



Wolf's Magic

The Westervelt Wolves Book Four

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Blurb

Wolf's Magic is the story of Azriel Kane, fifth brother in the royal Westervelt wolf pack. Always different from his siblings, Azriel prefers to spend his time underground in a lab than out fighting battles to save the pack from destruction. In his own way, he feels he is contributing to the pack's success. However, when fate plants his destined mate in a cage where he can't ignore her, Az will be forced to face up the demons that have plagued him since childhood and be the shifter she needs him to be.

Leah St. James has no idea who she is or how she came to be trapped in a cage in Azriel's lab. The only thing she is certain about is that she is not a wolf and that she wants out of her false wolf body as soon as possible. Counting on Az to save her from the same doomed fate as the other wolves Az is given to study, from the distance of her cage she can see Az for who he really is and not the false front he presents to the world.

But Kendrick Kane is not done with Westervelt and when he steps up his game to eliminate the Kanes from Westervelt, Az and Leah will need each other to discover the truth behind his evil plans, that is if Azriel can finally reveal the secret he has been keeping since he was a child.

With Leah's help, can Azriel finally take his place in the pack hierarchy or will they fail and lose Westervelt forever?

Dedication

To my mother-in-law Kathy who reads all of my work. Thank you for Sundays. The kids are in heaven playing with you and I get great writing time!

Chapter One

Leah woke up covered in brown and white fur still trapped in a cage. *Dear God, please let me not be a wolf, please let it all be a dream.*

Blinking twice, she looked down, her whole body deflating as she realized it wasn't a dream—she was actually covered in fur. How could any of this be happening? Her moments of lucidity were becoming fewer and fewer and even more frightening were the fact that her memories of her insane times had grown more vague. Now, not only could she not control what she did when the madness overtook her, she also had no recollection of what happened.

Maybe it was a blessing. The things she'd remembered from the earlier episodes had left her feeling horrified.

And then there was *him*, the man who watched her from outside the cage. Other wolves came and went from the cages, he paid attention to them, but not like he'd been attentive to her. Not to mention she couldn't figure out why all of the other wolves—or maybe they were actually people trapped in wolf bodies too—got to go somewhere and she was kept locked in her cage.

She couldn't talk, couldn't do more than growl or whine, and even those abilities were pathetic at best. The beagle she'd grown up with, Max, had done a better job of communicating than she could.

The man stood up from his desk. When he wasn't poking and prodding at her or the others, admittedly gently, he was always sitting at that black wooden table that seemed to function as his work station, hunched over a book or staring at a computer screen. The last she remembered before she'd had her previous episode was him falling asleep in the chair, head down on the desk. Didn't he ever leave? Wasn't there some family somewhere wondering where he was?

On that same note...wasn't there someone looking for her?

That was part of the problem. Other than her name—Leah St. James—and the absolute certainty to the pit of her soul that she was not a wolf and should not be in the body she inhabited, she had no idea—zero—who or where she came from.

The man's hair, brown to the point of almost being black, stuck up like he was a child instead of an adult she guessed to be around thirty years of age. Thin but broad shouldered, he was muscular and looked like he could handle himself in a fight. Hmm...that was a funny thing to think. Evidently she was the kind of person who thought of others in terms of their ability to fight. Did that mean she came from someplace violent?

His destination was clearly her cage. All the others were empty. Her heart picked up speed. She admitted it; she liked looking at his eyes. It was fun seeing the concentration and intensity in his brown-eyed gaze. Also, his smell was enticing. His scent reminded her of water, or at least the way the ocean smelled on a clear, crisp morning when no one else was on the beach.

She added the thought to the pile of interesting observations she was making about her inner dialogue. Maybe some of it would give her a clue as to who she was.

"Hello there."

Huh, usually he didn't speak other than unintelligible mutterings when he took her temperature or swabbed one of her claws. It's not like she could answer him. Still, if he wanted to talk at least it was nice to hear someone else's voice...

"Can you understand me?"

His voice was like chocolate syrup being poured over vanilla ice cream. It was just a perfect combination of taste and texture, like the universe had designed those two things to go together, in other words it was heavenly. She shivered from the intensity.

He noticed her small shake and hesitantly reached inside the cage. She couldn't blame him for his nerves. She was a wolf, she might bite him. After a moment, he reached farther and stroked her fur.

"Are you okay? Are you cold?" He drew his eyebrows down in a slant. "You're eyes are so intelligent, so different from the others."

Others? Did he mean the wolves that came and went? She flipped her head around just to make sure there weren't any others around that she didn't know about. Belatedly, she realized she could sniff the air to tell but using her nose to know anything was still pretty foreign to her. Half the time she wasn't sure what any of the sensory input she received even meant.

"And your fur...it's brown and white, it still hasn't lost its luster. It's soft." He was downright petting her now. She wished she were a cat, so she could purr. Oh wow, when was the last time she'd been touched? She closed her eyes. Really touched? He was gentle and he knew all the right places to rub. Behind her ears, it really itched; he moved his hand and scratched there. Her tongue fell out of her mouth.

Dear heavens, she panted. Her eyes flew open. If she were human, she would blush with humiliation. Here was this stunning man just barely touching her and she was acting like a real wolf for goodness sake. Daring to look at him, she didn't see the horror she expected to find at her behavior.

Instead, he seemed to be considering her even more closely. He'd put both hands in the cage. With one he continued to scratch between her ears while the other made long, divine strokes up and down her spine.

"You like that, girlie? I bet that feels better." He leaned his head up against the bars of the cage and she could see that a small scar, a thin line really, marred his face from the tip of his left eye down to his chin. It wasn't noticeable from afar but up close it gave him a sexy, scary look. "Can I tell you a secret? I'm not sure how much more of this I can do. I'm so tired of all of you dying. I'm exhausted from not being able to figure this out." Dying? Terror poured through her blood, she wished she could scream but it only came out a whimper. He stroked her harder. "Did you actually understand what I just said?"

Staring straight in his eyes, she willed him to understand that she did—she knew everything he was telling her.

Pulling his head off the cage, he nodded. "You did. None of the others ever could. I'm sure of it." This seemed to excite him. She could hear his heart rate increased. The wolf senses would be cool if they weren't so terrifying and bizarre.

"Okay, listen to me. I don't know how they did this to you. I know everything about wolf magic, I'm an expert and even I can't figure out how the witches did this to all of you. We thought at first that after the change they addicted you to a chemical to make you obey but now we know that's not true. You all just like the stuff so you go looking for it. With or without it, you'll die."

She had no idea what he was talking about. Wolf magic? The change? She whined in confusion.

“All right, I’ll start over. Do you remember what happened to you? Do you remember when the witches did this to you?”

She lowered her head onto her paws. It was so frustrating to not be able to speak. No, she wanted to scream, I have no idea, I have no memory and did you say witches?

An alarm sounded in the room, loud and piercing it caused pain to vibrate through her body like nothing she’d ever felt before. The man jumped back like he’d been struck, he jerked around.

“Shit. They’re here.”

Who was here and what was that alarm? Couldn’t he make it stop? She was howling now and she couldn’t seem to stop.

A boom sounded in the room momentarily covering the alarm. A bright orange light temporarily blinded her. Oh God, this was panic. Anything she’d felt before being locked in the cage and being a wolf was nothing compared to this. What the hell was going on? Was she going to die in this cage?

Smoke filled the air. She choked and gagged. This was hell. These wolf senses in this place with these horrors happening were too much. She needed it to stop. Where was the man? What had happened to him? She hadn’t seen him since the bright light that had blinded her. Had he died in the explosion?

The cage shook from beneath. It jarred her like she was on an airplane not quite steady in the sky. Two hands appeared on the cage bars in front of her followed immediately by the man’s face as he pulled himself up. He was coughing, his eyes unfocused.

He pulled keys out of his pocket and inserted them into the lock. After turning it, he opened the cage.

“Run.” He coughed, his eyes losing their focus as he collapsed to the floor.

She leapt out of the cage onto the floor. It had, evidently, been some time since she’d used her legs. They felt unsteady and difficult to move. Her heart pounded hard as she stared down at the man who had kept her captive in a cage for weeks. He’d been gentle when he’d touched her and she’d actually been able to start communicating with him just minutes earlier. Plus, it seemed like he’d hurt himself to set her free.

Not to mention there was probably no way in hell she was going to stop being a wolf without his help. Ignoring the voice in the back of her head that wanted her to acknowledge she also thought he was adorably cute, she bit down hard on his shoulder.

He didn’t even react to the assault from her teeth. Dragging him as hard as she could, she realized she’d never have been able to do this as a human. He’d be way too big for her to manage with her hands but her wolf abilities were stronger. They’d made it to the back of the lab and up some of the stairs huffing and puffing from the exertion when she smelled the people behind her.

Dropping the man for a second, she lunged around. The door to the lab was closed and someone—she sniffed the air—no two people were pounding on it and shouting. She forced herself to listen past the siren. What were they saying?

“Azriel, can you hear us?” Pound, pound, pound. “They welded the door closed from the outside. Hang on in there, brother. We’re getting it open.”

Someone had welded the door closed? She growled at the thought. This was

horrendous. People died in fires and lord knew with all of this fur she was getting really hot. The man on the outside had called him brother. Was that a term of endearment, like you might call someone 'man' or 'buddy' or were the people out there his family?

Leah shook her head from side to side. No, she couldn't go through this alone. Maybe it was wimpy to admit it but she was terrified of dying in the flames that she could see were rapidly approaching the staircase. Bending her head, she licked the man's face. He needed to wake up. Maybe there was another way out of the lab. He needed to tell her.

The man groaned, his head moving from side to side before his lids opened showing his brown eyes. He coughed, violently. Covering his mouth with his arm he sat up as he looked at her. One hand reached out and stroked the top of her head. "Hey, lady-wolf, did you drag me over here? I told you to run."

Well, she wasn't any frickin' good at following directions evidently. If she lived through this she would add it to the list of things she was learning about herself. Gesturing with her head, she whimpered at the door.

The man narrowed his eyes and struggled to his feet. She noticed he dragged one leg behind the other slightly, an old wound or something that had happened today? She didn't remember seeing him do it before. As if the limp didn't bother him, he took the stairs two at a time.

"Theo, Gabriel...is that you?" He shouted over the noise toward the door.

"Az, fuck, that's a relief. We've almost got it open."

The man nodded, which she found funny considering the people on the outside of the door couldn't see it. It was almost as if he was talking to himself in his own head. Leah thought the man who had answered from the outside, either Theo or Gabriel, sounded genuinely relieved.

"No, no...listen...speak to me with your voice, okay? I'm not alone in here. The wolf—the one I've told you about, the one who hasn't died—she's with me, she saved my life, Theo." He turned to look at her. "She's really something, she can understand me, which means, if you can, speak so she can hear us too, just in case something happens to me."

"Alright. Are you sure the fumes aren't getting to you?"

The man laughed. C'mon, they were going to die and she'd placed all of her hopes on a person who found something about this funny? Maybe it was she who wasn't right in the head.

"I'm sure, Theo." The man turned back to her and crouched down. He turned his head back to the door and shouted. "Listen, I'm going to shift to get some extra protection from the flames. Keep talking aloud." Reaching forward, he pulled her into his arms and whispered in her ear. "Don't be afraid. It's still me."

Internally, she gasped as a warm, blinding light surrounded the man—no wait, she had heard his name, and what was it?—Azriel shifted in front of her eyes into a wolf. His limbs reshaped quickly, dark brown fur pushing out of his arms and legs to recover him. He shook his head and the eyes that stared at her were wolf eyes.

She blinked twice. It was all so familiar, like she'd seen it before. Not that she'd seen it happen to him but to someone whose face she couldn't recall. Maybe it had happened to her. How else would she have become a wolf? Azriel, the wolf, moved forward, nudging her with his head to get closer to the door. He'd told her not to be afraid and

strangely enough, she wasn't. The fire and the smoke had taken up most of her nerves. Azriel's turning into a wolf was nothing in comparison to the rest of it. Besides, maybe it meant he could teach her to do it and then she could shift back too.

Following him to the door, she heard one last pound. Turning around, she saw the black and grey smoke making its way up the stairs. She'd never be able to breathe that stuff. If it reached them, they'd have very little time to get away before they both suffocated.

The door flew open. She didn't need to be told to run through it. Azriel hung back until she passed him and darted through the entrance first. After the blazing heat of the lab, the outside felt freezing. She shivered as she looked at the two men who were shouting for them to move away from the door.

They were tall—maybe taller than Azriel—but she could see the family resemblance immediately. The same dark hair and high cheekbones on each of them meant that they were family traits. But to Leah, that's where the similarities stopped. In the afternoon sun, she could see that their eyes, although brown, were not as kind or warm as Azriel's had been.

Just the same, she ran after them, turning around to see if Azriel followed. He was but that wasn't what made her feet falter. The door that had been opened led underground. She'd been so busy getting free she hadn't noticed she'd had to travel up three steps to reach the outside once she'd gotten through the entrance. She'd been trapped in an underground lab?

What the hell was this place? She sniffed the air as she looked around. It looked as if she was deep in the middle of the woods. Whatever was going on, Azriel and the rest of these people had held her in a cage in an underground lab in the middle of the woods. It was like something out of a teenage angst novel.

Note to self, evidently she knew about teenage angst novels. She sighed and it came out of her mouth like a moan.

Strong arms picked her off the ground. She yelped before she realized it was Azriel and relaxed.

He turned as he held her to the taller of the two men. "Give me that blanket."

Looking down she became suddenly aware that Azriel was completely naked as he held her. She gulped, at least internally. His body, well the parts she could see since she was held up against him, was sculpted like Michelangelo's David. It was as if someone had decided to sculpt the perfect man and Azriel had been created. Of course, a very important portion of the male anatomy was totally hidden from her view...

She shook her head. It was disgusting that she was even thinking about it. Did she need to make a mental note that perhaps she was a sex addict or maybe it had just been a very long time since she'd had sex? No, she had to quit that line of thinking. Clearly, she was not focusing on the things she needed to be thinking about at that current time.

"Here." One of the other men, the taller of the two who had scars on his face, handed Azriel a blanket, which he quickly wrapped around her. Grateful for the warmth, she again wished she could wrap herself up in it and never move.

"Dude," the shorter of the two brothers spoke. "She has fur, you're buck naked. We brought the blanket for you."

"Thanks, but I'm okay. The lady wolf has been down in the lab for several months—it's always hot—and she's just been through a fire. I don't want her to catch a chill."

“That’s awful considerate of you, little brother.” It was the taller of the two again. So far, Leah preferred him to the other one.

Azriel coughed. “Who did it?”

“We were hoping you could tell us.”

“How could I do that?”

“The magic alarm went off and then we saw on the monitors that your place was on fire. By the time we got here, the door was welded shut.”

She snuggled closer to Azriel, he still smelled like the ocean, as he had in the lab, but now he also smelled like the woods after a storm and that made her smile. He wrapped his arms around her tighter and the three men started walking. At the moment, she had no idea where they were going and for some reason she was completely fine with that.

“I never saw who firebombed the room. I was overwhelmed with the smell—you know that sick, sour milk smell that spreads before the fire from one of those things starts?”

The other two nodded their assent.

The shorter brother spoke again. “You’re holding her kind of tight there, Az. What have you been doing down there in that lab with her for so long?”

Leah wished she could bite him. If she had to be a wolf, maybe she should act like one. It could be fun.

“She can understand you, remember?” Azriel sighed and she remembered her impression of him from earlier in the day. He was tired, the kind of tired where he’d long since noticed how exhausted he really was. She thought there was an expression for that: bone weary.

She wondered why she cared.

Az continued. “I’ve been trying to figure out why she’s still alive.”

“Does she behave any differently than the others?” This time she appreciated the shorter one’s questions. She’d like to know the answers to that too considering she couldn’t really remember too many details since she’d opened her eyes about an hour earlier. No, that wasn’t entirely true; she knew lots of things about Azriel, just nothing about anything else. Was that odd?

“She has longer times of clarity—or at least as far as I can tell it’s clarity. I only started talking to her this morning so I don’t know if she’s been able to understand me this whole time or if it’s a recent development that’s going to precipitate some kind of change.” He paused. “I’m hoping it’s not the kind of scenario where she gets absolute understanding before she completely degrades and then dies.”

Oh wow, she hoped that too. Please, please, please don’t let it be that.

As if remembering that she understood him perfectly, he gave her a squeeze.

“Anyway, she does have episodes where she is like the others: aggressive, almost feral, and desperate for the serum. I keep waiting for her physical appearance to alter like the others. Her fur should be falling out or oily and disgusting, her eyes should be glazing over. One of the last stages is the drool. It’s everywhere and damn if it doesn’t stink something fierce.”

The shorter man took a sniff. “She smells pretty good to me. For a wolf, she has a scent resemblance to lilacs.”

A growl formed from Azriel’s throat that had Leah’s ears poking backwards. She shivered; in no way did she like that sound.

“You don’t need to be smelling her, Gabriel.”

“I can smell whoever I want. What is the matter with you?”

The taller man laughed aloud, his eyes filled with laughter. “Oh boy, do I remember this phase; I all but killed Rex.”

Azriel’s whole body had gotten very still. All Leah could feel was the beating of his heart. “What does that mean, Theo?”

“It means from the way you’re behaving towards that ‘made’ wolf, Azriel, I would say the reason she is still alive and not altered like the others is because she is your mate.” Theo patted him on the shoulder. “Welcome to the party, brother.”

His what? Okay, someone was going to have to explain that. Wolf or no wolf she was going to make them go into more detail about exactly what that meant. She knew nothing about herself. No way could she be his ‘mate’. It was simply out of the question.

She might have a husband at home waiting for her; searching all over the place and not knowing that she had somehow become a wolf. Azriel’s ocean scent mixed with the smell of the woods hit her again and she wanted to smile.

Maybe it wasn’t such an impossibility that she belonged to him, but it was still scary as hell.

Chapter Two

Azriel Kane stopped walking and stood perfectly still. Could it be true? How was it possible that Theo could have known the lady wolf in his arms was his mate when he didn't know it himself?

Well you would have known it if you ever listened to anything I said to you.

His wolf was pissed; he could hear it in the sarcasm travelling over their link. *I haven't been ignoring you. When did you tell me the little she-wolf was my mate?*

You know I can't just come out and say it. How many times have I asked you why she was still alive or why you were so fixated on her?

Azriel let out the breath he'd held and squeezed the brown and white wolf a little tighter in his arms. *Might have been nice if you could have been a little bit more direct than that. You know I don't 'get' relationships. Subtlety is lost on me.*

His wolf laughed. *And don't I know it...*

Pulling himself out of his daze, he ran forward to catch up to Theo and Gabriel keeping his unnamed lady wolf, who happened to be his possible mate, close to his chest. Two of his five brothers, they were used to him occasionally drifting off into moments of deep thought and losing track of the 'here and now'. If either of them had sensed immediate danger, they would have snapped him out of it but aside from that, they'd pretty much learned to let him be.

Theo, the shorter of the two, had mated about three months earlier to a recently rediscovered pack member named Faith. Their mating had been a gift for the whole pack as it had brought Theo back from near madness and eliminated a very serious threat from creatures called the fire demons. They'd first had to become demons themselves. Az really hoped he wasn't going to have to do anything like that to complete his mating...

Gulping, he turned to Theo. "I think I'm in serious trouble."

"I may not be a genius like you, little brother, but I'm pretty sure you're right."

Theo's tone held way too much humor for Az's liking.

"Can the two of you get your heads out of your mated asses long enough to focus on the fact that we were just attacked, *again*?"

Az winced. Gabriel might be harsh but he was usually right. It was just that they were always being attacked. It didn't matter if they eliminated a threat—and they had destroyed a big one when Theo and Faith had sent the demons back to their own dimension—another one popped up to replace it. Since finding their preordained mates seemed to be part of the 'game plan' in ending the destructive chaos their father, Kendrick Kane, liked to drop on their heads, sometimes literally, it seemed important to Azriel that he get his version of the mating thing figured out.

Besides, it was no secret that Gabriel had proclaimed several times that he had no desire to find his mate and found the whole thing to be a huge waste of time. He preferred battles to romance. Az often wondered exactly how tough a woman was going to have to be to survive mating with his second oldest brother.

"I don't think discussing Azriel's mating issue is going to mean the destruction of the pack, big brother. Theo jumped to his defense. "We can't really work through any of this without Tristan and Cullen with us anyway."

Az nodded his head. He shouldn't have let Theo defend him to Gabriel. It only made Gabriel think he could continue to tell him what to do. He laughed, causing Gabriel to roll his eyes. Who was he kidding? They'd been doing this routine for at least eighty years; it wasn't likely to change anytime soon. In his human form, Az preferred to live a more cerebral life than his kick-ass-and-ask-questions-later brothers. The others seemed to understand. Gabriel never did and Az knew enough to know he never would.

That didn't mean he didn't love him. Gabriel had just beat down a door with a battering ram to get him out of a burning lab. There was a bond between them, whether they'd ever really see eye to eye or not.

As they passed through a clearing in the woods, he could see their home up ahead. Every single window in the Westervelt lair was illuminated by light, creating a bright orange aura over the landscape. Much like a giant hotel, the lair had been constructed to house the entire pack until it was safe again for them to make their own homes elsewhere on the island. Az wasn't sure, if today was any indication, that they'd ever get to that point.

In any case, it didn't feel like home to him. As far as he was concerned, he'd had two homes in his life. The first had been the cottage he'd shared with his parents. He'd lived there with his brothers and, as it had turned out although the magic hadn't worn off enough for anyone other than Cullen to remember her, their baby sister. The second one had been the building they'd called 'The Institute' until Tristan had burned it down.

