear the last of the trees. To their left, the Little Lake is almost blue this morning. It is the opposite of the Big Lake. Cheerful instead of oppressive, welcoming instead of cruel. Winnie can’t help but wonder if Grayson Friday really did drive into the

water there. If so, does that mean a Hummer is still sitting at the bottom of the lake right now?

Winnie kind of hopes it is. For some reason, that just feels right: a statue no one can see for a man no one will ever speak to again.