

# Witch Hazel & Wolfsbane

## By Emily Michel

### Chapter 1

#### *Present Day*

Something hunted Annie.

The hair stood up on her arms and the nape of her neck as the last red rays of the sun faded, taking the summer warmth with them. A purple blanket studded with stars followed in their wake, and the milky full moon peeked out from behind the mountains. She glanced around nervously. The Northern Arizona woods grew eerily silent for a moment before a distinct howl reverberated off the mountains.

She ran.

Annie dodged trees and rocks and leaped dry creek beds. The pine needles covering the ground made the footing slippery and treacherous, but the hiking boots she had chosen over her sneakers helped her keep her feet. Her dash through the dry undergrowth left behind puffs of dust and the sweet smell of ponderosa pines. The growing darkness, only slightly allayed by the moonlight, made it more difficult to avoid the rocks scattered among the trees. The shadows grew deeper, capable of hiding even more terrors, and the cool breeze carried a faint slap of large paws on the forest floor, keeping pace with her. She should have been afraid, but she was exhilarated.

As she approached her target, the rocky terrain made for difficult footing. The creature gained on her, its hot breath at her heels. Her plan seemed to be working as she led the creature straight to the trap she'd set this afternoon. A few more seconds and she'd be in control.

Suddenly, she tumbled to the ground, tackled from the side. *Shit*. She'd been so sure her plan would work. Now, as the wind exited her lungs, she prepared to fight off a frenzy of snapping teeth and sharp claws, hoping she would survive long enough to apologize to her family. Instead, a distinctly human—a distinctly male human—weight fell on top of her. She gasped, wanting to shout her frustration.

"I've got you. Stay quiet," a clear voice whispered.

A gunshot rang out, then a cross between a growl and a whimper, followed by a heavy silence.

She caught her wind, pushing and punching nearly two hundred pounds of muscle. "Get off, you idiot. What did you do?"

"Hey, lady, we just saved you from—"

She slugged his shoulder as hard as she could and, when he finally moved, jumped up and ran in the creature's direction, hoping against all evidence there might be some way to save it. Sick disappointment rooted in her gut as her eyes confirmed what her ears told her after the gunshot went off.

"No, no, no, no, it's dead. You killed it!"

“Actually, that would be me.” A second man appeared a few yards away. He was slightly shorter than the first, slimmer, but in the moonlight, nothing else was evident.

An all-consuming rage at the waste of months of preparation filled her. Research, tracking, more research—just plain work—only to have the creature destroyed before she could enact her plans. A hundred feet north lay her trap. She would have been able to contain the monster and interrogate its human form once the sun rose. But there she was, kneeling over the corpse of a werewolf slowly changing into a man. She stood and confronted the presumptuous idiots who had ruined this opportunity.

They weren’t right behind her like she expected. Instead, the man who had shot the werewolf knelt by the larger one who had tackled her. He sat under a tree, cradling his left arm.

“Arghh, ah man, this hurts,” he said.

She could barely make out his mumbled words. She sprinted over to them.

“Hey, Owen, lemme see.” The gunman seized the other man’s arm and stared at it intently, flicking on a small flashlight. “It looks deep. Did a branch scratch you?”

She was close, inching toward them as quietly as a mountain lion. If the werewolf caused his injury, he required her help.

“No, Rhys, it was the wolf.” Even in the dim light, she could see their faces drain of color. Definitely bad news.

Suddenly, the gunman stood, drew his gun, and aimed it at Owen’s heart.

*What the hell?*

Acting on impulse, she ran full force at him and tackled his legs, both of them going down in a heap as his gun went flying off into the pine needles carpeting the woods.

“Holy crap!” Owen called from behind them while struggling to rise.

“Get off me, crazy lady! You don’t understand.” Rhys kicked at her in an attempt to free himself.

She kept her grip on his legs and matched his outrage. “You are not shooting him.”

Owen towered over the pair and pulled her off Rhys. He had nearly a foot in height and seventy pounds on her, making it no more dignified than a parent picking up a child throwing a tantrum. She squirmed and lashed out, hoping to free herself, but the man held her tightly.

“Listen, lady,” Owen said as Rhys frantically searched for his gun.

She tightened her jaw and snapped at these interlopers. “Call me Annie, not lady.”

“Annie, then. Do you understand what happened here?” Owen placed her gently on the ground, holding her hands together in a vise-like grip.