He shook his head. Thinking about both of those things only gave him migraines. How was it possible—his mother's strong magic aside—to simply forget one's sister? Could he just be bespelled into forgetting Rex or Michael one day? It was an appalling reality he wished he didn't have to live with.

The other place he'd thought of as home had burned to the ground during Tristan's mating issues. Cursed into trying to kill his new love, he'd torched the Institute his father had built and they'd all watched it turn into ashes around them. The memory made him angry, and not at Tristan who had suffered more than any of them when he'd come back to his senses and realized what had happened, but at Kendrick and the pain—no, the hell—he'd put them all through.

Maybe his mating would finally put an end to Kendrick. Gabriel stalked forward, leaving the Theo and Azriel behind.

Azriel moved to follow but Theo placed a hand on his shoulder. "Let him go ahead. I want to talk to you—to the two of you." Theo's eyes stared down at the female wolf in his arms.

It was a small gesture but a nice one. She could understand them—he was pretty sure that was true. He couldn't even begin to dwell on the idea that she couldn't. It was bad enough she was trapped in the wolf body and he was mated to a woman whose human side, or name for that matter, he didn't know. What if her brain was actually gone, eaten by the 'wrongness' of her creation?

"Are you paying attention, Az, or did I lose you to your inner musings again?"

He smiled. "Sorry, man, I know it's annoying."

"It's not annoying, it's just part of the intricacies of talking with you. It's not as if I can blame you," Theo's gaze fell to the she-wolf again. "You have a lot to think about but stay with me for a minute."

"You've got my attention."

Theo sighed. "I would say this to you telepathically except you want her to hear what you hear and I'm going to respect that. Faith would flip out if I ever tried to leave her out of conversations she should hear." Az watched in amazement as Theo actually smiled at that thought. How was it possible that he would like the thought of Faith getting angry? He might never understand relationships.

Theo continued. "Anyway, I'm worried about Gabriel." Az turned to watch their brother up ahead. "I know he can hear us. This isn't going to come as any surprise to him and maybe it's time someone started saying this aloud."

Why was this the first time he was hearing that there was some kind of problem with Gabriel? "What's been going on since I've been down in the lab?"

"What *hasn't* been going on since you went down in the lab?"

Enough. "Okay, all sarcasm aside, just tell me."

"Tristan wanted to send Gabriel to find our sister."

"So why did he end up sending Michael?"

"Ever since Gabriel and I got back from Arizona and our encounter with our father... Gabriel has been a little 'off'. He's very violent right now. It actually worked to our favor in getting you out of the lab just now but he goes from zero to crazy in under two seconds."

This part of being in a family didn't work so well for Az. There was sure to be an appropriate thing for him to say at the moment and he didn't have a clue what it was.

Want me to tell you what to say?

In no way did he want that. *No, you'll just start cursing and screaming, which even I know is not necessary at the moment.*

His wolf argued. *I would not.*

He cleared his throat. "Then why isn't Tristan doing something about it?"

"Tristan is off-island with Ashlee and the kids. Cullen and Summer went too. They brought the baby with them, too. Technically, I'm in charge only Gabriel doesn't seem to remember that."

Now Az saw where this was going. "Okay, then what you're telling me that I'm slow to catch onto is that when Tristan gets back he's going to have to bite the bullet and rank us?"

That would put Az way at the bottom of the pecking order of Kanes. Maybe right above Rex, maybe below him depending on just how pissed off Tristan currently was at their youngest brother.

"Well that, yes, but also that I want you to be careful with Gabriel. I know you're less volatile than the rest of us, only I've been where you are. You've found your mate; however, for obvious reasons, you can't mate her. That's going to make you really nuts. Gabriel is going to taunt you. Please don't kill him."

"You know, even as a wolf, I could never take Gabriel in a physical fight."

Oh bullshit. We could, if you ever let me loose.

He ignored his wolf.

Theo raised an eyebrow. "You've never been mated before."

"Are you telling me that mating increases physical strength and capabilities?" He was going to have to try to stay objective about this and observe the changes in himself scientifically. What was it about the mating *exactly* that brought on the physical alterations?

Because gods forbid you just enjoy finding your soul mate?

He sighed. Did everyone else have as contemptuous a relationship with his or her wolf as he did? *This is fun for me.*

"I'm telling you that if you wanted to, in order to protect your mate, you could fly to the moon using only a swat from your tail."

"Theo, I don't know if poetic references from fairytales are what's called for in this situation."

Theo only laughed, which made Az want to show him exactly what damage he could do with his tail. The thought stopped Az in his tracks. That was a fairly aggressive response, not something he usually bothered with where his brothers were concerned. Maybe Theo was right, maybe he was out of synch and more...primal...due to his mate's appearance and his inability to do anything about it.

He shook his head and looked down at the brown and white fur ball that he held in his arms. Narrowing his eyes, he realized she'd fallen asleep. This time he gave in and laughed aloud. Here he was obsessing over whether or not they were actually mated and what ramifications that meant for him and his future bride, the woman he was bound to for eternity, who he still had yet to lay eyes on, had fallen asleep in his arms.

Theo followed his gaze. "I guess she was tired after the fire. She's probably not used to the chaos like we are."

This sobered Az immediately. Was it a bad sign that his brother had twice now had to explain the woman to him? Why couldn't he be as attuned to her needs as Theo?

"Theo, she dragged me across the lab with her teeth."

"They're all *very* strong, stronger than 'normal' wolves, maybe as strong as we are. You haven't encountered one in battle yet. They really kick ass. Dad knew what he was doing when he created them." Theo visibly shuddered. "It would be great if you could figure out how to turn them back so we could take away that advantage."

"Are you under the impression that I'm not trying to get it done? Because I have been doing nothing else for months. All I do all day, every day, is work on the 'man made' wolf problem. You guys bring them in, I work on them, they die, and I burn their dead carcasses. Sound like a lot of fun to you? Sound like something you'd spend more than one extra second doing if you had the chance?"

Yeah, tell him to go screw himself.

Theo put his hands out in front of him in a placating gesture. "I'm sorry, Az, I mean clearly you must be doing something right if Dad is attempting to destroy your lab. We all know how hard you've been working. Maybe after your mating, your mind will feel clearer."

"Dad has been trying to kill me since I was born, remember? When I was two days old he tried to drown me in the bathtub and as for the mating, there is a big problem there—mainly that she is currently a wolf without a human body. I have no idea what to do about this very large problem."

Az started moving forward, Theo followed next to him, his hands in his pockets. A slight drizzle fell from the sky, not unusual for Maine in the early spring, and Az after checking to make sure the blanket was fully covering his lady wolf, raised his head to the sky to let some of the light rain spray his face.

"I remember when Dad did that. It was horrifying...and in retrospect, probably the beginning of his decline into madness."

"If Mom hadn't come along when she did, I'd be dead."

"Actually, I think it was Gabriel who saved you."

Az stopped dead in his tracks. "What?"

"I know the story always was that Mom came along and stopped Dad but I'm fairly certain it was Gabriel who told Mom what Dad was up to, risking Dad's wrath. She took all the blame to spare him."

So now Az officially owed Gabriel twice for saving his life. "I guess I've always been a little confused as to why the pack didn't throw him out of Alpha position for trying to kill his own son."

"No one outside of the Kane family knew anything about it."

He nodded. "That's what I always figured."

And if I'd been around back then he'd have been a dead man.

A thought occurred to him. "Why did Tristan and Cullen take their families off-island?"

"Ashlee and Summer wanted to get the babies vaccinated."

"They wanted to what?" Why hadn't anybody discussed this with him? One of his five degrees was in medicine. Granted, it was fifty years out of date...

"They're concerned the pups might be susceptible to human diseases like measles or polio."

"We don't get sick like that."

"I know that and you know that but the Morrison girls are still convinced the fact that their children are one quarter pure human might leave them open to those kinds of illnesses."

"Theo," Az scratched his head. "We have been marrying humans on and off for hundreds of years. There has never—ever—been a recorded case of anyone even catching a cold. Why on earth would Tristan let her think the pups could get sick?"

Tristan and Ashlee had three children. When Az was actually outside of the lab, he loved being with Braden, Virginia, and the new baby, Elizabeth. Secretly, although he suspected Tristan knew of the jokes, the pack liked to say that Tristan and Ashlee were trying to repopulate the pack all by themselves. Summer, Ashlee's baby sister, and Cullen, the pack's enforcer, had just had their first child, a son they'd named Jude. Already whispers flew around the pack about a future Kane/Murphy mating. Shifters liked to gossip. Matings however, as Az knew, were left to the Fates and not the speculations of the wolf pack. Not to mention they'd be first cousins...

"Tristan and Cullen learned quickly that one does not tell one's mate anything, one simply goes along to help them not get killed."

"Alright, but an unnecessary vaccination..."

Az stopped speaking midsentence. Ideas always came to him like a car slamming into a wall on the side of the highway. Impact was rough but if he was lucky he lived to talk about them. Vaccinations, the doctor stuck a small amount of a dead pathogen, or maybe in some cases a live one, into you giving your immune system the opportunity to develop immunity to it instead of having to develop a full blown case. That way if you came into contact with whatever you were being inoculated against—say the measles—you wouldn't catch it because your body would think you already had as it had the immunities stored up.

Az's head whirled. It was so damn simple. Why hadn't he seen it before? Not all

vaccinations lasted. Children—humans at least—had to sometimes be revaccinated for certain diseases. Sticking with the measles theme, he wanted to dance. Human doctors had to give the MMR vaccine at least twice during childhood and sometimes again if they knew a patient was leaving the country and going somewhere where there might be an outbreak.

That was what the drug was. It was acting like a counter-vaccine; it was stopping the bodies of the wolves from using its immune system to fight off the disease that was the wolf body Kendrick had given them. They weren't supposed to be wolves. It was like a disease. Too much suppression and the body overreacted to the pathogen—thus killing the wolf.

He wasn't any closer to knowing how the witches were hoisting the wolf on the poor souls to begin with but maybe he could keep them alive a little longer. Maybe he could keep his mate, and it was scary how fast he'd started to think of her that way considering he still didn't know her name, from dying on him before he learned the cause of the initial transformation.

Theo stared at him. "You look like a kid in a candy store."

Are you going to try to explain it?

He shook his head. *No way in hell.*

"I just figured out part of the puzzle."

Theo narrowed his eyes. "As we stood here?"

Az squeezed the wolf in his arms tighter. "That's right, and now I'm going to keep her alive."

Now all he had to do was figure out how to get her out of her wolf body and into her human one. Then he had to hope they actually liked each other...

And that no one else tried to fire bomb them to death while he worked on the other problems.

But hell, it was just another day in his life and this sort of thing had long ago become commonplace.

Chapter Three

Kill.

The voice resounded in Leah's head as her eyes flew open. She looked left and right, realizing she had no idea where she was. It didn't matter, she'd been given an order, and she needed to follow it.

The man—Azriel—stood across the room staring at the window. His brothers surrounded him on both sides. She wanted to howl with delight. Her Alpha would be so thrilled if she killed all of them. Then he'd let her come home and live in the light of his presence again.

She leaped off the table, growling. They needed to see her teeth; they needed to see how strong she was. They should know who it was who was going to end their lives.

The three men whirled around. Leah's gaze focused solely onto Azriel. She'd kill him first. Yes, that sounded like a good plan. Drool pooled in her mouth as she imagined how he'd taste...a pang thudded in her chest. What was that? No matter, she needed to do this. She'd been ordered.

"Gods damn it, she's having an episode." She had no idea what Az meant by that but it didn't matter. He was nothing but soon-to-be dead meat to her.

Gabriel lunged forward. "She's got death in her eyes."

"No," Azriel pulled back on Gabriel's arm, shoving the man back toward the wall. Leah was impressed. She hadn't imagined he was that strong. No matter, she'd still destroy him.

Kill the wolves.

"No one touches her but me."

Gabriel snarled. "Look at how she's looking at you, little brother; she's going to kill you."

"She can't control herself right now. Whatever is happening to her, it's making her delirious and psychotic. You're right, I'm sure she does want to kill me. She probably wants all of our deaths. If she was in the lab, she'd be locked up and the only thing she'd be able to do is throw herself against the bars. Unfortunately, she's out and this was way faster than anticipated for another episode. I think somehow it's not a coincidence that this is happening on top of the firebombing."

Gabriel growled, which only infuriated her. Maybe she'd kill him first. "That's nice. We're still going to have to subdue her."

"No one is subduing her but me."

Without another thought, Leah leapt forward aiming for Azriel's throat. Seconds before she made contact a warm, white light slammed into her, throwing her backwards. Where Az had stood, a dark wolf stared back at her. Damn, she had forgotten he could do that.

She leaned back on two of her paws ready to lunge at him again. Az growled, loudly, and she couldn't move. Inwardly, she raised an eyebrow. It was an impressive show. Jumping so fast she could hardly make out his form amidst the blur of color that streaked before her eyes, his mouth came down on her neck. He grabbed her by the scruff like she was a puppy, dragging her across the floor as she whimpered.

Forcing her onto her side, he stared down at her, his wolf eyes letting her know in no uncertain terms that he was in charge and she was going to cease and desist. If only it was that easy. Leah tried to make sense of her thoughts. Everything felt muddled, like her thoughts weren't her own.

She blinked twice. It wasn't that Az was hurting her; he hadn't, not even when he'd forcibly moved her across the room and put her into this position of submission. Wanting to cry, she closed her eyes. What the hell was happening to her?

Damn it, I wish you could hear me.

Leah's eyes flew open. Had she just heard Az in her head? This was really getting out of control.

Did you hear me? He narrowed his eyes above her.

If you're actually speaking in my head—and I'm not hallucinating—then yes, I heard you. Though why she would be surprised to hear a voice in her head when she was compelled beyond resistance to 'kill' by the same manifestation was beyond her understanding. Of course, maybe it was because it was Azriel's voice...

The fact that you can hear me is a very good sign. He sighed. *I'm actually hearing your voice. I have to tell you, it's a really pretty sound.*

His compliment sent shivers up her spine. No one had commented on her voice before...or maybe they had and she just couldn't remember. *Thank you.*

Now why don't you tell me what's happening to you right now. Oh...wait...I'm so ridiculous. What is your name?

It was almost more bizarre than she could handle. Here she was, trapped as a wolf, being instructed by one voice inside her head to kill people, while talking to someone who could shift between wolf and man, and about to introduce herself. In her mind, she shrugged. She could write that on her list: she was the type of person who was capable of going with the flow in truly outlandish situations.

My name is Leah St. James.

That's a very pretty name...Leah St. James. Wait, what? Azriel, the wolf, jumped back a few feet letting go of her scruff.

She rolled over on her side and stood up. Hoping the 'kill' voice could hold off a few seconds, she moved forward. *Do you know who I am? All I know is my name. Does my name mean something to you?*

Your name means something to the entire state. You're the daughter of one of our Senators and you've been missing for six months.

Azriel's abrupt tone told her he was not thrilled with his recent discovery of her identity. She shook her head. None of what he told her rang a bell in her mind. Shouldn't there be a big 'a-ha' moment now that she knew something about herself? But there was nothing. Still a blank slate with just her name to identify who she was.

The white light filled the space around Azriel again and he regained his human form. The naked version of it, which she swore this time she would not lust after.

Kill.

She closed her eyes and pointedly refused to acknowledge the order. This was all getting rapidly out of hand. Voices in her head were not going to get to tell her what to do. She was a cognizant human being—or wolf at the moment—she decided whom she did and did not murder.

"I think we have a very large problem." Azriel looked back and forth from his

brothers to her. *He* thought they had a very large problem?

Gabriel stepped forward, his eyes focused entirely on her even as he spoke to Azriel. “Were you able to communicate with her?”

“I was and her name is Leah St. James.”

Gabriel’s gaze moved to focus on Azriel as Theo, standing by the window, swore loudly. “Even for Dad, this is fucked up.”

Why was it so bad that she was Leah St. James? Wasn’t it a good thing? Now they could tell her family where she was and—

Like a light bulb turning being switched on, the truth of what Az had told her registered in her brain. She was Leah St. James, daughter of *Senator* Nathan St. James from Maine. Unless she was very much mistaken, people didn’t know that there were individuals running around who could be both man and animal. That meant that whatever went on here, it was secret. It wouldn’t do to have the daughter of a senator exposing it all.

Suddenly, she was overwhelmed with the urge to run. These people were going to kill her to keep her quiet. That’s what she’d do in the same situation and she didn’t want to record that in her pretend notebook about her personality traits. Looking around, she tried to figure out how she could escape.

The men were arguing. Well, Theo and Gabriel were. Az didn’t seem to be participating in it, all of his attention focused on her. He’d spoken in her mind. Did that mean he could read her thoughts, that he knew she was going to escape? She gulped as she couldn’t seem to stop herself from focusing on the fact that he was naked—again. She looked down at the floor to divert her gaze. Were they all so comfortable shifting back and forth that none of them minded being so exposed and vulnerable? What if they gained a few pounds?

Pulling his brown-eyed gaze from its examination of her, he looked at his brothers. “You both know that *whatever* happens, I go with her.”

Silence descended on the room and to Leah it felt like a palpable being. She was so sick of being stuck in this form and not able to ask her questions. As odd as it was, she was both desperate to run and terrified to leave Az. Truthfully, the idea of his going with her wherever she went was sort of appealing. Maybe they could get to know each other in less intense circumstances.

The door slammed open and a group of what she could only describe as huge men hurried into the room. Watching each one of them enter, she had to amend her thought. There were some women, but only a few. If there were maybe thirty men there were only seven women. Each man—and she had to guess they were all shifters—was better looking than the next but none of them held a candle to Az. She gasped. When had that happened? When had he become the best looking man she’d ever seen?

In the lab, she realized suddenly, when he’d rubbed her fur and spoken to her. That’s when it had happened.

A tall shifter with long black hair who stood with one of the few women handed Az some clothes, which he quickly, much to her chagrin, dressed himself in. Conversations flitted around the room, too fast for her to follow. More than anything she wanted Az to speak in her mind again. The connection with him felt palpable to her, even though it had only been for a few seconds, she wanted it back. Something to ground her in all of this madness.

It's okay.

She sighed with relief. There are so many people here.

They're all family—kind of. Even so, it feels like madness to me most of the time too.

It's one of the reasons I stay in the lab.

She smiled, not caring that she showed her wolf teeth while she did it. *What's the other reason?*

Az grinned back at her, his brown eyes sparkling with mischief. *You were there.*

The door slammed open again. *You shifters really know how to make an entrance.*

Az laughed aloud, gaining him some odd looks from the others in the room. The mind speaking was kind of fun now that it wasn't completely odd. As a man entered the room, a hush fell over the crowd. Leah focused her attention on the new arrival. He was tall, but not as tall as Az, and stocky. She immediately concluded that he didn't look like one of Az's brothers.

Theo spoke to the new man. "Aloud, if you will, Cullen. Az's mate," he indicated her with his head. "Can't yet speak with us telepathically."

The man they'd called Cullen turned to her, one eyebrow raised. "Really? He's mated to the 'made' wolf."

"Hey," Az's voice held venom. She was glad she wasn't on the receiving end of it. "She's a person to whom this happened. There's no way she asked for whatever abuse Kendrick did to her and even if she had, I won't have anyone speaking about her—or any of the people that this was done to—with anything less than respect. They don't want to attack us. I'm sure if given the choice they wouldn't." He took a deep breath and Leah noted that Cullen had narrowed his eyes but otherwise he did not move. "Also, she has a name. It's Leah St. James."

Cullen covered his eyes with his hands and rubbed the top half of his face like it hurt. "Crap." She supposed she should be insulted except she was smart enough to know this would probably be the response everyone had. He took his hands down and they hung by his side. "Did anyone tell the Alpha yet?"

Theo shook his head. "No way in hell am I doing that."

Gabriel snickered. "Nope."

"I'll tell him." Az's voice still held the same hostility.

Why are you so angry?

Az's gaze met hers again, an emotion she couldn't identify present in his eyes. *When someone calls you a 'made' wolf it's an insult.*

Leah digested this. *Because I shouldn't be a wolf?*

My father did this to you, to a lot of people. People like you, to whom this was done, have been attacking us for a long time. Some of our pack has been hurt. There is a lot of hostility but that doesn't make it right.

The door opened again, this time not slamming into the wall, and three of the most beautiful women she'd ever seen entered the room followed by a man wearing sunglasses.

That's Tristan. Az told her. The name didn't mean anything to her. She knew they'd discussed him earlier but so much had happened she couldn't keep any of it straight.

Who?

He's our Alpha and my third oldest brother. In a wolf pack, he's the absolute ruler. His word is law.

Tristan approached Az with a fast gait. When he reached her one anchor to the world, he stopped and stared at him for a moment. As she, and the entire pack watched Tristan pulled Azriel into an embrace.

“Are you hurt?” Tristan’s voice was rough and she didn’t have to know him to hear the emotion in it.

“It was minor and I’m healed. I shifted, it took care of the injuries.”

Tristan nodded and released his brother. He put out his arm and the redhead who’d entered before him moved to his side slipping under his arm. She placed her head against his chest like a woman who was used to fitting against him.

Abruptly, Tristan turned his head to stare at Leah. She gulped under his gaze, which even through the sunglasses she could feel the heat from.

“You thought it was a good idea to bring one of them into our meeting room?” She knew he wasn’t speaking to her.

Theo answered. “It’s complicated, Trip.”

“Explain it so it’s simple.” He regarded the room for a moment. “Why is everyone speaking aloud, is someone having a problem with the link?”

“The wolf is my mate and her name is Leah St. James.” Az stepped forward, placing himself between Tristan and Theo. She wasn’t sure why he did that but maybe it was one of those male things. “I’m sure you know who that is.”

Tristan pulled off his glasses. Leah took a step back and banged into the wall behind her. His eyes—even in his human form—were wolf eyes and they screamed one word: dominance.

Leaving the redhead, he stepped forward to Leah. Az followed close in his wake, a growl sounding from his throat. Leah didn’t know much about these kinds of things but she would guess it wasn’t a good idea to growl at one’s Alpha.

Tristan turned around to look at his brother and when he turned back to Leah he had an amused smirk on his face. “Relax, Azriel, I am not going to wound your she-wolf.”

“She didn’t ask for this.”

Tristan had been the only one in the pack not to remark on her name and he hadn’t called her ‘made’, which made her disposed to like him even if he was a little scary.

“I know that.” Tristan nodded and stood up. “No one knows better than me what it is like to be trapped as a wolf.” He reached out his hand and she shook as she braced for what she was sure to be a blow. Instead, he patted her on the head. “And no matter what she is she’s ours now.” That last phrase seemed to be directed to the room. He turned around to the pack. “She’s pack.”

In unison, everyone in the room answered. “She’s pack.”

Tristan nodded as if he’d expected no less. “Alright, Azriel—brilliant mind of our pack, now we just need to figure out how to get your woman out of her wolf body and into her human one.”

Cullen moved forward. “It begs the question, my Alpha, is she a shifter trapped in a phony wolf body or is she a non-shifter human who is trapped in a wolf body that she would never have otherwise?”

Az cleared his throat. “We aren’t going to get answers about that since she doesn’t seem to remember anything other than who she is and even that is hampered by the ‘episodes’ of lunacy that overtake her.”

How do you know I can’t remember?

Because you didn't know you were the Senator's daughter.

That made sense. *Did you have to call it lunacy?* She didn't know why but that word bothered her. It was bad enough he had seen her like that and that now his brothers had. The whole pack would think she was a lunatic.

Az cocked his head to the side. *That was not a choice word. I apologize.*

Wow. He apologized?

The redhead stepped forward. "Tristan, if I may offer a suggestion."

"Of course, little one."

The woman smiled and shook her head. "Some day you're not going to call me that any longer."

Tristan laughed. "Not possible. I'm going to call you that in this life and the next one."

Walking toward Leah, the 'little one' crouched down. "My name is Ashlee Morrison Kane." Ashlee looked behind her at the pack. "I think it's rude that no one is introducing themselves and Leah here has to try to figure out who we all are through osmosis."

Leah liked her already. Ashlee continued. "Anyway, Tristan, I think that I may have a solution. I've been trying to think this through using my own knowledge of magic coupled with the lifetimes worth of knowledge I acquired from the aunts before they died. I don't see why we can't do the same thing with Leah that we did with you when you were trapped in your wolf form."

A brown haired woman who had been leaning on Theo's arm stepped forward. "I wasn't here yet when that happened. What did you do?"

The blonde who stood next to Cullen laughed. "No women were here. It was just Ashlee and all of them."

Theo laughed. "And Ashlee was holed up in Tristan's room forced to shift by herself thanks to our carelessness that night. We're lucky anybody made it through that time. Are we sure we want to pull that out again?"

"It won't work." Leah really hated the sound of Gabriel's voice. It was so hostile. "Tristan was already a shifter. The magic just called him out."

Ashlee stood. "The same concept applies here. She's pack so whether she's wolf or not Tristan will call to her. If my father were alive, Tristan would call to him and he was human. Pack is pack. It just is." Ashlee took a deep breath. "Not to mention we don't know that she isn't a born shifter. She might be and," Ashlee put her hands on her hips. "I don't think, Gabriel Kane, that you are in any way qualified to argue magic with me. It's a female thing."

Tristan growled, which drew the attention of everyone in the room. "Whatever you're going to say, Gabriel, don't say it. I like Ashlee's plan. In any case, it can't hurt Leah. We'll do it tonight. Almost the whole pack is here. Michael, Damien, Kurt, and Reggie are off island but it's enough souls. Rex," Tristan turned to address a man Leah hadn't noted earlier. He quietly stood in the corner without making a sound. At the mention of his name, he raised an eyebrow.

That's our youngest brother. He's...troubled.

She grinned. *Seems to be that way for most of your family.*

The unmated ones anyway.

Leah was tempted to ask Az if that meant that he was now no longer going to be 'troubled' but Tristan continued talking.

“I want you to go with Faith and figure out the best way to contact Leah’s father. One way or another, we have to tell him she’s alive.”

Theo shook his head. “All objections I have to Faith spending time with little brother over there aside,” this earned him snickers from the pack and a look of angry dangers from Rex. “Are we sure we want to contact Senator St. James if we can’t be sure we’re going to return Leah to her natural state?”

Tristan sighed. “You’re not a father, Theo. I’m here to tell you, the man needs to know she’s alive. Besides, he might be able to shed some light on some of this.”

“Or expose us and we’ll all have to go into hiding.” Theo was clearly not going to let this go.

“Look,” Az interrupted. As sexy and warm as she found his voice when she heard it in her head, aloud it was rough and demanding. She wondered if he knew he had that effect when he spoke. “We’ll leave it up to Leah to contact her father. She’s not a child. We’re not going to make decisions for her like she can’t conduct herself.”

Rex stepped forward. “Any interest in seeing what your mate actually looks like Az?”

Az shook his head. “What?”

Rex held up his cell phone and Leah’s heart sped up. “I did an internet search. Here’s a picture of Ms. Leah St. James, beloved and missing daughter of Nathan St. James, senior senator from the state of Maine.”

Without another thought, she rushed to Az’s side to look at the photo. If anyone was going to see what she looked like, it was going to be her. Az took the phone from Rex’s hands and crouched down so they could look at her picture together.

Leah’s heart fell. The woman whose mischievous smile stared back at her was a complete stranger. Would there ever be anything about herself she would remember?

Chapter Four

Az stared at the woman in the photo displayed on his brother's phone. She stood on a grassy hill, leaning up against a large tree. Dressed entirely in black, which meant that she wore black slacks and a black turtleneck, except for, of all things, hiking boots, she grinned at the camera. Her hair, black as midnight, hung stick straight to her shoulders where it suddenly curled under towards her neck. Blunt cut bangs completed the effect. The look might have been severe was it not for the fact that she'd also dyed about one third of her locks hot pink. Ultimately, the look worked for her where on other women he might have found it akin to looking at an oddly striped zebra.

On Leah, however, it fit perfectly. He suspected it had something to do with the funny glint in her eyes or the way her thin black eyebrows lifted slightly like she was secretly laughing at the cameraman. His heart pounded in his chest as he was nearly undone with a completely unreasonable hate for whoever it was on the other side of the camera who had made her laugh. It should only be he who made her laugh.

Shaking his head, he forced the adrenaline-induced frenzy back down from whence it came. Theo had warned him, he was going to be extreme until he actually 'mated' with Leah. He placed his attention where it belonged: on the picture in front of him.

His mate's eyes were a striking blue-grey in color, like a rainstorm just before swollen clouds rolled in to obscure the sun.

Her skin was pale, almost porcelain white, with a sprinkling of freckles over her nose. Belatedly, Az realized she was skinny, not just thin and curvaceous, but actually super thin. Looking at her wolf self out of the corner of his eye, he wondered if she came by that look naturally or if it was a starvation attempt that achieved it. If it was the latter, they were going to have to do something about that...

I don't know that woman at all. Leah's husky voice sounded so despondent, he reached out to stroke her soft fur.

Your memory may return when your physical form does.

He heard her sigh in his mind. *Just 'may' return?*

Until we know exactly what it is that was done to you, we won't know when or if your memory will come back.

Az thought he'd known frustration caused by his inability to save the lives of his father's created wolves. None of that was anything akin to this. He was a person who got things done, he solved problems. Hell, he had inserted a tracking device into Cullen and Summer that had allowed the pack to track them to Mexico. He'd climbed a building in the middle of a rainstorm to reinstall a more efficient lightning rod that let them harness some of their energy supply from lightning strikes.

Yet with his own mate, he couldn't bring her back to her human form—he was going to have to rely on Tristan for that—and he couldn't help her with her memory problem. If he were Leah, he wouldn't want to mate with him at all. Out of the whole pack, he was the most useless member for her.

"Let's move." Tristan nodded to the group. "Maybe once we get her back into human form she can give us some answers."

Az looked down at Leah. "Want me to carry you? I know you can walk. I just kind

of want to.”

Don't you get tired? I must be heavy for you to cart around.

He shook his head and tried to keep his amusement out of his voice. She didn't know, he shouldn't find that adorable, only he did. “I'm a shifter. We can carry roughly two and a half times the amount that a regular person can. So, no, I did not get tired and I can do it again easily.”

His wolf's voice sounded in his head. *Show off. Even if you did get tired you'd want to carry her now that you've seen what she looks like. Admit it, you think she's hot.*

Az smirked. He did and he'd gladly admit it but not to his wolf. It would give the damn canine way too much laughter at his expense.

Leah leapt up, surprising Az but he still caught her. Pulling her against his chest, he followed behind the pack, which was moving to what they referred to as the ‘east lawn’. In reality, it was a grass filled clearing just east of the main residence. Surrounded by trees, it was the easiest place to do the magical spells hidden away and protected by the natural forest.

Magic had always irked Azriel. His mind—at least his human mind—didn't like the ambiguity of the whole process. Sometimes magic worked, sometimes it failed miserably and it all seemed to rely on the personal knowledge of the person in charge of the ceremony. The pack had its own magic that depended entirely on the strength of the Alpha. Only women could perform the ceremonies necessary to ‘call’ on magical forces and yet you could never be sure which women held the powers to do what since none of them came into their abilities until they were mated.

He rolled his eyes. It would have been nice to have been able to just snap his hands and stop all the wolves his father created from dying on his lab tables.

What are they going to do to me?

“It's a magic circle where Ashlee, Summer, Faith, Jana, and maybe some of the other women will call you to the pack. It will literally force your wolf to shift into its human form then to your wolf form repeatedly until you are in control of the shifts yourself. I've only ever seen it once before and it was on my brother Tristan, before he became Alpha.”

Will it hurt?

He thought about her question for a moment. “If this is your first shift, meaning you have never been from wolf to human before then yes, it will hurt. However, I think that is highly unlikely. I think you've probably been made to shift a lot.”

Which would mean it won't hurt?

“I'm not sure, Leah. See this is the trouble with magic—I just don't have any solid answers for you. In science, if you can create something once, you should be able to duplicate the results. We know the first shift hurts; I know that from personal experience.” The image of his first time filled his mind's eye. He'd been alone except for his father. It had been pitch black outside in the middle of winter. He hadn't eaten for days... He shook off the memory. Leah needed him to stay in the here and now.

“Some people find some discomfort from it later on too. I think it kind of depends on your own tolerance for the reshaping your body goes through and how willing you are to give into the white light that surrounds you.”

Were you able to do that?

Az nodded, not wanting to elaborate more. “After a time. I have a tendency to over think things.”

What if I'm not a wolf? What if I'm a human?

"Then I'm not sure what will happen after you regain your body. It may stop right there."

Leah closed her eyes. *I'm so confused about all of this. I don't even know how this happened to me.*

"How could you not be?" Really, she was being remarkably calm. No screaming, no hysterics to indicate that all of this was driving her to the brink of losing her mind. How much should he tell her? He didn't want to make her upset.

Everything. That was his wolf's advice. *How would you like to be kept in the dark?*

"Okay, so there is a lot about you we don't know but there are some things that we do."

Leah's eyes opened, her wolf gaze excited and trusting. *Tell me. I remember nothing outside of your lab.*

"You were brought to us from New York City by Malcolm and Jana." Az looked for the couple off in the crowd. It still amazed Az to see Jana back. He'd known her his entire life, she'd been one of the 'hot' unmated females who the young males liked to look at and hope they were mated to. One day she'd been there, the next she'd been gone, and all the mated females were dead. It had been that fast.

How did they find me?

"You were part of a wolf pack that attacked them on Valentine's Day. Presumably, you were being controlled by Jana's former boss who had aligned himself financially with Kendrick."

He felt her shudder in his arms. *I attacked them?*

"No one blames you for that. You're under my father's control. I tried to save all the wolves that had been part of your pack but only you survived. After that, when you were separated, your incidences of what you didn't like called 'lunacy' started."

Why am I under your father's control? Az, I hear voices telling me to kill.

"That's got to be all part of the same magic, which is why it drives me crazy. I have no idea why that is happening to you. My father is Kendrick Kane. While I was growing up, he was the Alpha of this pack. We were a huge number back then, several hundreds of wolf shifters. We resided on all these islands." Az nodded off in the distance to show her the direction of the other islands. He didn't know if she cared or not but to him life existed in the small details that made up the large whole of the universe. He would have wanted to know where the islands were.

She didn't remark so he continued. "Dad was never very wonderful to me. The pack, however, loved him. We grew strong and prosperous. One day he met up with this man named Claudius. We're not sure exactly what happened except that Kendrick—Dad—and Claudius hatched this plan to turn us over for scientific testing. Dad thought he could create an army of mindless wolves that he could control based on us. Somehow, he thought this would let us come out of hiding."

And you've already told me the Alpha's world is law.

She sounded so forlorn; he smiled and ruffled her fur. "There is a way to disobey the Alpha. You can challenge him for leadership. Only problem? Westervelt has to be led by a Kane. We're magic controllers, meaning we're strong in it, even if we're men and can't use it because only the women control magic. But male strength, specifically Kane strength, makes the whole pack better. So one of dad's brothers, my uncle, was going to

challenge him.”

Obviously he didn't win or you wouldn't all still be talking about your Dad.

“He never got the chance. Dad went and found a witch—”

She interrupted. *A witch?*

He raised an eyebrow. She was too cute. “I admire your skepticism. However, I have to point out that you’re trapped in the body of a wolf. You want to argue about the existence of witches?”

Good point. He heard the amusement in her voice.

“So I don’t know where he found the witch—turns out there are a lot of them—but he found one willing to place a curse on us. All mated men were cursed to kill their mates, the women they loved. You see, mating is a little complicated for a wolf shifter. Once we mate, we mate for eternity. When one dies, the other is driven to die too through a process of ritual suicide. We simply cannot live without the other one.”

No second marriages, then?

He shook his head. “No, it’s a onetime shot, this life and the next one. To not follow your partner is akin to living a half-life; evidently it’s all but unbearable. Again, I don’t know how it works. It’s *magic*.” If there was disdain in his voice when he said the last word he couldn’t help it. “The idea my Dad had was that he would have the men kill their women and then be driven to end their own lives. The pack would be left with unmated men, always considered the most volatile and weakest members. Plus, he’d be able to hold our unmated future brides over our heads to make us behave.”

And this happened? Her voice held so much horror in its intonation he wished he could lie to her.

“Almost.” He took a deep breath. Images passed in front of his eyes. Another day like this one. He’d awoken to the screams. Women were dying all over the islands and not just dying, gods, it was so brutal. The men they loved, trusted with their very existence, the fathers of their children were murdering them. He’d tried to help. He reached up with his left hand to stroke the side of his face that still held the scar from his last attempt at stopping a man he’d looked up to his entire life from murdering his own wife. Hell, the man had once taught him Latin and Greek. In that moment, he’d been a wild, murdering beast.

Az?

Leah’s voice broke him out of his memories of the past. Why was that happening so frequently? Usually, he was really good at keeping the past where it belonged: hidden.

“Sorry, she-wolf, I went away for a minute.” He shook his head not wanting her to ask him any questions. “Um, Mom got wind of what was happening. There wasn’t much time and she knew if Kendrick caught her she’d be dead so she did the best she could and got the unmated women off the island. Casting a spell to hide them from us until it was safe for them to return, we saw no other females—save our widowed aunts who endured the half-life to keep the magic alive on Westervelt—we waited helplessly for thirty years. Drifting might be a better description than waiting. We drifted for thirty years.”

Ah...how is that possible? You look all of thirty.

“I’m eighty years old, next week I will turn eighty-one. We stop aging, physically, at thirty until we are mated or commit ritual suicide, except for the Alpha. He and his mate stop at the age at which he became Alpha. So Ashlee will always look twenty-two even though she is twenty-seven now and Tristan will always look thirty even though he is

over one hundred years old until he steps down or is challenged and killed.”

She was silent and he thought perhaps he’d finally scared her off with too much information. *Are his eyes always like that?*

“Like a wolf? Yes, that’s another Alpha trait.”

Okay this is a lot to digest. I’m still trying to figure out how I could fit in. I have a father who is a senator so I’m obviously not one of your missing women...

“No, but you could be the daughter of one of the missing women, like both Ash and Summer. Or you could be human. We do mate humans.” As soon as he said the words he wished he could take them back. He hadn’t told her they were mates; he was sure she’d heard it earlier but still you didn’t just launch that information on someone—especially if they were a human ‘someone’ and not used to the idea that their love was predestined for them. Az swallowed a lump of anxiety. What if she wasn’t attracted to him? Could that happen? The woman in the picture was a goddess and he was...well...out of all of his brothers he was the shortest.

And you spend so much time in that stupid lab you look paler than the snow that’s melting on the ground.

Leave it to his wolf to know just what to say to make him feel even worse.

They arrived on the east lawn behind the others. Tristan stood in the center of the circle. Ashlee and Summer stood on both sides of him, Jana was positioned behind and Faith was moving to a position near his front. Three other newly mated women—Claire, Moira, and Tatiana formed a triangle on the outside of the first four women.

Upon their approach, Tristan raised his hand and beckoned them to the center of the circle with his index finger. It was an annoying trait his brother had picked up since becoming a father but there was no way in hell he was going to tell the Alpha of their pack that he found that mannerism to be appalling.

“Place her here, Az.” Tristan stepped out of the way indicating that Az should put Leah down where he had been standing. Gently, Az leaned down and placed Leah’s wolf form on the ground. As her paws connected with the earth, she started to shake.

Oh wow, Az, I’m really afraid.

He wanted to tell her that they didn’t need to do it, that they’d be okay if they didn’t but he couldn’t. She had to go through the ceremony. There was no moving forward if she didn’t and he wasn’t even thinking of their mating—well not entirely about it. Leah needed to be human so they could find out what happened to her, so they could learn what she knew about the process their father used to turn ordinary people into wolves who only lived a few months. She had to return to her original state so they could contact her father. There was no other choice.

“I’m going to be there.” He pointed to an open spot in the circle. “That’s the Kane position in the power circles. We’ll all be lined up there.”

Leah let out a nervous giggle. *I learned something else to put in my pretend ‘all about me’ book.*

“What’s that?”

I don’t do well in stressful situations.

His heart shattered into a million pieces. He scratched the top of her head because it was all he could do. “You’re doing fine. This will all seem like a memory soon.”

As he stood to his full height, he turned to face Ashlee. With a growl in his throat, he refrained from grabbing his sister-in-law by the shirt. “She’d better not get hurt.”

“Brother, did you just threaten my mate?”

Tristan sounded like he wanted to kill and even though Az’s wolf went nuts at the fact that he’d all but threatened the Alpha’s mate, Az really didn’t care.

“Oh hush, Tristan.” Ashlee’s voice rang out. “You remember what it was like before we mated. I thought you were going to kill Rex in the back of my father’s SUV. Let’s get started and save the posturing for later.”

Az moved into his spot next to Tristan. Normally Cullen stood on Tristan’s right side but he’d quietly given the spot to Az without comment. He liked that about Cullen. The man might have been the boogeyman of his youth but he knew when to shut up and not utter a sound.

Ashley turned around and said something to Leah that he couldn’t hear. For a second, he considered contacting her telepathically to ask her what it was. The thought quickly swept from his mind as Ash raised her arms to the sky, threw her head back and spoke to the heavens.

“Guardians of the western sky, your daughters who you sent here to serve you salute you. We beseech thee—hear us.”

A shiver ran down Az’s spine. This was the magic he hated. How did they know they weren’t all about to blow up? Next to him, Tristan made a noise in the back of his throat as he watched Ashlee. His older brother looked proud.

Summer spoke next. She raised her arm and threw her head back. Cullen’s mate had once been a singer and she knew how to project. The silent woods surrounding them rang out with her voice. “Guardians of the eastern sky, your daughters who you sent here to serve you salute you. We beseech thee—hear us.”

When it was Faith’s turn she raised only one arm to the sky. His other sister-in-law was extraordinarily powerful. She’d once held the essence of a fire demon inside her. Shifters sometimes whispered that the universe seemed to move when she talked. “Guardians of the northern sky, your daughters who you sent here to serve you salute you. We beseech thee—hear us.”

Jana was small in stature but strong of will as she immediately lent her voice to the ritual. “Guardians of the southern sky, your daughters who you sent here to serve you salute you. We beseech thee—hear us.”

Around them the wind picked up. Az couldn’t pull his gaze from Leah although he didn’t dare speak to her. There were too many unknowns. What if his contact with her altered the ritual and something happened? He clenched his fists at his side wishing they’d hurry.

Ashlee moved forward. “As you have brought us the wind, we know you are with us.” She raised her hand to point to Tristan. “Our Alpha would call his pack. Call to them, our chosen one.”

Next to him, Tristan took a small step forward. “Come to me, my wolves. Answer my summons.”

Az’s ears rang. His Alpha had called to him and he would obey. A howl started in his throat. Around him, he heard the calls of all their pack mates answering their Alpha. What was happening to Leah? He couldn’t look as the warm white light demanded his total surrender. Closing his eyes, he let it take him—there was no other choice.

As his body reshaped into its wolf form he let out a howl to Tristan, the moon, and any gods that were listening to keep his mate safe.

Chapter Five

Leah screamed as the first wave of white light hit her. Az had called it warm; it didn't feel that way to her. No, the word she wanted to use was scalding. Her body burned as she thrashed and rolled on the ground. They were killing her. This whole thing had been an elaborate hoax to cause her pain. It was the only explanation.