Annie sighed heavily, trying to release her frustration and control her other feelings. She couldn’t do anything to help Owen if they believed she was mentally unstable.

“You were scratched or bitten by a werewolf while making an ill-advised attempt to save someone who didn’t need your help.” She couldn’t keep the snark at bay.

“Right,” said Rhys, surprise evident in his voice. He had recovered his gun. “And at the next full moon, my brother will turn and become an animal who hunts humans. He doesn’t want that, I don’t want that. You should respect his decision.”

Annie caught an edge of bitterness in his tone. Why would this be *her* fault? It’s not like she asked the man to take a swipe meant for her.

“Did it occur to you I knew what I was doing? Did you realize there’s a trap a hundred feet that way?” She nodded toward a small clearing, her voice growing shriller at each question. Annie breathed in through her nose and returned to her normal pitch. “He didn’t say, ‘Shoot me.’ He’s not begging to be murdered.”

Owen grinned and released her, his teeth flashing in the moonlight. He made eye contact with his brother over her shoulder.

“She’s right.”

Rhys grunted, exasperated. “It’s something we decided long ago—if one of us is bitten, the other shoots him before we have time to think about it.”

During this exchange, Annie inched between the two men. If she couldn’t make Rhys and Owen see sense, she could at least make them hesitate.

“I have another way,” she said. Annie had double checked the contents of her medical kit before hunting a werewolf. Preparation solved many problems.

Both men stared at her. Even in the moonlight, Annie could see the pain written on Rhys’s pinched, haunted face.

Rhys laughed bitterly. “There’s no cure, darlin’! Prolonging this is only gonna make it hurt worse. Go home where it’s safe. I can take care of this.”

He lurched toward Annie and reached out to grab her arm. She dropped to the ground and swept her leg into both of his. He fell with a thump and was still. Annie grabbed Owen’s good arm and pulled him in the trap’s direction. He had no intention of going along, and his size made it extremely difficult to force him to move.

“Hey.” Owen patted her hand. “It’s okay. We’ve been doing this for a while, and I knew it could happen. It’s all right, let go.”

Rhys inhaled loudly and sat, letting out a grunt of pain. She fixed her gaze on Owen, momentarily distracted by the way his eyes sparkled from the light of the now risen moon.

“It’s Owen, right?” She used her concerned nurse voice, and he nodded. “I can fix this. Please let me.”

Rhys mumbled a curse as he rose to his feet and brushed away pine needles and leaves. The dust glimmered in the dim light.

Owen chuckled softly. “Didn’t see that coming, did you?”

“Fine.” Annie dropped Owen’s arm and resisted the temptation to put her hands on her hips. These two were playing the knights in shining armor and wouldn’t respond well to their damsel in distress ordering them around. “For all you know, I’m some nutcase out here for a midnight run. It’s true, no one can cure lycanthropy once you’ve turned. But I have my medical kit over by the trap, and there’s something in it that could prevent the change. What do you have to lose?”

They shared a short glance, and Rhys gestured her to lead the way with his gun.

She led them carefully around the edges of the clearing, avoiding her trap, until she stopped at a large boulder.

“Stay here.” Annie pointed at the rock and dashed behind the boulder. Her medical kit was right where she had left it. The white cross embroidered on the red messenger bag shone in the moonlight. Annie returned to her patient. She hadn’t moved this quickly since her practicum in the emergency department.

“Owen, make yourself comfortable. Let’s take a look at the damage.” Glaring at Rhys, she snapped, “Flashlight?”

“You don’t have one?” The words had an exasperated edge, but he produced the flashlight he’d used a few minutes ago.

She stared at him in silence. Rhys sighed and turned the light on. After Owen found a spot on the boulder to lean against, he aimed it at the wounded arm.

“Hold it steady,” Annie said. She could almost hear his teeth grind and suppressed a grin.

She stared intently at the deep, six-inch long scratch on Owen's arm, poking at it until he hissed in pain. Rhys moved a step toward them. Annie guessed it was some sort of protective instinct kicking in.

"Hold it steady," she snapped at him. This man was a pain in the ass.

Rhys grunted in reply, and it seemed there was an apology in there, somewhere.

"Okay, I can fix this." Annie used her most matter-of-fact voice, one that served her well in the clinic. "Give me the flashlight."