Az's face appeared before her eyes. She knew it wasn't really him, she'd watched him howl and shift when this horror had begun. It was just a vision of him, a memory from earlier. What had he told her? Some people resisted the light and it hurt them more. Was that what she was doing?

Her vision swam back to the present and she tried to breathe deeply even though she wanted to throw up. First her left paw began to reshape, followed immediately by the right one. The toes elongated, moved, where there was once fur human skin appeared before her eyes and oh how it burned as it happened. Nothing could be more agony than this.

She fell down on her face. Lifting her head she realized she was in her human form. The wolves around her still howled to Tristan's command. Even the four women who were leading the ceremony had shifted.

Brace yourself. Here we go again. A female voice she'd never heard before spoke in her head.

Before she questioned who it was, her body convulsed again. Oh hell. The wolf body was coming back.

It won't hurt as much this time. That voice again.

Her change came faster brought on by the white light. Leah knew she wasn't calling the white light to come so it must still be part of the ceremony Tristan had invoked when he'd called the pack to him.

He's our Alpha. He calls and we come.

Still in the thralls of misery, she realized whom she heard. It was her wolf. Az had said he had one and now that she had one she supposed it was official—she was an actual wolf shifter. The whys and hows of this were going to have to be worked out later. For right now, all she could focus on was that her wolf—and what freaky concept that was—had been correct. It didn't hurt quite as much. That wasn't to say it wasn't uncomfortable. By all things holy, it truly was. However, this time around, it was manageable, like going to the dentist, she knew it was going to hurt but she was going to live through the pain.

Grimacing as a wave of uncomfortable sensation floated up her arm, she tried to make a mental note that she had, at some point, gone to the dentist and knew what that experience was like.

As she stared in wonder, fur covered her body. It was the same colors as earlier, brown and white, except now it seemed so much more vibrant. The white looked less like dirty snow and more like the first flakes that fell on a cold winter's night before they'd had a chance to be sullied by the ground. The brown was different too. She'd thought her fur had resembled the color of mud. This version looked more like chestnuts. All in all, for a wolf, it was a prettier presentation.

That's because this is what I actually look like and not the idiotic facsimile those vile

and disgusting people forced on us.

Leah was confused. *You were with me then?*

Her wolf laughed, a dainty little sound like those women from movies about Victorian England, it was more like a twittering than a full on laugh. *Oh darling, I've always been with you and if we'd been raised as we should have been, then you would have known me much earlier.*

Leah's wolf form began to shift again. She groaned and her wolf assured her that it was the last switch. This time, although she was exhausted from the overall experience, she found she could endure and if she breathed through the light then it didn't hurt at all.

Someday you might actually enjoy it.

That she was going to have to wait to see. As she regained her human figure, strong arms pulled her into a tight embrace. She opened one eye to see Az's concerned expression above her.

"Tristan," Az called behind her. "She's burning up. Did that happen to you?"

"No." There was movement behind her. "Gods only know what Dad did to her with all of his messing around. She shouldn't have fever. Let's bring her back to the house."

"I've got you, Leah. We're going to take care of you now."

Although her arm now felt like it weighed a ton, she raised it and touched his cheek. "What? No more she-wolf?"

He smiled and smoothed the hair off her forehead. "Did you actually like that?"

Her hearing was different outside of her wolf body. It felt strange to hear his voice this way. Az sounded gentler; his intonation held a timbre that spoke of warmth and longing. It sent shivers up her spine. Or, she wondered, maybe that was just the fever she evidently had.

I think we need to sleep now.

"Can you hear her, Az?"

He shook his head. "Hear who?"

"My wolf. She talks to me."

"No, I can't hear her, Leah, only you will ever be able to do that. Good or bad she entirely belongs to you."

* * * *

The next time Leah opened her eyes darkness assaulted her senses. It had been midday when she'd passed out and now, clearly, it was nighttime. Her last coherent memory was of being in Az's arms and now she was sprawled out in a soft bed. She wanted to roll around from the sheer joy of the sensation. When was the last time she hadn't been in a cage?

A cool rag touched her forehead and a woman's face loomed over hers stealing her gaze from the nothingness of the darkness in the room. "That feels better, doesn't it? He can stop pacing now."

The woman cleared her throat. "I'm Jana. We met briefly out on the field. Not that I'd expect you to remember, there was a lot going on."

The woman's dark hair was cut in a severe bob that ended exactly at the edge of her chin. Leah took a second to contemplate exactly how Jana achieved that level of perfection with her hair before she realized Jana expected a response. Truth was, Leah knew she had much to say to this woman in particular.

“Az told me I tried to hurt you. I’m so sorry about that. Every once in a while, I’m overcome with the desire to do things that are not my own idea.”

“My mate might disagree with me on this subject but I’ll just say that actually we owe you a debt of gratitude.” Jana pulled the cloth off her forehead. “If things hadn’t happened as they did, we might still be in New York, me trying not to mate him and Malcolm would be out of his mind confused with how to deal with me.”

“So, my being part of a pack of all but insane wolves was a good thing for you?”

Jana nodded. “In the long run.” The small woman chewed on her lip. “Az has made himself nuts worrying about you. He’s in the basement of the building, muttering to himself about infections, suppressed immune systems, and cursing magic to the heavens. He has some sort of makeshift lab down there and he’s been desperately trying to concoct some kind of formula to help you. Ashlee and I felt that you’d probably be fine given a little rest, which you obviously are but he couldn’t be dissuaded from trying.” Jana smiled and Leah thought she might have seen some sadness in the other woman’s eyes. “He was like that as a child too. If there was a problem, he needed to fix it.”

Leah tried to absorb the plethora of information she’d just been given. Az was trying to make her better, he was most likely making himself sick about, and Jana who looked to be about thirty years old was clearly older than that.

“How old are you exactly?”

Jana raised an eyebrow and cracked up laughing. “A lady never tells her weight or age. I may have just dated myself there. I’m a lot older than Malcolm and that’s all I’ll say.”

Leah swung her legs over the table and tested her feet on the floor. It was then she noticed she was dressed and, she was relieved to realize, so was Jana. Someone had put a pair of comfortable grey cotton sweat pants and a navy blue tee shirt on her after she’d passed out. Her feet seemed to be holding steady and she gave Jana a small grin. The other woman looked glamorous wearing black pants and a tight silver long sleeve turtleneck that tugged at all the right places. Of course, Jana might just be one of those women who looked that good all the time.

Mental note: clearly, she knew something about fashion.

“So tell me why all the women here are so gorgeous.”

Jana raised an eyebrow. “Have you looked in a mirror? How did you get all those colors in your hair? On someone else it might look odd but you are stunning.”

Leah followed Jana’s gaze to a mirror across the room. Forgetting her fears about falling over, she moved forward watching as her reflection got bigger the closer she got to her destination. In the picture, her hair had been streaked with dye—a reddish, purple color—but maybe it had been an out of date snapshot of her because the woman who stared back at her in the mirror had more than just that one shade illuminated in her hair.

The reddish, purple was there but also white, orange, and blue highlights danced back at her. Grabbing her locks in her hands, she wanted to shriek. Why had she done this? It was ridiculous. She closed her eyes in mortification.

“What’s the matter?”

Leah swallowed before she spoke but she never got a chance to answer as the door to the room swung open. The sound of Az’s voice had her opening her eyes.

“Any change?”

Jana indicated where Leah stood by the mirror. “As you can see.”

Nodding to both of them, Jana left the room. Leah eyed Az warily. What did he think of her external appearance? If she really was his 'mate' he must feel as if he was saddled with a giant mess not to mention the nightmare of being with someone who still couldn't remember who they were.

His grin surprised her. "I'm so glad to see you up and about." He moved forward, his gaze on her eyes; he reached out and touched her forehead. "Nice and cool. That's a relief."

"I'm sorry, I really don't know why that happened and I still don't know who I am."

Stop apologizing. None of this is your fault. He knows that. She almost jumped at the sound of her wolf's voice.

Az shook his head. "Don't be ridiculous, you have nothing to be sorry for. Whatever is going on here, we're going to have to get it figured out...one way or another."

Leah narrowed her gaze, looking at Az. He really did look worn out. "Jana said you were in the lab in the basement. If there's a lab here, why did you use the one below ground?"

"When we built the new structure, when Tristan and Ashlee designed it, they made room for a lab here for me. In my Dad's days, there was never one anywhere where I could use. He got so sick of tripping over my quote "science shit" that he had that lab built for me to get me out of his way."

Leah rolled her eyes. "Sounds like a real charmer, your dad."

Az smiled, but it was mirthless. He touched a strand of her hair, a white strand, and she wanted to hide. "He could be. If he'd met you, under different circumstances, he would have known just what to say and do to get you to do what he wanted. Kendrick Kane knew how to charm the ladies...especially our mother who thought the sun rose and set with him. I, by contrast, have no idea what to say to you."

See, you're not the only one who is insecure.

"I like what you say to me, Az. I like it now and I liked it when I was walking around on all fours."

He let go of her hair and looked at the floor, she followed his gaze where he seemed to be watching his feet. "Did you notice that your fur changed colors?"

She had. "It looked more vibrant to me."

"It might do that again. Faith's changed several times after her first shift. She started out all black and ended up brown and gold. We have no idea why that happened."

Her wolf scoffed. *I am much more secure than that. I pick colors and I stick with them.*

Leah smiled. "My wolf seems to think that Faith's furry one is insecure in her color selections."

"So then it's magic and nothing biological at all. I don't know why I bother. I should assume all things in life are related to the 'hoo-doo' and leave it at that."

She laughed. "I'm sure life is a little more complicated than that."

His brown eyes met hers shining with amusement. "Guess I'm being a little bit dramatic, huh?"

"Just a tad." She waited a bit before continuing. "Could you say something about it already?"

He grabbed her hand, stroking his index finger over her hand. "Something about what? You're going to have to excuse me, I don't always follow conversations the way I

should. My head is always doing one hundred things at a time not to mention my wolf yammers on and on telling me all the things I'm doing wrong."

"No, in this case, I assumed you were being nice not mentioning my mess."

"What mess?"

She pulled her hand free and grabbed her hair. "My hair, Azriel, my multi-colored clown hair."

"It does have more colors than it did in the picture but I don't think it looks like clown hair. I think it's beautiful, lovely, like a rainbow of colors."

"It's a disaster." Tears filled her eyes. Why was this bothering her so much? She never would have guessed she was so superficial. No, it wasn't that. It was just that doing that to one's hair...it was a decision you consciously made. A statement of some intent that you wanted to express to the world and Leah had no idea what that statement was because she could not access the memories of the person who had decided to do that to herself. She had to live with the consequences but had no ability to understand the reasoning. If she had to be an oddball who couldn't remember even what her birthday was or what color her childhood home had been then why couldn't she blend into the wallpaper and not draw attention to herself?

"It fits with what I now know about you." Az actually jumped from foot to foot. "We looked you up on the Internet while you weren't feeling well. I guess technically I should say Rex looked you up. He's the one who really does well with modern technology."

She sighed. "And what does it say about me that I choose to wear my hair like a children's cartoon character?"

He ran to a table and picked up some pages. She hadn't noticed them sitting there. How could she when her hair used up all the light in the room?

"There are all these articles about you from when you first went missing. Your father makes lots of pleas for your safe return. You're their only child. Your mother died last year in a car accident." He looked up from where he read. "I'm so sorry about that."

Her mother was dead. She processed that information. Nothing, no reaction at all but then how could she? He was talking about a woman she did not know. "Thank you...go on."

"He says that you are fun loving, sociable, charitable and kind."

"Wow, I sound like a real saint." If sarcasm dripped in her voice, she couldn't help it. None of those things matched her own internal musings.

"It also says that you own several art galleries in Portland, Maine and Nashua, New Hampshire."

"So, I'm an artist or I just display other people's work?"

Either way it seemed to Leah that this other version of herself—the one who'd made the fateful decision to paint her head all the colors of the rainbow—obviously liked to show off. This didn't sit well with her.

"I don't know but either way it makes sense, right? You're a creative person. Creative people do this sort of thing." He motioned to her hair.

"No, people who are trying to be the center of attention do this 'thing' to themselves." She'd had enough. Just the few minutes she'd spent dwelling on this was too much. "Until I know who she," Leah pointed to the pages Az held, "is, then I get to decide what I do and do not do. And this," she grabbed her hair, "has to go right now. Where is the nearest drugstore?"

“Off the island.” He looked between her and the door. She suddenly wondered if she was acting like a lunatic. Maybe he was considering making a break for it. “Do you want to go off-island right now?”

“Yes, right this very second.”

He ran a hand through his dark locks. “Do you think that’s a good idea?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Because you didn’t want us to call your father yet and maybe you’ll be recognized by someone if you go out in public.”

He made a good point. “Do you think it’s smart? To call my father when I have no idea who he is?”

Yes, call him.

She smiled. She hadn’t been asking her wolf but it was nice to hear her opinion.

“I want to do whatever you want to, Leah, and I don’t mean now. I mean always.”

His voice was so low she had to strain to hear what he said. Goosebumps travelled up and down her arms. Here was a man who said so little to other people and yet to her he said the most wonderful things. She wished he would speak all the time.

She crossed to him grabbing his hand. “I have a wolf that speaks in my head now. Obviously, I have two bodies. I’m clearly a shifter. Am I your mate Az?”

“What does your wolf tell you, Leah?”

Am I his mate? She’d not tried speaking directly to the animal yet. Up until now it had always addressed her first.

You know you are. Why ask me silly questions?

“She says I am.”

He nodded. “That’s what mine says. Here’s the thing. Most of the pack accepts predestined stuff like they’re talking about what color underwear they want to choose that day.”

Visions of Az in his underwear filled her mind. She’d already seen him naked after the shifts. Still, the image of him in a pair of silk boxer shorts seemed more intimate, more personal like he would only show it to someone he was deeply connected to.

“And you don’t?” What was he saying? That he didn’t want her?

“I’m saying that even without my wolf—if I saw you walking down the street, holding a cup of coffee, with your beautiful skin like porcelain, your expressive eyes, and your hair that shows your unique vision of the world, I would follow you wherever you were going and spend weeks trying to figure out how to get you to speak to me. But you’d have a choice if you wanted to. I still want you to have that option.”

She smiled. Her intended held lots of self-confidence problems. They were going to have to do something about that.

“Az, I have no idea what I’d think and say. I have no idea who that person is. I know that standing here today, in front of you, with my new wolf hanging out in my head, I look at you and you are the most breathtaking man I’ve ever seen. I thought that way when I couldn’t speak aloud in my other wolf body. I saw the whole pack today and none of them—not one other man here—holds a candle to you. I—”

She never got a chance to finish what she wanted to say. His mouth came down on hers. Warm, soft, and inviting she closed her eyes and let the essence that was Azriel Kane fill her from the outside in. He pulled back, his lids heavy, desire evident in his gaze.

“In my whole life, Leah, no one has ever preferred me to any of them. Are you sure? I have so many eccentricities. I spend a lot of time living in my own thoughts.”

Reaching up, she kissed him. No one was going to criticize Az in front of her, not even Az.

Chapter Six

Az pressed his lips firmer against Leah's. Gods, she smelled so delicious...like lavender essence mixed with vanilla soap and the natural essence that only belonged to her. The amazing thing—the gift—of Leah kissing him was like something out of a dream. In his real life, things like this just didn't happen.

Now let's not screw it up.

Not even his wolf was going to dampen the excitement this moment created for him. Even as his heart beat loudly in his ears, he was overcome with a sense of completeness, with a sense of, for the first time in his life, coming home. The kiss ended too soon as her soft, dainty pink lips moved off his.

He opened his eyes. Leah's were still closed and he was glad to see her breathing was as fast as his own. Raising his hands, he touched her cheekbones with his palms. She opened her eyes and grinned.

Her smile was infectious and he grinned right back. "What are you grinning about?"

"You just kissed me lightheaded." She chewed on her bottom lip. It was all he could do not to start biting her himself. "You know, Az, since I have no idea about my personal history, those two kisses were my very first ones."

"Leah, with as gorgeous as you are, I find it very unlikely that you haven't been kissed many times by many people."

"No way. Not when I was so obviously waiting for you."

Gods, the things she said made his heart flip flop. If this was what it was like having a mate it was a wonder anyone ever got anything done. He rubbed his thumb over her left eyebrow, loving the soft feel of her light brown hair under his rough callused thumb. She sighed and his groin got even tighter.

Leah's next noise sounded quite different. She shrieked and her eyes rolled to the back of her head. Az managed to catch her barely, before her knees gave out and she hit the floor. What the hell?

"Leah?" He yelled loudly, as if he could will her back to him just by the sound of his voice alone.

What was going on? Seconds later, her eyes opened and her head shot up. Fury stormed through Az's veins. They weren't her blue-grey eyes that looked at him but dark, almost pitch black pupils.

"You know what has to be done, Azriel." The voice was Leah's but the intonation was wrong. He hadn't known her long but he'd bet any money that Leah never used that singsong pitch he heard now. In fact, he was sure he'd recognize it anywhere.

"Mom?" His mother's death had wounded him but not for the same reasons it had ruined the others. He and his mother had never been exactly what he would have called close.

"He knew you would know what to do, it's why he tried so hard to kill you as a child. You and my Angel." Her angel? Realization dawned fast on Az. Angel was his sister. He had no memory of her except that Cullen had recently remembered her existence and told everyone her name. Their oldest brother Michael searched for her.

"Let go of Leah. Whatever you're doing, I don't want to communicate with you like

this. Give me back my mate. Now.”

Leah smiled and he wanted to wince. It wasn't his mate's jovial, side smile but his mother's practiced grin. “She's not being harmed. This is her gift, her magic. She can commune with the other side.”

“Somehow I doubt she intentionally allowed you into her body and mind while we were getting to know one another. Now get out.”

She reached out and touched the scar on the side of his face. “He did that to you during the horrible night where nearly everything was lost. I'm sorry.”

Az batted away her hand. “It's too late for apologies and even if it weren't, I don't want sorrows delivered from beyond the grave. Maybe that makes me a bad person and a bad shifter. I don't like magic. It's what got us all into this situation to begin with. Now, give me back my mate.”

Leah's eyes narrowed and he groaned. Obviously, his mother wasn't any better at listening to him now than she had been then. “You haven't yet figured out that of all your brothers you always held the most magic at your fingertips?”

“Only the women have magic.” He sighed. “Get out of her now.”

She gripped his chin, turning so he had to look her straight in the eyes. Her fingernails tug into his skin. “That is nonsense. You know it and I know it. We both know what you were capable of doing as a child. If you're not doing it now then that is your choice. I didn't protect you. That is my burden and my guilt. You have to take Leah on a memory spell. It's the only way she's going to remember and you need her to do that if you're going to bring back your father.”

Abruptly, he pulled away. “What the hell makes you think I want him back? I want him dead.”

Her slap surprised him. The side of his face burned from the impact. “Use your head, Azriel.”

He bit down hard on the side of his cheek to keep from wincing and to keep his grip on Leah's shoulders soft. No way did he want to hurt his mate just because his mother, who had driven him nuts while she was alive and had now found a way to do it dead, inhabited her body.

“If you have something to instruct us, why don't you go and speak to Tristan. Find a way to bother Ashlee about this.”

Her eyes filled with tears and he cursed. Women's tears, especially ones that seemed to be coming out of Leah's eyes, were always his undoing. One tear slipped out and ran the length of her cheek before they stopped. “*You* have to do this, not Tristan.”

With that statement, Leah's head fell backwards again. Seconds later, she was back shaking her head. “Oh my, that was odd.”

He picked her up in his arms, carrying her to the table before he sat her down on it. His eyes roamed her body, looking for any signs of physical distress. She grabbed his head, turning his attention to her.

“I'm okay, let's talk about what happened?”

He closed his eyes. “I don't want to.”

“Open your eyes and look at me.” Since he was being a baby and he knew it, he complied. “I could feel what she felt and I could see what she remembered. How on earth did you survive your childhood?”

He shrugged, he would have preferred it if she had never known about any of this.

“We all had our burdens. Michael, as the oldest, was made to feel weak. Dad didn’t want competition for Alpha. Gabriel was all but destroyed to make him tough with a killer instinct. Tristan, they ignored. That was probably on purpose. All of us knew he should be Alpha but he never knew it. Mom must have wanted to spare him Dad’s notice. Theo has his temper. Dad tried to encourage that but T’s a really good man and couldn’t be destroyed that way. Rex was all but forgotten.”

She smoothed the hair on his forehead. “And you he blamed for everything.” It wasn’t a question. He knew she’d seen it in his mother’s memories. Just how much she had seen still remained to be discovered. “You he tried to kill you when you were a child.” Okay, she’d seen enough.

Letting go of her he stalked to the other side of the room. “I don’t want your pity, Leah. I’m just fine.”

“Everyone has a past, Azriel. Even me and I can’t remember it. Evidently, there is something you can do about that.”

Az really wanted to throw something. “Men are not supposed to be able to do magic. There are rules to these things, order in the universe even to magic. What I can do is an abomination.”

“That’s nonsense. Your father told you that because he was scared of your power. I saw that. So what did you do? Bury it so far inside you that you can’t find it anymore and only your wolf’s pestering you reminds you that it even exists?”

Ouch. That was a direct hit. Inside of him, his wolf perked up.

Maybe mating isn’t just about lovey-dovey stuff. Maybe she sees us better than you would like.

No, he shook his head, this was Mom’s fault. She never had to know.

She did.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said it like that.” He noticed she wasn’t sorry for having said it just the way she’d done it.

Az cleared his throat. “We’re a funny pair, aren’t we? You had access to all of my most horrendous memories and we can’t get anywhere near yours.”

“Apparently, we can.” She jumped off the table. “I’d say we’re a perfect pair.” She wrapped her arms around his waist, burying her head against his chest. “I can’t remember anything and even though you hate magic, you can give it back to me.”

She was right. “Okay.”

Her head jerked up. “Just like that? Okay?”

“You want it. For you, I would do anything.” As he said it, he realized he meant it. If Leah needed him to, he would walk through walls. “However, despite what my mom thinks, I’m going to have to speak to Tristan. The pack isn’t run that way anymore. We don’t hide things from the Alpha unless his life is in danger and we know he’d throw himself in front of the bullet. Then we might lie to keep him safe.”

“I like that idea better.”

He didn’t like anything about it, not one damn thing.

I do. I think it’s a great idea. His wolf danced around in his head.

Of course you do. Az rolled his eyes.

* * * *

Az watched Tristan shake his head in wonder. All the Kanes were in the room with

him and, of course, Cullen and Summer who might as well be Kanes these days. Leah had requested Malcolm and Jana be there too. In their brief contact, his mate had come to trust the other woman. Since he was doing this for her, he might as well indulge what she wanted in all things. The whole pack would know of his humiliation soon enough.

“Why did I never know you could do this?” Tristan turned on Cullen. “Did you know he could do it?”

“No, my Alpha, this is the first I’m hearing of it.” Cullen raised an eyebrow at Az in the infuriating way he did where it was like he believed you but he questioned everything you said at the same time.

Hit him. His wolf’s solution for everything.

Shut up.

“Jana, have you ever heard of a male member of the pack being able to perform this kind of magic?”

Malcolm’s mate shook her head. “No, my Alpha, but I would venture a guess that Az’s wolf must be very strong for this to work.”

“Dad beat it out of me by the time I was fourteen. Mom forbade me to speak of it. Frankly, I’m not even sure I can do it anymore, which is why I didn’t offer it up right away.” That was, at least, partially true. Leah knew all the circumstances. The rest of them didn’t have to.

From the corner of the room, Gabriel spoke. “I knew about it.”

Tristan turned around to look at him. “Why didn’t you ever say anything? Why didn’t either of you ever say anything?”

Gabriel shrugged. “Not my story to tell.”

“He tried to kill me as a baby because he had an inkling that I was ‘different’ and then again when I was a child because he thought I was a freak. In the pack, only women have magic. My existence and my ability to do what I can do goes against nature. I didn’t exactly feel like advertising it.”

Leah placed her hand on his back and he immediately felt better.

“Besides, memory walking is not exactly a useful talent. Most of the time when we forget things, it’s better if we can actually forget them.”

Cullen spoke up. “It would be extraordinarily useful in interrogation. You could just slip into their minds.”

Az shook his head. “Doesn’t work that way. It’s never that clear or that easy.”

Ashlee took a small step forward. “You know Braden sometimes does things that seem magical to me. I thought maybe it was just my imagination but now that I know that you can, and you’re his uncle, maybe I’m not hallucinating.”

Tristan looked at her sharply. “You never mentioned this to me.”

“He’s still so young, I didn’t think it warranted attention yet.”

There was a moment of silence in which Az became convinced Ash and Tristan were speaking telepathically.

He looked at Leah. *It’s a personal nightmare for me to be standing here doing this. I think it would be much more useful to be in the basement figuring out a compound to break Dad’s hold on the wolves he’s creating. I had this idea about a vaccine...*

She shook her head. *First off, I still have to get used to the fact that you can speak to me like this. Second, you are not going to go run away to the lab. After we get my memories back, you can go hide there if you want. Everyone is acting just fine towards*

you. Kind of stunned but not weirded out or disgusted.

Was she right? Was he being too sensitive about the whole thing? It was so hard to give up a lifetime of believing what he could do was wrong based on a few minutes alone with his family.

I never told you that it was bad. I've wanted you to do it for years.

That was true. His wolf had only become hostile towards him when he'd stopped doing it.

"Alright." Tristan nodded. "Do it."

"It's a little more complicated. I can't just do it."

"What do you need?"

"I guess I need quiet and time alone to give it a try."

"Do you want my office?"

Az appreciated the offer. "No, thank you. Do I still have a room here?"

The room erupted in laughter. Az felt his face turn red. Tristan walked to him and placed his hand on his arm. "Yes, little brother, you still have a room here. We haven't thrown you out of the house for lack of attendance."

Placing his hand in Leah's, Az led her from the room. The hallways were quiet; it was early in the morning, and other than the pack members he'd awaked from their beds no one was up and around just yet.

They arrived at his room and he turned the knob, opening it up. A quick cursory glance told him that the room was exactly as he'd left it. No one had been in it at all and it showed. The main sitting room had pillows thrown around everywhere—he could remember doing it, he'd not been able to settle down and relax, having wanted to be in his lab more than he wanted to be in the rooms—and he'd thrown things around in frustration. If they walked into the bedroom, it was likely that there wouldn't even be sheets on the bed.

Feeling sheepish, he regarded Leah. "Um, I don't stay here very much."

She nodded, her eyes dancing. "I can tell."

"I tried to tell you earlier. I'm not normal. I mean forgetting the fact that I can do what I'm about to do with the memories, sometimes I just forget to do basic things. I might disappear in the middle of the night and you'll find me at four in the morning up to my elbows in chicken fat as I try to figure out if I can use the stuff to create a new way to fuel the compound."

He really needed her to understand. The life she saw with Tristan and Ashlee or any of the other mated couples, it was never going to happen with him. Az had always suspected that the universe was going to curse his mate with a miserable existence. It might be better off for the woman if he never mated.

But now there was Leah and gods help him, he wanted her with every part of his soul. Wolf and man both needed her, desperately, except she needed to understand. It was pivotal that she really 'get' what she was buying into.

"I have to believe that a lot of these things will work themselves out. I'll tell you what, if I find you missing in the middle of the night, I will come and find you and bring you back to bed."

Gods, the idea of being in bed with Leah...

"Let's focus on this so you can see if you actually like who I am, shall we?"

Was she worried about that? "I can almost guarantee that I'm going to like you."

You're like a dream, a gift from the universe."

"Oh, the things you say."

Only he meant them, every word. "Leah..."

She placed a hand on his arm. "C'mon, let's go."

He nodded. She was right. "I need to touch you to do it."

Raising an eyebrow, the teasing glint he'd first seen in that picture and had noticed briefly here and there since appeared in her expression. "Even better."

He sat down on the floor and he tucked his legs under him like a pretzel. "I discovered I could do this by accident and unfortunately in the presence of my father when I was about two years old. I travelled backwards into his mind." He shivered at the memory. Not too many people could remember things from that age but he could remember doing that. First off, it had scared him that it happened and second because of the way his father had reacted to the whole thing. "He didn't much care for the experience."

"Will we get to see what happened to me? Or is it just going to be my childhood, my parents and stuff like that?"

He shook his head; maybe he would actually start laughing at how little he understood what was going to go on. "She-wolf, I have no idea what's going to happen. I'm so sick of saying that to you. Sit here." He indicated the spot next to him.

"Do we have to be right there next to each other or can it be just that you're touching me?"

And it was already starting. She didn't want to be near him. Well, he had warned her. He shifted slightly trying to cover his discomfort. "Just sit close enough for me to be able to reach you with the tips of my fingers."

She nodded. "Right." Moving to him, she placed herself directly on his lap, her back pressed up against his chest. "Does this work?"

Yes, it worked. His heart pounded hard and his groin jumped to attention. Shit, she smelled so good. All he wanted to do was stick his face into her colored hair and stay there for eternity. Forget anything that didn't exist outside of Leah. "Um, yes. It works."

He heard her laugh slightly. "I saw your face. You thought I didn't want to sit near you."

Okay, now he felt foolish. She squirmed in his lap and before he could stop himself, he groaned. Her tight, snug ass moving on top of him nearly undid him.

"Are you going to be able to concentrate?" Her voice had taken on a low, husky sound.

"No, but don't you dare get off."

She snickered and he grinned at the sound.

"Alright, let's do this."

He placed his right index fingers on her temples. She closed her eyes and sighed under his touch. Even though it wasn't necessary, he ran his other hand down her face tracing her features with the pads of his fingers.

"You're so beautiful."

"That's not true. Right now I'm really funny looking."

He closed his eyes. "For the rest of my life, I will be able to picture the perfection of your face in my mind's eye."

"Are you sure you're a scientist? You sound like a poet."

With that strange thought in his mind, he pressed his hand harder against her temple until he could feel her pulse. Three seconds passed and the strange falling sensation he hadn't had since he was a child gripped him. Everything went black. He heard screaming and had no idea if it was Leah or he. Not that it mattered. They were both going in.

Chapter Seven

Leah landed on her butt, rolling to her side as soon as she made contact with the ground. Hearing an oomph, she saw Az land next to her. Raising her head, she looked around warily. The room where they were was darkly lit. Two lights made to look like lanterns glowed on top of two glass tables illuminated what, she quickly determined by the number of book shelves on the wall, was some kind of library or study.

"Az, is this typical?" She pulled herself up to her knees looking around.

"Yes, but most of the time the person knows what memory they've landed in. We're going to have to hope it triggers something otherwise it'll be a little like watching a play with yourself as the actor, I suppose."

He stood and offered her his hand. She took it, loving the feel of his rough fingers closing around hers. Everything about him was so much bigger than her. She guessed it could make others feel small. To her, it just made her feel safe.

She looked around one more time. Az was right, like something out of an action play she watched herself stomp into the room. Her eyes widened as she recognized the sound of her voice yelling.

"I said no. I'm not going to speak to him. Not now, not ever."

A tall man with silvering hair and high cheekbones covered in stubble entered behind her. She could see parts of her own face reflected in his. They had the same chin and the curvature of the top of her face looked like his.

She whispered. "I think that's my father."

"He looks like the picture in the articles I read. We don't have to whisper. This already happened. There is nothing we can do that they can hear or be aware of. We're not really there. This is coming out of your head."

That was good news. At least it meant the memories were still in there somewhere. What would have happened if there had been no memories? She turned to ask Az but then heard her past self screaming again. She noted that her hair looked like it had in the picture. Hot pink streaks but no multicolored stripes.

"Mom never would have wanted this. It's exactly what she didn't want. She told us 'never ever go anywhere near the shifters or Kendrick Kane.' She couldn't have been more explicit. She's not dead two months and you want to arrange a meeting with the man?"

"Leah, baby, your mother was overwrought. Do you think if there really were people who could shift into wolves that the American military and the government wouldn't know about it?" He threw his hands in the air. "For goodness sake, I sit on the Senate Committee that gives out money to the military for special research. *I* would know."

Leah shook her head. "Mom was adamant and she wasn't given to flights of fancy. Other than this one subject she never said anything to me in my entire life that wasn't down to earth and easily proved with facts and data. The woman was a biologist for god's sake. She said she and I are wolf shifters and that Kane is dangerous. I'm choosing to believe her. I will not see the man."

"I've already set up the meeting."

Leah expected to hear her past self argue some more and was surprised that she said

nothing else for a few moments. “Why would you do that?”

Her father sat on the edge of his desk. “You know how much I love you.”

She nodded. “I do know that, Dad.”

“I loved your mother that much too...which is why I always let her believe this little lie. Truth is, I think something terrible must have happened to your mom when she was a child. Kendrick Kane is barely thirty years old. He couldn’t have possibly had anything to do with it.” He ran a hand through his silver, grey hair.

“But maybe he knew her family; maybe you have some family left that you could know from her side. Now that she is gone there is no reason to continue on with this farce. Besides, if someone hurt your mother so badly she was forced to live her life with this delusion then I want to know who it was so I can hurt them.”

Her father exhaled and Leah in the future knew he looked tired. “Have you ever seen a wolf become a man or vice versa? Has it ever happened to you? Did you ever see it happen to your mother? Do you hear voices of wolves speaking to you in your mind?”

Past Leah shook her head. “No, Daddy.”

Next to her, Az swore. “I know exactly what happens.”

Barely able to form words, Leah looked at Az’s hard profile. “Tell me.”

“Your dad called him. It’s easy to get to him, especially someone in your dad’s position. Hell, I could get him on the phone right now if I wanted to. He told him who he was, mentioned your mother’s name. Kendrick remembered her. Arranged the meeting. He wasn’t here two seconds before he would have scented you as a member of our pack. Kendrick must have felt as if he stumbled on gold. He’d finally get to experiment on a member of our pack, the one thing he’d never gotten to do.”

She nodded. Yes, that sounded right, familiar. Images flooded her mind. The meeting had gone well, Kendrick had been pleasant. She’d started to doubt her mother. At the thought, Leah closed her eyes. She could remember her mother now. Her sweet mother, never the typical politician’s wife. How could she have become so disloyal so fast?

As if he read her mind, Az stroked the back of her hair. “It would be normal to doubt her. If you’re not raised with it, it seems like the stuff of bad movies. If your mother never shifted in front of you or your dad, it’s ridiculous to think you’d just believe.”

Then the men had come. They’d grabbed her out of her bed at night, after having stormed the house like an army coming through the door. Before she’d known what was happening, she’d been gagged and in the back of the car. It had felt like a nightmare and that was only because she didn’t know what pain was yet.

She would.

Opening her eyes, she still stood next to Az but the scene had changed. Grabbing tightly onto his arm, she looked around. “Where are we?”

“Your memory, she-wolf, you tell me.”

Leah liked how he kept using the nickname he’d coined for her when they’d interacted in the lab. It made her feel more secure. He was still with her. She didn’t have to go through this alone. This was a man who had risked his life to get her out of the cage. No way would he fail her now. Not that she needed protection; she’d already lived this. Whatever happened had already happened.

She saw herself gagged and bound sitting in the center of a clearing. Instead of the grassy one on Westervelt this was a sandy desert during sunset. Men and women surrounded her with a man in the middle shouting.

“That’s Kendrick.” Leah was going to have to make a mental note about when Az did and did not call his father ‘dad’ versus calling him Kendrick. As she stared at her mate, she realized that his eyes looked dead. Seeing the man who had been responsible for his birth was killing him. She wished she could make this all go faster.

“You look like him.”

He nodded, his eyes still glassed over in that way that gave her the shivers. “But not as much as Tristan, Gabriel, or Rex.”

“You’re much better looking than he is.”

That earned her a half grin. “He’s trying to bring on your wolf like Tristan did.”

“Must not have worked as I never heard her until I came to Westervelt.”

After minutes of Kendrick screaming, he threw his hands in the air and pointed to a woman who stood next to him. Her hair was a golden shade of blonde and even from the distance where Leah stood she could see the violet of her eyes. “She’s a latent, this is pointless.”

“What’s a latent?” Leah asked Az.

“A half shifter who can’t shift.”

“But I’m not.”

“I know that.” Az kissed the top of her head. “Your wolf refused to answer his call. She did not want him as her Alpha. That’s huge. Most wolves do not want to be lone wolves. She must have really hated how he smelled.”

I did. It was awful.

“Kendrick probably wouldn’t believe he could be denied as your Alpha so he assumed you were latent.”

The man stalked to the edge of the circle, grabbing a petite woman with long black hair and striking blue eyes. “Carrie, I told you to get me witches who could make this happen.”

The woman shook in his arms. “I did. They’re the very best. Since the Westervelt group killed their leader, they’re still settling into this. If she’s latent, there isn’t anything to be done.”

Kendrick dropped the woman named Carrie—who for some reason Leah actually felt sorry for—on the ground, hard. Dust sputtered up into the sky where she landed. “Give her to the boys, change her over. If she can’t be one of the real deal we’ll make her one of *them*.”

His statement made, he stomped away, the circle dispersing as he passed except for Carrie and two men who still stood near the past Leah. Carrie stood and dragged herself more than walked in front of her. She knelt down.

“I’m sorry about this.”

Leah watched as her former self screamed and tried to speak through the gag.

“I wish I could make this stop. I know I can’t make you understand and even if I could why should you forgive me? Anyhow, if it means anything and maybe it doesn’t, I have no choice. I’m as trapped here as you are.” Carrie stood and looked at one of the men who remained. “Take her to the change chamber.”

Leah’s memory showed her that she had screamed, fought and that did give her present self some relief. As she watched the scene unfold before her, the memories seemed to pull out of what she watched and replant themselves into her mind. Now she could remember how hot it had been outside, how sand had gotten into her mouth around

the sides of the gag and scratched her tongue. She could recall with perfect clarity that she'd been terrified and furious at the same time. Her mother had warned her this could happen.

Well, not this scenario exactly. She couldn't imagine the woman who raised her ever envisioning a day when her only child would be hauled around the desert, forced to endure terror at the hands of her former Alpha. She couldn't have imagined it because she'd made her husband swear to keep her, Leah, away from Kendrick Kane, something her father had immediately neglected to do. Maybe it was unfair, maybe it was petty, but Leah blamed the senator—her father—for this happening to her.

A thought struck Leah. She whirled around to look at Az who was watching with anger in his eyes as her previous self was dragged away. "Why is my father still alive? As her mate, shouldn't he be dead? Shouldn't he have made himself die?"

Az turned his regard to her. She shivered under his gaze, the intensity, the hotness that permeated through his eyes into her soul. God, she wanted him. "There are two scenarios for that not happening. The first is that there is a young, young child involved and the living parent remains alive until that child is old enough for he or she to leave. I don't think that is the case with you."

Neither did Leah. She was certainly an adult. "What's the other one?"

"The remaining mate lives in utter agony every day of their life until they follow."

Leah shrugged. "My dad looked a little upset earlier but not in agony."

"My aunts denied themselves death to keep pack magic alive after their mates were killed in the curse. Ironically, my uncles were the only ones not to kill their mates. They killed themselves instead."

"You Kane men are nothing if not loyal to your wives. I've only seen you a little while now but that was obvious from moment one."

Az nodded. "Tristan fought tooth and nail, even burning down a building, to not hurt Ashlee." He stopped speaking for a moment. "This still doesn't explain the issue with your father. It bothered me earlier that he didn't 'get' pack. Even non-shifter, she should have spoken to him in his mind. He should have believed. That's what happened with Ashlee and Summer's father."

"Az, when she died it was so awful. She and my uncle were both killed on their way back from a charity event. It was instantaneous, which is something, I guess, but I thought I was going to just shrivel up and die."

"Your uncle? Your mother's brother?"

Leah sat down on the sand. Why wasn't the memory changing? "No, my father's twin brother."

Az's foot started tapping on the sand and she looked up at his face. His expression was guarded however she could tell that inside his head he worked out a problem.

"Tell me about your uncle, she-wolf."

"He was an artist, a local guy, never became big time but really talented. My mother used to bring me over there every day when I was young. He taught me to paint. My dad hated it, thought the whole thing was a waste of time."

Az knelt down in front of her. "Of course I can't know for sure, but my bet is that your uncle is your father."

"What?" Leah leapt to her feet standing over Azriel. "Oh hell." She chewed on her fingernail as she paced around. Some of it made sense, she supposed. Her uncle was

artistic—so was she. She looked like her father but her uncle was her father's twin brother, it was a familial resemblance. Her mother had always gazed lovingly at her uncle. Once she'd caught her crying...

"Why would she do that?" Leah grabbed onto Az's shirt. "Why pretend Nathan St. James is my father?"

"I can't answer that question." Az ran a hand through his hair. "I guess maybe she thought she could keep you safer as the daughter of a United States senator. St. James is a strong, powerful man. I don't know who your mother was—if I see a picture maybe I can identify her—but assuming she fled for her life in the middle of the night to get away from Kendrick's plan to kill all the women, then perhaps her goal was to set you up as strongly as possible to be safe."

Leah shook her head. The idea was horrifying to her. "When she used to talk to me about being a shifter—she never hid it, which is funny because if I had told anyone she would have been in big trouble."

"Only you didn't, obviously."

"Maybe I knew inherently it was important to be quiet about it. Anyhow, she told me about finding a mate."

Azriel looked down at the ground. "What did she say?"

"That it would make me know myself like I never had before."

"Everyone is so tightlipped about the mating. I don't even really understand what happens." He blushed and she wanted to giggle. "I mean, I do understand a lot of what happens. I think there must be more to it than anyone talks about otherwise what triggers the change in everyone? Cullen practically became a puppy after he mated with Summer. Theo came back from the brink of madness and Tristan stepped up to finally become Alpha."

She couldn't help but tease him. "Maybe the sex is just that good."

He smiled and looked at her again. "Now if that isn't pressure, I don't know what is."

The scene shifted around them and Az grabbed her, pulling her into his arms. She knew she wasn't at risk, these were only memories, they couldn't physically hurt her but she loved that he wanted to protect her so she snuggled close and let him act macho.

Leah saw herself strapped to a table. Four hooded women stood over her. She knew they were women because their long hair fell down over their shoulders. Leah pulled out of Az's arms.

"I want to see their faces."

Walking fast, she stood next to her remembered self and stared at the people who would, she knew, change her into something out of a horror movie. Funny, they didn't look horrible, just like four regular women she might see walking down the street.

Az, they look so...regular.

My father looks like a nice guy when you first meet him

The first lady, the one who seemed to be conducting the spell, had long blonde hair. Her locks fell almost to the floor. Her face was long and horse-like with a strange looking nose that she'd either been unfortunate enough to be born with or butchered by a plastic surgeon to receive. It didn't fit on her face.

Next to her was a set of twins, gorgeous women with curly black hair and grey eyes. Leah actually shivered as she looked at them. They scared her. Blondie with the bad nose

might be leading the ceremony but those two were the power behind it. The other woman looked mousy with dirty brown hair and sad eyes. All in all, it was an odd bunch of people to be performing such monstrous acts of destruction.