She aimed it into her bag. The light glinted off her smartphone and illuminated the interior. She fished out four bottles, placing them on the ground: an empty medical wash bottle, some witch hazel, a small bottle containing a tincture of wolfsbane, and a fifth of vodka.

"Well, if I knew vodka cured lycanthropy..."

"Shut up, Mr. Sarcastic!" She stared at him coldly.

Rhys clamped his jaw shut, staring back just as coldly. Under ordinary circumstances, Annie would have tried to see it from his point of view. A stranger held his brother's fate in her hands. But tonight, after he cost her the opportunity to capture a werewolf and had callously pulled a gun on his own brother, she had no patience for his bullshit.

"Here. Take a couple swigs." Annie passed the vodka to Owen.

Her patient did as she ordered. When he was done, he handed it to her, and she placed it next to the other bottles on the ground. She removed a large, white pillar candle and a lighter from her bag. Annie lit the candle and tossed the flashlight to Rhys. She appreciated how he aimed it at her work area without complaint.

"You ready, Owen?" She rinsed her hands with the vodka.

"Yeah."

"The cleansing potion is only two ingredients: witch hazel and a tincture of wolfsbane. Three to one ratio." She shook her hands dry and unscrewed the top of the empty plastic bottle, adding the liquids from the other bottles. "And a magic word."

With a wry grin, Annie cupped the bottle.

"*Sana*," she murmured. The potion glowed purple. "The magic word is important. Wolfsbane is poisonous."

The glow faded, and she passed Owen the bottle. Rhys stepped forward, grasping her wrist and preventing her from moving the bottle any closer. She glared at him and tried to pull her hand away. His grip was even stronger than his brother's had been.

"You're not getting that poison anywhere near my brother until you explain," Rhys snarled.

"Really?" She glared pointedly at his holstered gun. Moments ago, he'd aimed it at Owen. He followed her gaze and clenched the fist next to his thigh. "As I was saying, the magic word directs the wolfsbane to attack only the lycanthropy pathogen. It means 'heal'. Without the incantation and intention, this could kill you. I wanted to make that clear before I continued. I believe in informed consent."

"Rhys," Owen said softly, meeting his brother's gaze, "you're not helping."

Rhys released her wrist and clenched his jaw. "Fine."

Owen gave Annie an encouraging smile. "Go ahead."

"This'll sting." She squeezed out a stream of the mixture to wash out the wound.

Owen breathed in sharply. Debridement was never pleasant, but a hospital at least had anesthetics. Vodka was the best she could do under the circumstances. Once she finished washing out the wound, she patted it dry. She made quick work of closing the wound as best she could with butterfly closures.

“I’ve treated the physical part of werewolf infection. Now for the spiritual part.” She rooted in the medical bag and pulled out her phone, a small spell book, three more candles, salt, and purifying herbs: sage, dandelion leaf, and juniper. Annie pointed at the ground by the boulder. “Sit.”

Amazingly, he did. Owen seemed to have some idea of what Annie was doing, though he tilted his head and pursed his lips in bemused concentration. She stood next to him and poured the salt around them. She checked the compass app on her phone and placed the candles at the cardinal points—north, south, east, and west. As the last step, she piled herbs in the center of the circle in front of Owen and lit everything. Smoke billowed out from the herbs, and she coughed. Rhys chortled. *Infuriating man.*

“Laugh it up.” She glared at him once the coughing subsided. He pressed his lips together. Once assured of his continued silence, she opened her book to the correct page and chanted.

“Cleanse this soul, remove this poison, remove the wolf.” She repeated the German words three more times, facing each compass point as she chanted, putting a bit of energy into each iteration, starting and stopping instead of using the smooth build a more experienced practitioner would manage. It worked, though. She placed her hand on Owen’s arm and pushed more energy into him. He stiffened until his body was ramrod straight, and she could almost see the spiritual toxin leave his body as her energy replaced the blackness.

She exhaled, compelling the final bit of energy of the spell into her patient. Owen visibly relaxed. She closed the spell book and broke the circle.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

He lifted his arm to examine the wound. “It still hurts like a son of a bitch.”

Annie inspected the men in the candlelight. In the dark, all she could tell was they were tall and muscular, but Owen seemed to have a couple of inches on his brother and was broader through the shoulders. His hair was cut short and seemed to be dark blonde or light brown. A smile came easily to his square-jawed face. Rhys had dark brown hair, which seemed to absorb the light rather than reflect it. He and Owen shared facial features, but his green eyes seemed harder, not the kind of person who laughed easily. They appeared to be about the same age.

Annie crossed over to Owen and gestured for Rhys to shine the flashlight on the arm again.

“I can Heal it, and there shouldn’t be a scar, or I can stitch it.”

“You’re a Healer?” Owen’s voice rose in surprise.

“Yep. So, do you want the scar or not? I hear Hunters compare scars and trade stories. I don’t want to cost you points at your next show and tell.”

Owen chuckled and held out his arm. “Here. I have plenty more that’ll win me a beer.”

She cleared her mind and accessed the energy around her, the earth under her feet, the wind whispering through the pines, the warmth still radiating from the stone, and the water molecules in the air. She placed her fingers on the wound and pulsed her Gift into Owen’s arm. His skin warmed. She held it there for another few seconds. Besides the butterfly bandages and a smear of blood, she couldn’t tell there had been a wound.

“I regret my decision. This would make a great story.” Owen examined his arm.

“Too late now.” Annie gave him a warm smile as she packed her supplies. When she turned to his brother, her smile faded. The man rubbed her the wrong way.

“There, good as new. You can still shoot him next month if this doesn’t work.” Her voice dripped with sarcasm just to push his buttons.

Rhys was standing by the boulder, alert and watching Owen closely. His tone matched hers, beat for beat. “Great, I’d hate to waste the silver bullet.”

Owen stood and held out his hand to her. “Thanks, um...”

“Annie,” she reminded him, as she shook it. His hand was much larger than hers, calloused and strong. “And you’re welcome.”

“If this works, we owe you one.” Rhys tentatively reached out a hand.

She gripped it after an instant of hesitation. Like his brother’s, his hand belonged to a worker. But unlike Owen’s, it didn’t dwarf hers.

“It worked, and you damn well owe me. It took me months to find and track that werewolf and build the freaking trap. Now I have to find another and start all over!”

They gaped at her incredulously and tried to out-stammer each other.

“Um, what, no,” Rhys said.

“You’re not, sorry, what?” Owen shook his head in disbelief.

“Look, guys, I have a trap to disarm, a body to bury, and tomorrow I’m back at square one. Are you going to help me or waste your breath?” Annie had put a lot of energy into the spell and the Healing, more than she should have. She must get home and eat before she passed out.

“You seem drained,” Owen said. “I feel great, better than when I woke up this morning. You did that, using magic to Heal me?”

She nodded slowly, her head heavy with fatigue.

“We’ll take care of the body. You go home and do what you need to do. I’ve worked with a few practitioners. You should rest after working that kind of mojo.”

“Thanks. Let me take care of the trap first.” Giddy with relief, she walked over to the clearing and drew a small knife from a pouch on her belt. She hadn’t been sure she’d be able to accomplish everything before the fatigue won out.

“Fini.” She knelt near a tree and cut the ground level string encircling the clearing. A blue light glimmered at ankle height and dissipated. “It’s safe.”

“What would’ve happened if we’d sprung the trap?” Owen asked.

“You would’ve been stuck in the clearing until somebody from the outside cut the string. You are far off the trail. It could’ve taken hours or days for a passerby to come close enough to help. Thanks for offering to bury him.”

“Can you find your way in the dark?” Rhys asked.

“I left a trail to my truck.”

“You sure that’s a good idea? It may lead law enforcement to the grave,” Owen said.

“The spell breaks at dawn, and the marks will slowly fade throughout the night. It’s the best I could do.” Annie looked at the men again. She caught Rhys’s gaze, which darted between her and Owen. She softened for a moment. He’d almost lost his brother. Assuaging his fear was the least she could do. “When administered immediately after an attack, the werewolf spell never fails. I promise you won’t have to kill your brother.”

Rhys avoided eye contact and pressed his lips together, but Owen met her gaze and nodded. There was no way to convince Rhys she was right, other than waiting for the next full moon. She trudged toward her truck, Rhys’s scowl following her until she crested the next hill over. She refused to look back, refused to give him the victory.

Exhaustion set in as soon as she reached her truck. Her legs were lead weights, and she could barely keep her eyes open. She would go nowhere tonight. Tossing her medical kit on the passenger side, Annie crawled into the driver’s seat. She ate the protein bar she kept in her kit in a few bites. Reclining her seat, she spread the fleece blanket she kept in the truck over her and fell asleep within minutes.