The blonde looked down at remembered Leah on the table. As she watched, Leah could see sweat forming on her forehead. She didn't need to remember this part and wished they could move on.

"Az, do we have to watch?"

"From a pure scientific perspective, I would like to see what they do. However, if it's going to cause you pain, then no, we do not have to. I can pull us out."

He was right. There was knowledge to be gained here. "Alright, let's witness it."

The women started to sing. Not words exactly, it was more like high-pitched vowel sounds. Their voices were not what anyone would call beautiful. Leah closed her eyes and covered her ears, trying to tune out the onslaught of pain listening to them caused to her. All at once, the ladies raised their arms towards the ceiling and Leah heard herself—even through her covered ears—scream on the table. The change was coming.

She couldn't watch, turning her back to the scene so that should she even accidentally open her eyes she wouldn't have to see it.

"Alright enough, I've seen enough."

Az's voice cut through the agony of sound in the room and the next thing she knew she landed on her behind again. Looking up, she uncovered her eyes, and saw sky scrapers above her. Snow fell lightly to the ground.

"What the hell? I tried to send us home." Az sounded annoyed so Leah stood to get a better look around.

"This is New York City." She'd been there enough to know. Pointing in the distance, she indicated the Empire State Building ahead. "See."

"I haven't been here in ten years." Az scratched his head. "We should be back in the 'now' and out of your memory."

"Look, there I am." Leah watched herself walking fast out of a drugstore. Behind her a man was yelling. In her arms, she carried...hair dye.

"Stop, that woman is shoplifting."

Leah's former self took off running down the street and before she could stop herself, Leah ran after with Az behind her. After a few minutes, she followed herself into a McDonald's bathroom.

"You were already a wolf by now. What are you doing?" Az sounded confused.

Leah laughed. She couldn't help it. She knew exactly what she was doing. "I'm dying my hair, Azriel. It's a small act of rebellion. I can't remember any of this—my mind was warped by the forced wolf change—except I know myself now. I'm going to paint my hair like this." She grabbed her damaged locks. "Somewhere inside of me, I still existed enough to cry for help. This was the only way I knew how."

Just like that, the world went black. Moments later she opened her eyes to the warmth of Az's bedroom.

She knew who she was: Leah St. James—wolf shifter and survivor. Now the question was what should they do next?

Az stood. "Shift with me, Leah. I need to run."

The bright light filled the room and the body of her mate became a glorious dark wolf. Not needing another invitation, she followed suit. As far as she could remember,

she'd never run just for the fun of it on four feet before.

Chapter Eight

The wolf loved to run. His feet hit the ground hard but oh it felt so nice to be free, to run, to not be contained not only in his human body but also by the years of misunderstandings and self-doubt that plagued Az's life. Like this, like the animal he tried not to hate, he felt free and relaxed.

The female who he'd waited for since his birth eighty years earlier moved too far to his left. That wasn't acceptable. He wouldn't have her move too far away from him. She might get hurt. He was male. It was his job to protect her.

Growling, he batted her with the top of his head. She growled back at him but complied with his wishes. That felt better. He could run again. His first priority was the she-wolf. Now and always it would be she who mattered most.

Az shook his head, trying to force his own consciousness back into the wolf. It was easy to let him take control, easy to just let his mind drift into the animals, to exist in nothing more than what he smelled, heard, and tasted, to not be plagued with endless questions and worries.

Are you there? Leah's voice sounded worried. How long had she been trying to reach him?

Sorry, sometimes he takes control. Or rather, sometimes I let him.

I like your wolf. He's very...protective of me...but I missed you.

Let's shift. He called the white light unto himself loving the heat and the warmth for the few seconds he was blessed with it. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Leah do the same.

In the background he heard the sound of the waterfall that led into the largest lake on Westervelt Island. He hadn't realized they'd run that far. No wonder Leah had sounded worried she hadn't been able to reach him.

He turned to look at her, his breath catching in his throat. Bathed in a ray of moonlight, Leah was a sight to behold. Az was glad there was a strong tree behind him as he leaned back against it, not sure his knees were all that steady. He'd seen her naked—a few times now, with all the shifts they'd been doing but this was different. There was no pack around to distract him, no task that needed to be preformed, just his mate and the nighttime to tempt.

"You're the reason men write poetry and sculpt artwork." After he said it he realized how cheesy it sounded and wished he had a rewind button so he could redo his decision to speak it aloud.

To his amazement, Leah grinned from ear to ear. "I should be embarrassed being naked. I certainly wasn't raised walking around in my birthday suit all day long."

"It's different here."

She moved forward, her gaze locked with his. "My mother used to tell me about this place, not by name, of course. She probably didn't want me, during my rebellious years, to try to come looking for it. I used to think it was in Ireland or the West Indies. Somewhere exotic. It never occurred to me it could be less than an hour from where I was born." Leah stopped right in front of him, her head pushed back so she could look up at him, which gave him a perfect view of her long, luscious neck. Gods, he wanted to mark

her.

He reached out and touched her hair with both of his hands, loving the way the silky strands felt on the pads of his fingers. “What did she tell you?”

“That it was a shame that I’d never get to come here because it meant that I’d never know what real freedom was—the freedom to be who I was born to be—and that if I didn’t find my mate then what I thought love was would always be a shallow interpretation of the real thing.”

Az swallowed hard. “It’s counterintuitive. Why tell you how fabulous it is if she knew you’d never come here?”

“Maybe she hoped that I would.”

Closing his eyes, he smelled the nighttime wind on Leah’s skin. Because he couldn’t help himself, he rubbed his forehead on the top of her hair covering his face with her hair. “I’m so glad that you did. When Malcolm handed you to me in the lab, I knew you were different. I had nightmares of you dying. My wolf begged me to keep you safe and I was terrified that you wouldn’t be.”

“I don’t remember much from the lab, just vague impressions, but you were there and I knew you, if I was unaware of everything else, I knew you.”

He didn’t know which one of them kissed the other first. All he cared about was that their lips met. Her mouth felt soft and her breath tasted sweet against his tongue. Never in his life had he been so glad to have his eyes closed, there was no way she could look at them right now and not see the hundred of emotions he knew would be pouring out of them.

She made a small moan in her throat and he pulled her closer up against him. Using his hands, he explored her back from the top of her neck to the spot right above her buttocks. Leah was so small, so thin, but under his hands she didn’t feel delicate—instead she felt solid and secured like the most perfectly put together machine ever constructed.

Azriel...

Her voice in his head only added to the moment. Did she even know she was projecting? He didn’t think so.

Pulling his head back, he stared down at her face. Her chin jutted out stubbornly and the one dimple she had on her left cheek grinned up at him. In her blue-grey eyes he saw nothing but trust and desire reflected back at him. Still...

“We should be doing this in a bed the first time.”

Leah pushed him backwards against the tree wrapping one leg up against his thigh. His groin jumped even further to attention.

“Bedrooms are overrated.”

He ran his hands through her hair as he stared at her. “Leah, are you sure? Are you absolutely positive? Whatever happens here—it’s going to change us in a significant way. You’re sure you want to do that here up against a tree.”

She shook her head. “No, you’re right, Az, I don’t.”

His heart flip-flopped. He’d known it when he asked her that it was possible she would say no. Nodding, he stroked her cheek. “Okay, we’ll go back to the house, we’ll do this slowly. I’ll court you—gods know you deserve it...”

“I want to do it over there.” She shoved off him and rushed toward the waterfall. “Can you catch me?”

She didn’t have to ask him twice. He was part canine, there was nothing he liked

better than to chase, unless you counted catching his prey—which he intended to do this time.

Still in her human form, Leah shrieked as she ran toward the falls. Stopping at the edge, she looked down at the lake below and he had one second to realize what she planned before she leapt over the edge into the water. Without a thought, he followed her over barely noticing the rather cold water that surrounded him, as he was so intent on locating Leah.

Pushing himself to the top, he saw her laughing as she swam toward the side. Finally catching up with her, he grabbed her leg as he hauled them both to shore.

“Are you crazy?” His heart pounded hard both from Leah’s naked form spread out beneath his body and also from the mini-adventure she’d just put them both through. “You could have been hurt.”

She shook her head. “No, my wolf said we’d be fine. It was fun.” As she grabbed the back of his neck, he let her pull his head down to her own. Her lips met his and he sighed. She was right; there was no way she would have been seriously injured. That still didn’t mean he wanted her to know just how scared he had gotten watching her do it. Breaking their kiss, she raised a brown eyebrow at him. “Now stop stalling and mate me, Azriel.”

They were both wet, the ground was hard and he couldn’t care less. Life became all about Leah, what she wanted, what she needed, what they could do together.

Touching her pert, pink nipples he teased the buds until they became engorged. She moaned and he smiled at the sound, guessing that they had to feel tender. That’s how he wanted her, aching, desperate, and begging for his touch.

Moving so he could see her better, he pressed his lips to her already touch-ravished nipple, sucking on it hard. Her back arched off the ground and she drove her hands into his hair. He was on fire from the taste of her, sweet and salty at the same time. Leah’s breasts were small and firm, he’d never considered himself a ‘breast man’ but right at that moment he couldn’t think of a more heavenly, female thing than the two mounds of ecstasy that sat on Leah’s chest.

She laughed. “I can tell you like the two sisters. That’s good. I’ve always wished they were bigger.”

Pulling his mouth off her nipple, he grinned. “They’re perfect. Just the right size for me to suck on, play with, and caress all at the same time. Besides on your frame, if you had big bulging boobs, you might fall over.”

Leah smacked him lightly on the side of the head. “I’m skinny, I get it. I come by it naturally. I eat all the time.”

“Don’t ever say that aloud in public. Everyone in the whole world will turn on you in anger.”

“You’re funny.” Her eyes shone brightly in the moonlight.

He thought about telling her he hadn’t been kidding and changed his mind. Not the time to ruin the mood. It helped, he realized, that they were naked. There wasn’t any need to remove their clothing. A benefit he’d never considered to the shifting process.

“Woo-hoo, Mister Mind, attention here on me right now.” Her eyes were still bright; she didn’t seem to be insulted, which was a good thing.

“I’m sorry, my head just goes off on tangents that I can’t seem to control...”

“Really?” Her hand grasped his erection hard and he groaned. “Now do I have your total attention?”

“Every last bit of it.”

Letting him go, she wrapped her legs around his waist essentially trapping him between them. He kissed her, their tongues battling in each other’s mouths. It was no longer gentle; having reached a frenzy that seemed to say they should get serious about what they were doing or stop doing it.

In and out, their tongues swirled, one showing the other what they wished they had begun to do with other parts of their body. His desire for this woman, the one the universe had picked out for him and perversely stuck in a cage in his lab, grew stronger every second he was around her. Now touching her like this, in the most intimate way, he wasn’t sure he could survive it.

Leah St. James—five feet nothing weighing in, he would guess, at less than one hundred pounds could destroy him if she wanted to. For some insane reason, he was more than happy to give her permission to do just that.

“I’ve waited a lifetime for you.” His voice sounded lower than usual, not surprising considering the lump in his throat.

Her trusting gaze bore into his. “Sorry it took me so long to get here. I came as fast as I could.”

“I know you did.”

“Take me.” Her command was barely a whisper. He was thrilled to comply.

With one solid push, he entered her warm inviting core. She gasped and he stopped moving, realizing he’d just broken through a barrier. His eyes widened.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was raised to believe nothing short of mating was worth very much. If I couldn’t have that, I didn’t want it at all.” Her hands cupped his cheeks. “I waited for you, Az.”

Her words almost undid him. Snug within the heat of her body, her words were a salve for his wounded soul. He’d been drifting, miserable, waiting for her and even though her life had been so much briefer than his, in her way, she had waited for him as well. It was an amazing gift.

Almost fully inside of her, he desperately wanted to move, to place himself up against her womb, to know the real completion of being joined as one with her. With a last thrust, he broke all the way through, filling her completely. She moaned and he stopped moving again.

“Az,” she opened one eye to look at him. “This might be my first time but I don’t think we’re supposed to be so still and unmoving.”

“I’m trying to give you the chance to get used to me.”

She wiggled and this time it was his turn to gasp. She teased him into submission, his only thoughts were to fulfill her every need, her every desire. Placing his hand between them, he teased the sensitive spot he found with the tips of his fingertips.

She screamed her delight, her tight muscles clenching around his hard shaft. Az wasn’t sure how much longer he could hold on. In and out of her he plunged, all rational thought leaving his mind. There was only Leah, only the two of them on this planet.

Her fingernails dug into his back as she threw her head back and lost herself in release. He watched, as if from a distance, overcome with desire and love for the amazing woman the universe had gifted him. Seconds later, his own needs overwhelming him, he spilled his seed deep inside her.

Barely able to support his own weight, he pressed his forehead on hers trying to

concentrate on just breathing for a while.

Leah's indrawn breath brought him back to the here and now. He opened his eyes looking down at her. "What's wrong?" Gods, please don't let her regret what they'd just done.

"Look, Az."

He followed her gaze to the small space between them and almost jumped off her. Leah's arms came around him. "Don't worry. I'm sure this is the mating. Remember how you said you didn't understand what changed between shifters after they mated? This must be it. I can feel your soul inside me." She paused. "Can you feel me?"

He could. Nodding, because he couldn't talk, he watched the dance of miraculous lights that illuminated between them, pushing parts of his soul into Leah and placing parts of hers inside his.

The warm white light that always came with a change surrounded them, but this time it made a giant circle around both their bodies. Each part of their souls seemed bathed in color. Reaching out, he touched the blue strand that floated from Leah, knowing instinctually that it represented her tremendous sense of loyalty. His hand moved through it as though it was no more than air, yet when it found its place inside him it felt solid like a brick being inserted into its spot in a wall.

Each color seemed brighter than the next. Red, for her sense of humor, yellow for the kindness she had for everyone around her, an assortment of oranges for her artistic nature. Looking down at her, he bit his lower lip.

"I'm getting all this goodness from you and you have to be filling up with insecurity and anger."

Leah raised an eyebrow, a look he was becoming very familiar with. "That's not what I'm getting from you, Az. Gods give me the patience to show this man who he really is." She sighed. "Your soul is beautiful, it's filled with brilliance, confidence in your abilities, compassion, love, loyalty and fun."

He shook his head. "I don't think of myself that way."

"Then I guess it's a good thing you're not in charge of this process, isn't it?"

Another piece of Leah's soul entered him and he sighed. She really was filling him up. He didn't feel empty, or lost. She was always going to be with him now, even when they weren't together.

He finally understood. "You know what this means? This is why we'll never be able to live without the other one. You hold half of my soul in you. If you were to die," and even saying the words die and you in relation to Leah made him ill. "Then you'll take me with you."

"Considering that the same goes for you, I'm going to have to insist that you don't take too many chances there, Azriel Kane. I'd like a long, happy life."

He smiled. Personally, he'd take a few lifetimes with her. "I'm going to start to age now. Since Theo mated, he's found a grey hair." The thought made him smile. "You'll just continue to progress as you would have—twenty-six years old and onwards—but I'll pick up like I'm really thirty and not," he had to pause to think about it. "Eighty-two."

"Best looking geriatric I've ever seen."

He laughed, her smile touching him so deeply he had to lean down and kiss her. Reluctantly, he lifted his head. He could already hear real life intruding on his luxurious thoughts.

Taking a deep breath, he scented others in the distance—not too close but less than a mile away—they were moving slowly. It was Theo and Tristan. Neither of his brothers would be coming at such a slow pace if they didn't want to give Az time to scent them.

"I smell them too."

Leah was a remarkable wolf. She'd only been truly shifted for twenty-four hours and yet she'd grasped onto this part of herself with both hands, embracing it. "Let's shift and meet them halfway."

His hope was that they'd brought clothes. He really didn't want others to see Leah naked, not unless it couldn't be helped. She belonged to him now, and it turned out that one of his personality traits was an unapologetic need to keep what belonged to him all to himself.

* * * *

Az shifted first, taking the clothes from his brothers. He dressed himself. Looking at Tristan and Theo, he motioned for them to turn around.

Tristan laughed and they both complied. "You know we're both mated men, completely devoted to our other halves. I am the Alpha of this pack. During ceremonies, I'm going to see her naked. I see all the pack naked."

Shrugging, Az couldn't force himself to see the truth of what Tristan said, not just yet anyway. "We'll deal with that when we get to it."

Leah shifted, bathed for a second in the white light that would always look different to him now that he'd been mated to her in its embrace. Az let his eyes stroke her body and was rewarded by watching her nipples peak at his lustful stare. He reluctantly handed her the clothes.

Leah dressed herself. "You can turn around. I think Captain Caveman over here will behave."

Az hoped he could. Everyone changed during matings. Maybe he got more aggressive and difficult.

Don't worry so much, I was making a joke.

Leah's voice in his mind was a warm caress. *You know me so well now.*

Tristan spoke first. "I'm sorry to interrupt your mating."

Theo laughed. "Who is he kidding? None of us get long, uninterrupted matings these days. My mate turned into a demon an hour later."

Leah grasped Az's hand tightly. *Faith's a demon?*

Not any longer. "What's the problem?"

"Cullen's spies tell us that Leah's father is on his way here."

His mate's eyes filled with anger. "I told you not to call him." She looked at the ground quickly and Az realized she was warring with her need to scream and her wolf's need to be subservient to Tristan.

"It's okay, Leah, Tristan is used to us occasionally blowing up at him during extreme circumstances. He's not going to throw you out of the pack."

Tristan shook his head. "You're a Kane now. All of my brothers and their wives take extra liberties with me. I'm used to it."

Az didn't miss the look Tristan threw him that indicated that perhaps Azriel had taken a few too many of those moments himself but then his brother smiled.

"At this point, I wouldn't have it any other way. I wasn't Alpha until I'd lived with

these guys over a hundred years. It would be weird for my brothers to always look at the ground when I showed up. In any case, I didn't call him."

Leah looked up, squeezing Az's hand even tighter. "So how does he know I'm here?"

"Therein lies the problem." Theo crossed his arms over his chest. "It seems Kendrick Kane told him."

Az cursed loudly. So much for basking in the glow of his new mate. His father was once again playing havoc with his life.

Chapter Nine

Everything had moved so quickly, Leah could hardly keep track. One minute they'd been out in the field. The next, she'd been rushed back to the mansion to await her father's return. Standing in Tristan's office, she tried not to let her hands shake. Nathan St. James might be her father, but he could be a scary son of a bitch when he wanted to be. Right now, he seemed intent on putting on a show.

Leah couldn't believe this was happening. She stood in front of the man she'd believed to be her father for twenty-six years of life and she felt nothing but terror. Not one tiny ounce of feeling of love or compassion to the person she used to believe had been at least half responsible for giving her life.

"Leah, these men, they've brainwashed you. This is a cult. I've called the authorities; they are on their way here."

To give him his due, the man sounded frantic.

His announcement earned a growl from Tristan, whose office they were currently borrowing for this strange reunion.

"They didn't kidnap me, Dad. Kendrick Kane did."

"No, they've deluded you into believing that."

She wanted to laugh but couldn't muster the energy. "Really? They've convinced me they didn't kidnap me? They've done something to my brain to confuse me about exactly who broke into my bedroom in the middle of the night and took me away?"

"Leah..."

Don't taunt him, she-wolf, he's a powerful enemy and a good ally.

Az's solid voice was the only thing keeping her from leaping at her father and ripping his head to shreds with her teeth. Leah could practically feel her teeth extending in her mouth at the thought.

That's just because you are a new wolf. It's hard sometimes to separate the emotions. You may not want to see him again but you would never forgive yourself if you gave into the instinct. Even your wolf wouldn't like it when it was over.

Leah cleared her throat. "What about you, Dad? Did they do anything to your mental faculties?"

Hands fisted at his side, Senator St. James, who it turned out was her uncle, looked like he wanted to break heads together. His bodyguards had been detained at the boat deck. Whether or not the local authorities had jurisdiction on Westervelt was a bit of a tricky question. The truth was, Az had told her, they probably did, but it was enough of a grey area to at least keep them busy on the phone with state officials while she tried to work this out with 'Dad'.

"I don't think I understand the question, daughter."

"Has anyone here done anything to you that would make it impossible for you to tell what is happening to you?"

Don't do it.

She shouldn't be surprised her wolf didn't want her to show him what she could do. In this case, she was going to have to discard the canine's advice. Calling the white light, she slipped easily into her canine form. Through her wolf eyes, she stared up at her

father.

Az, I'm going to need you to translate for me, as the one flaw with this plan was that now he can't hear me.

Her beloved cleared his throat. "I'm going to speak on behalf of Leah who, obviously, you can't hear."

Her 'father' had been hostile toward Az when he'd first met him, which Leah might have resented as much as the fact that he'd all but handed her off to Kendrick to be kidnapped.

Does he believe me now?

Az repeated. "She wants to know if you believe her now."

Her father nodded. "This has become hugely more complicated for me."

To him? This had become more difficult for him? With barely a thought, Leah transformed back into her human form. Standing in front of her father, she immediately realized she was naked. As if reading her mind, Az threw a robe around her nude form. She smiled her gratitude. Someday she might get used to the constant shifts into nudity on Westervelt but she doubted she'd ever feel that way in circumstances such as this one.

"How is this more complicated to you?" She couldn't help the sarcasm and pettiness she heard in her voice. He was supposed to love her. As far as she knew, he thought she was his daughter. She would probably always think of him as her dad.

"Because Kendrick told me you were latent. I thought that meant you would be spared what is to come." Her father chewed on his bottom lip as Leah's pulse pounded loudly in her ears. What had he just said? "I know you won't believe me. I never wanted you to be hurt. I guess you're going to be the first casualty of this war."

"Cullen." Tristan yelled as he shifted into his wolf form. Behind her she heard several loud growls.

Shift. Hurry.

Her wolf was begging her to move and Az screamed something but all she could see was that her father's green eyes had turned gold in front of her. She stared into them, transfixed. Who was this man and what was he doing to her?

He raised an arm and pointed his index finger at her. Instinctually, she tried to block herself with her own arms. The movement didn't happen, her limbs were frozen. Light poured out from his fingers as time slowed even further.

For a second, Leah swore she could see the particles that made up the light as it moved toward her; if she wanted to she supposed she could count the individual atoms that had formed it. Just as quickly as she had the thought, she was slammed to the ground, the hard floor jarring her body as stars appeared before her eyes. Az's large body landed on top hers.

Above her, she felt him convulse. Her eyes got huge. Oh dear gods, what had just happened?

"Az." She shook at his body but he didn't move. "Az!"

Pushing him off took more effort than it should have. She still felt sluggish from whatever was going on with her father. Looking over briefly, she saw three wolves had him pinned to the ground while he laughed, a strange high pitched shriek she never would have imagined could come out of a human mouth.

Leah stroked Az's face desperate for him to wake up. When that didn't work, she shook him by the shoulders, hard. He groaned.

Az can you hear me?

No response met her query.

Tristan ran next to her. Still in his wolf form, he shifted back to his human state.

“What happened?”

“He took whatever was supposed to happen to me.” Her voice shook as she spoke the words. He never should have done that.

“I can’t reach him at all.” Tristan looked up at her hopefully. “Can you?”

“No.”

Just then a terrible pain wracked her body. She rolled over, gripping her stomach.

“What is it?” Tristan’s voice jarred her out of the darkness inducing pain that all but immobilized her.

It’s Az. He’s dying. Her wolf answered her, a small, sad voice.

“It’s not me, its Azriel. He’s dying.”

And so, she realized all of a sudden, was she. If Az died she would follow. The thought of Az’s death made her eyes fill with tears. She couldn’t watch him suffer. Whatever it was, she would fight for him to live. But if he couldn’t...she would gladly follow him.

He held her soul. She held his. When they had mated, she’d dwelled on that thought except she hadn’t really understood it until now. In no way would either of them be alone. Not even travelling to the next life would be something they would do without the other one.

Az’s eyes flew open. “I’m so empty. Oh god, he’s not here anymore.”

Tristan grabbed his brother’s face. “What are you talking about? Who isn’t here? Az, you have to tell me what is happening. I can’t reach you telepathically. Whatever has happened, you have to explain it.”

“My wolf, Tristan, my wolf is gone. That man, Leah’s father, he took him from me.” Az’s head jerked back and forth on the floor under Tristan’s touch. “How can he just be gone?”

Leah felt her soul shatter into a million pieces each one ripping from her insides like a stitch being torn from a hem in a dress. She sobbed openly. She looked up at Tristan. “Can he live without his wolf?”

“I have no idea. As far as I know, this has never happened before.” If they lived through this, Leah knew she would never forget the look in Tristan’s eyes as he told her that. They might be all wolf but contained in his animal eyes was the heart of a man already starting to mourn his little brother.

She pounded her fists on the ground. No. They had just found each other. Forcing her tears to stop, she acknowledged that she wasn’t ready to move on. Not even if Az went with her. Leaping to her feet, she jumped over the desk and landed on top of her father. He was still shrieking, that strange high-pitched sound.

“Tristan,” she heard Az say behind her. “There are things I have to explain to you about how they make the wolves I saw in Leah’s memory. I thought I’d have time.”

“You will have time.”

Bless Tristan and his optimism. She was going to figure out how to fix this or before she died she was going to rip out her father’s throat. That is, unless, Gabriel did it first.

Placing a gentle hand on Gabriel’s fur before she spoke, she patted him on the head like he was a puppy dog. “I’m going to get him to fix this.”

Gabriel's ears fell backwards and he growled but let up his assault on her father's arm. Theo and Rex still maintained their holds on his legs while Cullen sat by his head. There was no mistaking the look in Cullen's wolf eyes. She might have to fight him for the privilege of ending her father's life. The shifter held death in his gaze.

"What did you do?" Right now she didn't care about why he had done it. She might care eventually if Az lived.

"I took his wolf. I can feel him prowling inside me." He snickered. "I always wanted to be a shifter. It's why I married your mother. Kendrick told me I'd become one if I mated with her, only that never happened. Kendrick explained it to me years ago. It meant your mother was deformed." Her father's voice had a dreamy quality. It was as if he spoke to her but at the same time had no idea what he said.

"That's not your wolf. You aren't meant to be a shifter and he lied to you." She wanted to shake him.

"I actually didn't take him out of desire to be a shifter alone. I took him because you killed the female leader of my coven. What good is it being a warlock if your coven falls powerless?"

Leah shook her head. "I didn't kill anyone."

We did. Tristan's voice in her head sounded strained. "To save me, Cullen killed the witch who cursed us."

That was information she could have used earlier. Staring at her father, she tried to breathe. "You're a warlock? You're with those witches who forced the fake wolf body on me?"

"Which wouldn't have happened if you had done your duty and joined Kendrick's pack."

Leah bit down hard on her tongue. Now was not the time for dealing with that. "Give Az back his wolf."

"I can't do that. I used all of my power to take it. Now I just need my new wolf to make me powerful. Kendrick said it would." He grabbed Leah's arm. "Why isn't it working?"

"Because the wolf doesn't belong to you. He doesn't want to be inside you. It lives with Azriel like my wolf lives with me. I don't understand all of the spirituality of all of this yet but its symbiosis, okay? They are connected to each other. Yours is not the body or soul it wants."

She hoped what she said was true. Az had told her his wolf didn't like him. Maybe it liked being inside her dad?

Not possible. He picked Az like I picked you. Perhaps his wolf gets annoyed with him but it's all love, Leah. Her wolf sounded genuinely annoyed that she'd thought ill of Az's wolf.

"I can't give it back."

Ashlee rushed to her side. "I'm going over and over in my mind to see if there is anything I can do to help here. I have the collective magical memory of both of the Kane aunts. If anyone knew how to fix this, they would. Only I find it really difficult to access the information during stress."

Tears fell from Ashlee's eyes, which was the only reason Leah resisted the urge to ask the woman what good the knowledge was if she couldn't bring it to fruition when they needed it the most. Damn it.

A strange tingling sensation popped in the back of Leah's neck. Vertigo swayed the room. Oh hell, this is what had happened the last time Az's mother had decided to use her body to take over a visit. What did Mrs. Kane want now?

Well, it is Mrs. Kane, darling, but not Az's mother. No, I'm his dearly departed Aunt.

Leah looked left and right. She was trapped between walls of darkness. Nothing to see to the left or right, up or down. Just vast amounts of black nothingness. Was this what it was like after death?

No, this is what it feels like to be possessed. Mary Jo let you look at her memories but I'm a little bit more private. I'd prefer to keep my memories my own.

Her head pounded. Had the woman just said possessed? Visions of little girls spitting up pea soup with their heads spinning filled her mind.

Not like that. The woman actually laughed. *I'm informing Tristan what he needs to do to bring back Az's wolf. Really, Ashlee needs to practice more with connecting with our collective knowledge if she can't remember under stress. These things should be like muscle memory to her by now.*

Leah actually felt bad that she'd thought the same thing earlier. *She does have three children to take care of and a fourth on the way. I think she might have reached her maximum capacity for handling things.*

Not that she would personally know, never having had any children or pregnancies to compare Ashlee's situation to.

It's still no excuse. There was a pause. *We're about done here, which is good since I think your beloved—my precious nephew—is all but out of time. Do tell Tristan to hurry.*

Like her consciousness had been thrust out of her body earlier, she felt her mind slam back in. Gasping for air, the light in the room felt too bright on her eyes. She closed them for a second, noting that strong hands held her around her shoulders.

"Don't fall, okay? It might kill him to watch you fall." Leah opened her eyes to look at Rex's strong face. So much like Azriel, and so different too. He was the Kane brother she'd seen the least of.

She shook her head. "You can let go. I'm steady now." Even if she hadn't been, the look of steel determination in Rex's eyes would have made her that way. Clearly, he was a man you didn't want to cross.

"Leah." Az's voice sounded strained. Leah rushed to his side, kneeling down to stroke his brown hair.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm so sorry about this." He coughed and groaned. Her heart fluttered in silent pain at the sound. "Did I ever tell you what my name means?"

Suddenly Leah worried about Az's mind. Was he going to start making no sense before he died? Was this a prerequisite to the end? "Az, I'm not sure what you're talking about."

"I would laugh at that statement if it wouldn't hurt too badly. That's sort of the story of my life 'Az, I'm not sure what you're talking about'."

Kissing his forehead, she nuzzled the top of his head with her nose. "That's not true. I understand you completely. I simply don't understand your train of thought at the moment but whatever. No, I don't know what your name means."

"Technically, the way the name is spelled it means 'Helped by God' or something

like that. It depends on who you ask.”

Okay, she really wasn’t following this. Tristan and the others seemed busy getting something together. Gabriel had her father slung over his shoulder and Summer rushed from the room on some sort of mission.

“That’s a nice name.”

“Yes, but that’s not what they wanted to name me. They just spelled it wrong. Azrael...with an a and an e instead of an i was how they intended to name me.”

Leah tried to recall her limited biblical history. “He was an angel.”

“The angel of death, that’s right. Lately, I’ve been feeling that way. All of those people dying in my lab, having to burn their decimated wolf bodies. It’s been hell. Then somehow you came and it all got so much better.”

This had to stop. “Honey, this is starting to sound an awful lot like a goodbye death speech. You’re going to stop giving it right now. We have plenty of time to discuss these things in the future.” She laughed. “Besides, even if you were to die—which you will not be doing—I’ll be right behind.”

“That’s the problem. I should have known that my bad luck would cross over to you. The last thing I want to do is be responsible for your death. I got to live a very long time. You still have tons of stuff left to do. I’m sure in that vast amount of magical knowledge Ash has, she must have a way to resist the death compulsion. Ask her to help you. Live a full life.”

Alright, enough was enough. Still leaning over him, Leah pushed her index finger in Az’s face. “Stop that right now. You don’t get to decide these things for me. I love you. You are my mate. If I want to follow you, I’ll follow you. Since we’re both going to live a nice long time you might as well get used to the idea that I don’t like being told what to do.”

Tristan’s voice jarred her. “We’re ready. Get him to drink this.” Tristan handed her what looked like a glass of milk. At her questioning look, he explained. “There’s stuff in the milk, make him drink it.”

She nodded. “Az, we need you to drink this.”

“What is it?” There was her sweet mate. He could never just do anything.

“I don’t know. They haven’t told me. However, our Alpha has ordered me to make you drink this. That means drink it.”

I don’t want to lose him.

Her wolf sounded terrified. It wasn’t a good sign. What could she sense that Leah on her own couldn’t? She shook her head. There was no dwelling on that right now.

She placed the glass on Az’s lips and was glad when he drank it down. Gagging, he pulled his head away from the substance. “Oh gods, it burns.”

Gabriel dumped her father, who was still shrieking like a banshee, next to Az. Tristan stood over both of them placing his hands in the air palms facing downwards directly over Az and her father’s heads.

“Go on, Ashlee.”

Ashlee’s voice was strong. “We call on pack magic. We call on the gods that made us that which we are. What should not be, give back to us. Remove from the false shifter and give our brother back his magic.”

As Leah watched transfixed, Tristan’s hands vibrated. Ashlee repeated the incantation three times. Finally, Tristan threw his head back and her father’s shrieks

became painful, his whole body convulsing. Simultaneously, Az yelled, a blinding white light surrounding him. For a moment, as impossible as it seemed, he was both man and wolf at the same time. It was different than the shift where she could watch his body reshape. He was both entities at the same time. One second she could see the wolf, the next her beloved Az, and then strangely enough a moment later she could see both of them fusing together, each one straining to take the other inside of him.

And then just as quickly as it began, it ceased.

Tristan fell to his knees and three pack members rushed to him. Had it worked? Her heart pounded hard in her chest.

Az...she tried to reach him telepathically, hoping that he'd hear her. Silently, she prayed to whoever answered these things that he was okay.

I hear you loud and clear, she-wolf.

She exhaled on a laugh.

Can't talk right now. I'm getting an earful from my wolf.

Chapter Ten

Az stared down at the man who had raised his mate and tried to find a shred of normalcy contained in his crazed eyes. The man was a senator in the United States Congress and had, for gods knew how long, been co-leading a coven somehow connected to their father. How had Leah been kept safe for as long as she had been?

Senator St. James' involvement with the dark magics also changed his opinion that Leah had been kept with the Senator for her own safety. Her mother might have been afraid to leave him, afraid that he would turn over his daughter to Kendrick if she did. The whole thing was completely nefarious and Az feared they might never know all the answers to these questions, as the man couldn't seem to speak in coherent sentences.

Or at least he wants us to think he can't.

His wolf's tone was nothing short of furious and had been since he'd returned to his body.

How could you let him take me like that?

Well, in any case, it was a mixture of hurt disbelief and outraged anger. Az was pretty sure he preferred the anger to the disappointment.

I didn't let him do anything and you know it. He took you and I had no way to stop him.

His wolf made a sound that was distinctly like a harrumph noise and settled down like he was going to take a nap. It had been a long day for all of them. Only, Az's wasn't quite over yet. He still had to get the information they needed from Leah's 'father' and then dispose of the man. Normally Cullen, Theo, or Gabriel would have handled the second part of his last thought. This time, however, it was personal to Az. Not only had the man taken his wolf, he'd threatened his mate.

Az felt his eyes turn wolf at the thought, his furry side waking up abruptly as his blood pressure surged, causing his heart to beat loudly in his ears. The man was basically a walking, talking corpse even if he didn't know it yet.

Anything yet? Leah's tired, worried voice filled his mind.

He had insisted she stay behind and not be part of the questioning and removal of her father when they'd taken the man downstairs to the lab. Right now she was with the other women, upstairs in the main house. As tough as she might believe she was, his mate had a heart filled with kindness and compassion. There was no way in hell he was letting her witness what was about to happen.

"Senator, are you awake?" Az finally addressed the man who lay on the floor. He had to admit to a certain amount of personal satisfaction in finally having the upper hand on a man who had caused him a tremendous amount of physical and emotional pain.

Cullen stood to the left of Azriel. Although nearly silent, Az became aware of his brothers entering the room followed by Faith, Malcolm, Summer, Trent, and Boyd. Looking up he caught Tristan's eye.

"Who is with Leah?"

"Jana, Ashlee, the kids and the rest of the pack. Everyone is under 'distract Leah' orders. Braden is going to show her his magic tricks."

Az hissed out a laugh. "Magic, huh?"

“Glad to have yours back?”

Sighing, he regarded his older brother. Everyone had known Tristan should be Alpha...everyone but Tristan. Azriel couldn't help but wonder what they all 'knew' about him that they never let him become aware of.

“Yes. I am glad to have the wolf back. As much as he drives me a little crazy, he is mine. We need each other. However,” Azriel looked down at Leah's father. “I'm thinking that magic isn't going to work in this circumstance. His mind, it's warped. He wants the magic. Maybe he even feeds off it. I can't help but feel that considering the fact we were cursed by a witch—more than once if we count your getting imprisoned in your wolf body—that we have been tremendously negligent in not learning more about these people who are in our father's employ.”

“You're right, of course.” Tristan nodded as he considered what he said. Looking over his shoulder, Az watched Tristan narrow his eyes. “Rex, come here.”

The look of surprise that crossed Rex's face almost made Az laugh. Their youngest brother had been out of favor recently after running away from the island and nearly getting killed by Kendrick during the fiasco with fire demons. Tristan very rarely addressed him directly.

“How would you like a job?” Az turned to give Rex and Tristan some privacy but Tristan growled and pointed a finger to stop Az from leaving. Raising an eyebrow, Az had no idea what Tristan wanted at this particular moment.

After a moment, Rex answered. “I would be honored by any job you wanted to give me, my Alpha. Do you want me to kill him?” Rex pointed at the man on the floor.

Az interrupted. “I'm going to kill him.”

“No one is killing him.” Tristan's tone gave no room for rebuttal. Az wanted to howl in anger. It was his right to eliminate the threat to his mate. Anger surged through his veins so strongly that Az had to close his eyes to resist screaming at Tristan.

“Before you get yourself into a frenzy, hear me out. Rex, we're going to be taking a little pack trip out to Dad's.” Tristan raised his finger again in a gesture he was obviously using more and more to stop people from interrupting. “Yes, Cullen, I will be going too. I know you were going to object. Don't think I'm not aware that you are standing over there listening to every word I say.”

Cullen muttered an apology and Tristan laughed. “Rex, when we get where we're going, you are going to have the job of capturing us a witch. This might not be so easy. It is highly likely they will get away. We haven't even seen one in person since we killed the one who cursed us. If they so much as get wind of our arrival, they will vanish. Your job is to bring one back. If they run, you chase. Got it?”

“Yes, my Alpha.” Az noted the glint of happiness that filled Rex's eyes before he pushed it down. Compared to the rest of them, Rex was very young. They all needed their Alpha's approval. It looked as if right now Rex needed it a lot more.

“Good.” Tristan turned all of his attention to Az now. He was going to get Tristan to let him deal with Nathan St. James, too bad if Tristan didn't want to be argued with.

“We need information from him. Let Cullen get it.”

“No.” Az said his last words through gritted teeth. What he really wanted to do was shift and tear Senator St. James to pieces.

“Why? Why does it have to be you?”

Az shrugged. “Why can't it be me?”

Something glimmered in Tristan's eyes and Az couldn't make out what it was. "Because you have to be able to look at her when this is over. She has to stare you in the eyes and not see your guilt at handling this written all over your face. Notice," Tristan indicated the room. "Ashlee isn't here but Summer and Faith are. Ash knows I have to do things as Alpha...yet, if I was the man to handle this she would be horrified. Faith and Summer have the stomach for interrogation. Jana's not here either or any of the other women. Go find your mate—comfort her. I need you to work on that compound you thought up to stop the wolves from making the shift, the vaccine. I need that before we can leave and I need to leave tomorrow."

Az couldn't help the growl that escaped his throat. "I have the same instincts as everyone else. I don't need to be protected from my mate's displeasure. She's not here because this is her father. However, that does not mean she is under any illusions about what is going to go on in here. Cullen isn't going to be able to get what he needs from him." Az walked over to the cabinet that stood on the left side of the interrogation room. He opened the top drawer and finding what he needed, pulled out the syringe and vial he knew he'd hidden in there. After a second, he inserted the syringe into the vial and filled it with the liquid he'd created. "Only I can." Az looked at Cullen and Theo. "Could you guys put him on that table and strap him down for me?"

Tristan sniffed the air looking at the syringe Az held. "I can only detect the metallic taste of medicine, nothing more distinct. What is that?"

"Amobarbital. I mixed it myself, took some time. These days, it's illegal to use—considered a form of torture. Of course, I'm old enough to remember when it was all but recreational in certain circles." Az couldn't help smiling at the memory. Regular humans did the oddest things. "It's derived from barbiturates. When given from an IV, slowly, and over time, the person has no choice but to tell you things they might otherwise not tell you. Doctors first thought they could use it to help psychologically blocked patients open up about—"

"Az. I don't want the history of Amobarbital. I'm enough impressed that you made some up. When did you do this?"

When had he done it? Time frequently slipped away from Az. "Um...maybe five years ago."

"And you put it in the interrogation room?"

"I thought there might come a time when we might use it. I have a whole bunch of it in here actually. Good thing it wasn't in the lab, huh?"

"Almost like it was predestined for you to do that?"

Az took a deep breath. "Tristan, as happy as I am to be in the land of the magical creatures again, I really don't want to start talking about fate. I'm grateful beyond belief for Leah. Can we leave it at that?"

Tristan laughed. "Alright, fair enough. You use your drug, get the info I need and I'm sending Leah back in here. Anything you do, she needs to be able to know about it. You'll have to do it in front of her."

"Hey Trip, when you were getting those degrees in architecture and engineering all those years ago did you also pick up a doctorate I don't know about in human psychology?"

"No, but since I became what essentially amounts as the father of the entire pack, I have to concern myself with the well being and emotional health of all of you douche

bags. It's a good thing my mate knows a thing or two about feelings."

Az laughed. "Tristan, did you just call me a douche bag?"

"What? Ashlee says it's important that I use the vernacular of 'now' and not sound like an old man when I talk since I'm going to look thirty forever, even after all of you start to finally age. Did I say it wrong?"

"No, I believe you said it perfectly."

Tristan addressed the room. "Let's go. Az has work to do."

The crowd that entered started to disperse. Faith grabbed him by the arm on her way out. "Are you really not going to tell him that douche bag is an insult?"

"Nope, I'm going to let him go out in public and say that to someone. I think it'll be very amusing."

"Azriel, who knew you had the Kane sense of humor?"

"I did. Well I didn't know it was Kane-esque but I knew Kendrick's got a wicked sense of humor." Leah entered the room around the crowd that exited. Faith let go of his arm immediately. For a second he was confused and then he realized that his sister-in-law was concerned that Leah wouldn't approve of her touching him.

"Sorry, I know you guys are newly mated. It's too soon for me to touch him. I think of Az as my little brother." Faith threw her hands up in the air in a conciliatory gesture. Az actually had to cover his mouth with his hand to stop from grinning. Had Leah sent out some kind of signal that he missed that made Faith nervous?

Leah smiled but it didn't reach her eyes. "I'm sure Theo is waiting for you."

Faith whistled. "Nothing like the hormones of those first months. You'll both come down from this craziness eventually."

As Faith exited, Leah exhaled. "I thought I was going to rip off her head." Leah grabbed Az and pulled him into her arms. "I know its nuts, I just can't help it."

"In the past," Azriel kissed the top of her head losing himself in the scent of home that was pure Leah. "Mates used to go away for a time. Actually, it was odd because you never knew when two people were suddenly going to awaken to the fact that they were mates. One day they were just Jon and Jane wolf-shifter, going about their lives, the next they'd gotten some indication from their wolves that they were supposed to be together and—boom—they'd mate, drop everything, and disappear for several months. When they reemerged, usually the female was pregnant."

"Are you saying this craziness that we are going through is nature's way of making sure we procreate?"

"I'm probably the only shifter who would say that but, yes, that's what I think."

"And that's why Ashlee and Summer had babies so quickly? I can do the math; I know she's had three babies in five years." Leah squeezed him tighter, her nails digging slightly in his back. His groin, which had already hardened, jumped to attention.

"How good is your nose?"

"I'm picking up more and more senses every hour. At least I think I am. Why?"

"Because Ash is pregnant again. I can smell it. They haven't told anyone. I always know weeks before the other shifters become aware of the change in scent. I think it comes from all the time I spend sniffing out odors in the labs. I'm very attuned to subtlety." Az let go of Leah, forcing himself to get to work hooking up the IV in her father's arm. He needed to start the medicine drip or her father would never be ready for questioning when he woke up. "That's why I know that Jana and Faith are also in the

early stages of pregnancy.”

“Is that what you want? A baby?”

Az looked up into the unfathomable depths of Leah’s sharp gaze. “I want you. Do you want kids?”

“I didn’t.” She swallowed, he could see her neck muscles strain.

“Didn’t or don’t?”

“I do. I want them with you. Is that just the mating talking?”

Leah was so smart. He’d never heard anyone else ever question what happened to him or her during this time. “I have no idea because I’m afraid I’m too under the influence myself to be non-partial. I want babies with you too.”

“Okay.” She nodded. “But not four in six years.” She held up her index and middle fingers. “Two, at most. I’m an only child. Two seems like a lot.”

Having set up the IV, he turned back to her. “Ashlee had been told she couldn’t have kids, couple that with the fact that Tristan is Alpha and wants to add numbers to the pack, and you have two people who think nothing of getting pregnant every year. Plus, we have a lot of extra hands around here. Everyone wants to be called Uncle or Aunt to everyone else’s children. Ashlee sneezes and five people rush over to grab her kids.”

“It takes a village…”

He nodded. “Or in this case, a pack.”

Leah’s father groaned. Az took her hand and pulled her close, gesturing to Senator St. James. “He’s going to be groggy and ticked off. He’s not going to be happy he can’t resist telling me what I want to know. Tristan thought you had to be here. If you want to leave, that’s fine with me.”

She shook her head. “I know you didn’t want me here. I had to come anyway. Whatever you have to do, I want to be with you for it. Even this.”

“I’m only going to question him. I wanted to beat him, to tear out his throat. Tristan objected to that…on your behalf and then I remembered I had this stuff stored up. It was a compromise, of sorts.”

As Az watched, Nathan St. James became aware of his surroundings all at once. He raised a finger like he wanted to magically attack Az again. It didn’t work and he shook his finger again.

“Not going to happen.” Az shook his head and tried not to laugh. “We’ve put a magic dampener in this room. Anything short of shifting isn’t possible in here right now. Guess you’re out of luck in that respect.”

“Why does my head feel foggy?”

Az moved and sat at the end of the table. “We drugged you.”

Looking up at the clock, he decided it had been in St. James’ IV long enough. He could probably start to ask questions soon.

“What are you going to do with me?”

“I’m going to ask you some questions. You’re going to answer them. I’m not all that clear what will happen to you then. My inclination is to give you back to Kendrick after you’ve spilled all of his secrets.”

The man tried to rear up on the table, stopped by the restraints. “You can’t do that. Kill me first. Don’t give me back to Kendrick.”

“Not so in love with my dear old dad now, are you? It’s really not up to me. You’ll have to take it up with Tristan and see what kind of compassionate mood he is in.”

“Leah, baby, I tried to get you out of here. That must count for something.”

Az growled. “You don’t get to address her.”

Leah laughed. “This is Azriel’s show, Dad, I’m just here as a witness.”

Her faith temporarily blindsided him. Realizing he was still on a precipice in this makeshift interrogation, he couldn’t allow himself to analyze just how fantastic it was to have someone who believed in him wholeheartedly.

He needed to focus. “Tell me how you kept Leah’s mother from her mate for all of those years.”

“There are simple ways...spells, if you will, to separate a shifter from their mate.” Nathan’s head swung back and forth on the table as he tried to resist the compulsion the drugs put on him. “Any time I thought she was starting to go back to him, I would give her another dose of the spell. As for my brother, he was easy enough to manipulate knowing that at any time I could and would turn his daughter over to Kendrick Kane.”

“How did Kendrick find you?”

“Right after his expulsion from Westervelt, he spent some time searching for the missing women. He found my brother and his mate. I managed to convince him to let me have them for a while. I kept hoping I could find a way to take her wolf as my own. Unfortunately, she died right as I perfected the spell.”

Az’s blood boiled at the thought. Despite what Tristan felt, he knew he was more than capable of ending this man’s life right at this very moment. Leah’s cool hand touched his arm, dousing his enraged mood to a simmer.

“Did Kendrick send you here now?”

He shook his head. “He’d be furious if he knew I had come. He was angry that I’d even filed a missing persons report on Leah. I had no choice. Too many people came around asking where she was.” His eyes narrowed as he looked at Az’s mate. “She’s always been so damn social.”

Asking Nathan about the nature of the magic he used would be useless for Az. He probably wouldn’t understand it even if he managed to get the other man to answer his queries. Looking down at the man who had raised Leah but destroyed her family, he noticed the sweat forming on the older man’s brow. Tristan and the others could ask their magical questions. He just had one of his own.

“Tell me, where is Kendrick now?”

Chapter Eleven

The interrogation of the man who she once believed was her father and now had become something out of her worst nightmare took almost the entire night. Azriel had finally gotten the location of his father's compound out of Nathan—and she was determined to think of him that way now as 'Nathan' and not as 'Dad'—which had brought Tristan and the others back into the room to question him about his magic use and the intricacies of his coven.

Leah didn't particularly care about the magical end of things. She knew they would be going on a trip to Texas where Kendrick had made his new home and where it was more than likely the place where he had imprisoned her turning her into a wolf. Other than that, her head simply hurt. It wasn't the kind of thing taking a pain medication would cure. It was a tired headache telling her she had just done too much over the last...well who even knew how much time it had really been?

Excusing herself from the interrogation without a word to Az, she had found her way back to his rooms using scent alone. A feat she might not have been able to do earlier that day. Her wolf was definitely finding her mojo. Opening the door, she barely spared a glance to the ill-kept room before stumbling into the adjacent bedroom and, still dressed, collapsing into a deep sleep on his bed.

Sometime later, she was vaguely aware of Az entering the room and undressing her. The sensation of clothes being taken off and then placed on her body stirred her briefly but his assurances that she should stay asleep resonated with her exhausted brain and within seconds she sank again into slumber.

She did not dream that night—a strange occurrence for Leah who, as an artist, found that most nights were filled with color, images, and stories that usually let her awaken feeling motivated to paint in the morning. She could only attribute it to her utter need of deep sleep. Opening her eyes, she became aware of two things very quickly. It was very early, there was barely any light coming through the window and Az's strong arms were around her pulling her snug up against his chest.

His breathing was even and if the movement of his eyes beneath his lids were any indication he was deep in REM sleep. Not wanting to disturb him but desperate to pee and use the shower, she dislodged herself from his embrace and made her way to the bathroom. Moments later she stood under the warm water of Az's shower and tried to straighten out her thoughts.

Did she feel more refreshed? Sort of.

Did she feel like she could go back to sleep? No.

Was she aching for her mate? Yes.

Closing her eyes she tried and failed to make her need for him diminish. There was no helping it. Her body practically burned from her need for Az. Was this part of the early stages of their relationship that Az had mentioned earlier? The part where the couple reappeared months later with a baby on the way or would she wake up this way needing him every morning?

Turning off the spray, she shrugged not really caring either way. If she woke up this way every morning it would only add a bonus to their relationship. Assuming Az was

game for being awoken by her sexual attentions.

Wrapping herself in a towel she exited the bathroom. He hadn't moved since she'd left the bed and she took a moment to admire the perfection of the male form that was Azriel Kane. She knew, because she'd been in his mind and had half of his soul stored in her body, that it bothered him more than just a little that he was the shortest of all of his brothers. She raised an eyebrow and almost laughed at the thought. On the physical scale with ten being total hottie and one being lame, her mate was a twelve. What would he do with two more inches? His lean, hard frame was everything a woman could ask for. Well, at least everything she could ask for and if anyone else tried to make a move on him, she'd rip out her throat.

Dropping her towel to the ground she crept to the bed and gently pulled the covers off Az's body. He sighed in his sleep but didn't stir. Reaching down, she cupped him in her hand. She felt his whole body stiffen as she used her other hand to pull down his boxer shorts and with one swift movement take him in her mouth.

Az came awake instantly, groaning, the sound causing her to become instantly wet. "She-wolf, what are you doing?"

"Sssshh." She informed him, laughter in her voice. "I'm waking you up."

Inside her, her wolf paced anxiously, loving the new playful side that Leah had just discovered. What could she say? Az brought out the best in her.

He tried to sit up and she pushed him gently back on the bed. Truth be told, he let her push him back down. If he wanted to, he was much stronger than she was. She couldn't help her small smile. It was a real man who knew when it was time to let his partner be in charge.

Gliding her mouth up and down his hard length, she heard his intake of breath. "Leah, baby, let me touch you."

She shook her head, not wanting him to take control from her yet. She needed Az; moreover, there was nothing in the world she wanted to do more than she wanted to take him deep inside her mouth at that very moment. His breathing changed, becoming faster. She could feel him becoming harder by the second and the idea that it was she—Leah St. James—making him that way made her even hornier for him.

She moved faster, taking him deep within her throat and pulling out fast until she was all but removed from the tip of his hard erection. At his gasp, she plunged back down, taking the whole of his length into the back of her throat. Over and over she deepened her embrace until she was wild from the experience.

"No, no, Leah, I want to come inside you. I need you desperately." He tugged at her shoulders.

"Come in my mouth." She longed for him to. More than she wanted to breathe.

"No." He pulled hard at her shoulders finally dislodging her from her task. "I'm desperate for your warmth. I need to feel your core around me, baby. I need it so damn much."

Az rolled her beneath him. The feel of his weight above her made her feel small and protected. She loved it. "Az, I want you so bad. I was going to come when you came in my mouth."

"I'm going to make you come more than once, Leah."

She raised an eyebrow. "Do you promise?"

He growled—the sound all wolf—and plunged inside her. She cried at out at the

penetration before gasping and closing her eyes as the sensation of his hard length filling her became all there was in the world. She threw her head back in ecstasy.

“Please, Az, more. Don’t make me beg.”

“What if I want you to beg?” His tone was amused, not mocking and she opened her eyes enjoying the play between them.

“I’ll do anything. Just do it. Please.”

He stopped moving and she opened her eyes to stare into the depths of his brown eyes. “You never have to beg me. I’ll always do whatever you want, when you want it. You’re my everything.”

Reaching up to press her lips to his, she tried to show him with passion what no words could ever adequately illustrate. Azriel Kane was her life force. Not only had he saved her from what was sure to be death but he had reawakened her soul and shown her parts of herself she had never known existed until he presented them to her. She needed to be his mate, his wife, his love, and his destiny. Fate had given her these things. Why was she so lucky?

Lifting her rear end, Az pushed her back up against the headboard plunging in and out of her with such force she wanted to scream from the pleasure. Reaching up she grabbed the top of the burnished wood bed frame that she was afraid wouldn’t survive their sexual assault and braced herself for dear life.

Az flipped her over and she used the chance to grab the headboard even more securely. She pushed herself up on her knees, screaming her pleasure as his thrusts forced her closer and closer to the end of the bed.

“Hold on baby, hold on.” Az’s words seemed far away, so lost in the pleasure his movements created in her body.

“More. Gods, Az, give me more.”

“I want to, she-wolf, I want to so badly. Oh hell, Leah, you’re so tight, baby, you’re killing me.”

And just like that she exploded. The world became a dazzling array of colors and sounds, all of it fueled by Azriel and his love for her. Seconds later he shouted her name, finding his own release. In unison, they both collapsed on the bed, Az falling down next to her.

With her eyes closed, she listened to his breathing or rather to the sound of Az trying to catch his breath.

He laughed and she opened her eyes as he kissed her hard on the mouth. “Are you going to awaken me like that every morning?”

“Who knows? I’m like a whole new person since I got my wolf.”

Az pulled his weight off her body and she felt slightly bereft for the loss of his warmth. Not wanting to let go, she rolled next to him to fit herself in the crook of his arm.

“You’re not a ‘new’ person. Your wolf just might be letting you do things you prevented yourself from doing before. It’s kind of easier having them around. They let you know if you’re doing something dumb before you do it. It’s like one more filter from the things we think to the things we actually end up doing.”

Az yawned and she felt a tiny bit guilty about having woken him. “Do you have time to go back to sleep?”

He shook his head. “It was actually a good thing you got me up. I’m leaving for Texas in about three hours.”

She jerked upright. "Don't even tell me you're thinking that you can go without me?"

Looking at her sideways, he smiled. "I kind of hoped you might stay here but the truth is I doubted that you'd agree to it, which is why I told Cullen you were probably coming."

Slightly pacified, she relaxed her back a little bit. Az hadn't been totally foolish. If he'd told her he expected her to stay there would have been a small war between them.

"What is the plan once we get to Texas?"

"Tristan, who is insisting on coming too, wants to do some recon. It's beyond time that we knew exactly how large a number Kendrick's wolf army actually is. Also, he's determined Rex is going to capture us a witch. Then, he wants me to use my barely functional serum that I whipped up to see if I can stop the wolves from shifting."

Az closed his eyes at whatever thoughts were bothering him the most. She sighed and reached out to stroke his cheek.

"You know you're not responsible for all the ills of the world, not even all the problems facing the pack. You had less than twenty-four hours to do the impossible and create a formula to stop what it presumably took Kendrick thirty years to create. I don't even know when you did this."

Opening his eyes to look at her he grinned. "After you snuck off like you were escaping a mob scene, I stayed up most of the night and did the best I can. My brother expects miracles. He has no patience for things that take time. With magic, you say a spell and boom you get your result. The things I do, they take time. Unfortunately, lately that is a luxury we never seem to have."

Using her index finger she jabbed him lightly in the chest. "You're magic too, Az. If it wasn't enough that you can shift from wolf to human and back again with just a thought, you can travel through people's memories."

"I still think it's a bit of an abomination I can do that." He raised his hand when she would argue. "I'm always going to feel this way. It'll just have to be one of those things we agree to disagree about. Any more out of body possessions for you?"

She shook her head and shivered at the memory. There had to be a way to stop the ghosts of the Westervelt pack from invading her body any damn time they felt like it. It had only happened twice but she could already see that it was going to be a problem if it just happened whenever and wherever the ghosts felt like it.

"There is something I have to do before we can go to Texas and it's going to require you finally taking me to that drug store."

He raised an eyebrow. "Hair dye?"

"Exactly."

Oh good. I just think...well, I think we look ridiculous.

Leah silently laughed at her wolf's comment. She couldn't agree more.

* * * *

"Exactly how many brands of this stuff are there?" Leah watched as Az stared at the back of one of the blonde hair dye boxes. She rolled her eyes and continued to try to decide between chestnut brown and ash brown. The color on the models never matched her own exactly. Also, she kept going back and forth about whether or not she should buy some Kool-Aid and put the red streaks back in or give up her little flair for the dramatic

altogether.

Without a sound to warn her, Leah was thrown to the ground, Az's hard body on top of hers. He placed his mouth against her ear and kissed her cheek as he spoke telepathically in her mind.

We are surrounded on all sides by invisible wolves.

She felt her eyes get wide. They can be invisible?

Here they can. On Westervelt they can't anymore but we're on the mainland now.

It's one of the reasons we avoid leaving.

How do you know they're here?

I can smell them. It's one of those weird things I can do because my sense of smell is even stronger than most of the pack. It's slightly acrid and makes my nose itch.

Leah gulped as she realized they were still lying on the floor. That meant that Az thought this situation was going to be very bad. A non-shifter human walked down the aisle staring at them sideways.

Az, there are people here who have nothing to do with this. They could be hurt.

He nodded and swore quietly aloud in her ear. *This has the makings of a disaster. We need to get out of this store, draw them away from the people.*

She knew what he wasn't saying. Given the first chance, he would lead them away from her as well. First things first, however, she knew he was right.

A distraction is what is called for. She bit down on her lip. Follow my lead.

Rolling out from beneath him, keeping her hand tightly on the hair dye, as she had no intention of leaving this disaster without it, she jumped up pushing on the hair dye rack behind her.

With one hard shove it fell over into the aisle behind it. Az jumped off the floor.

"Leah, what the hell are you doing?"

She spoke softly. "Getting us thrown out." She winked at him. "Gods damn it, I wanted red hair dye. None of this is red hair dye." She made sure to keep her voice elevated to the point of almost screeching.

Az looked left and right as the store manager came rushing over. "What exactly is going on here? What have you done?"

She shoved gently on Az's arm. "Head for the door, Az."

The store manager was a tall balding man who had done his best to hide that fact by combing over what little hair he had left. "Did you make this mess?"

Stomping hard on his foot, he gasped as let go of her and stepped backwards. "I certainly did and I will do more until you get me what I want and get it right now."

Turning to Az, Leah noted that the man's face had turned a shade of red closest resembling a tomato. She hoped he wasn't going to have a heart attack. "Aren't you going to do something to control your girlfriend?"

He shook his head, a glint only she could identify as moderate amusement shone in his eyes. They were in serious trouble and Az was doing his best not to laugh at her. Really, between the two of them they were sick in the head. "No, the lady wants her hair dye. I suggest you get whatever color it is that she wants."

"This is unbelievable. I should have known my day was going to be like this. My horoscope said it was better if I stayed in bed." He pointed at the door as he grasped Leah's arm again. "You two are going to have to leave."

"Get your hands off her." Az growled in his throat and Leah realized he wasn't

kidding.

“Alright, we’ll leave. We’re going outside.” She tried to speak slowly and clearly remembering vaguely the general sense of confusion she always had when she’d been one of Kendrick’s wolves. It was crazy that she was setting herself up to be attacked but better she and Az than anyone who was ill-prepared to deal with it.

Following Az’s fast pace, she was hustled out the door by the store manager who muttered the entire time. She couldn’t help but notice the extra shove the man gave her through the threshold as he informed them never to grace his store with their presence again. Well, she smiled, maybe that was what she pretended he said. What he’d actually informed them had been so horrendously rude—not that she could blame him—she never wanted to think about it again.

The angry store manager had just stalked away when Az grabbed her, his embrace much gentler. “Listen to me, we need help. We’re hugely outnumbered. There’s no way we’re getting out of here. I can hold them off. You have to go for help.”

He had to be kidding. “There’s no way I’m leaving you.”

His eyes turned wolf, which almost took her breath away. Az always had such good control of himself. He was clearly on the edge and about to lose it. “Listen to me, I can’t protect you and fight them.” She started to argue but he kept going. “I know you think you can help but you can’t. You’ve had no training. It would all be pure instinct for you and that would only get you so far. We’re too far for telepathy. The pack is going to be leaving in one hour for Texas. Get them.” He kissed her hard as the hairs on the back of her neck stood up. He might be able to smell them but at that moment she knew they were there too.

“If you want to help me, to save me, get help.” With a gentle shove, he moved her forward. “Run, Leah, like you’ve never done before.”

As she moved she saw in horror that in the light of day, in public, in front of all who could see he shifted into his wolf form launching in the air at an invisible wolf

Seconds later, the other wolf became visible. Like two snarling monsters they fought and tore at each other. Only one of those beasts was the man she loved more than she’d ever believed possible. With tears in her eyes, she did the only thing she could do.

She ran.

Chapter Twelve

Still on the street in front of the store, Azriel thanked the gods that magic kept the humans from seeing what happened in front of them. Whatever it was that made it possible for them to be unseen was working overtime right now. It was troubling to him. They could get away with a few minutes of not being detected. But this, this was going on way too long.

How much time had passed? Azriel had no idea. How many wolves had he taken down and how many were still waiting to attack? Those two questions he cared even less about. All he knew was he had to survive. Leah's life depended on it.

He tore at the exposed throat of the wolf in front of him. His body ached and even with all the magic in the world if he lived through this he was going to hurt later. His wolf growled and surged forward waiting for the next attack. Sniffing the air, he looked left and right but no immediate danger presented itself. This was particularly troubling to Az. They were there...he could feel them. So what were they waiting for and where were the human authorities that should have been called to investigate the fighting wolves? Kendrick, he realized. Kendrick must have done something to give himself an edge. No more would they be able to get away because of the presence of humans arriving. His sire had found a way to keep the humans from coming near.

His mind couldn't help asking these questions even as his wolf growled and snarled. This was why he was never the perfect wolf shifter. It was next to impossible to completely turn off his human side even in times of need. Only the one time when he'd run with Leah had he managed to lose himself.

The street was dead silent. No cars travelled down it, no one came out of the stores to see what was going on. Only magic could have caused such an occurrence and it was not anything Az was familiar with.

Just as he'd had the thought his gaze caught movement across the street and as he watched time seemed to slow down. Gods, was it possible? Like a nightmare come to life, the man who had made his very existence hell moved forward to him. Narrowing his eyes, his wolf growled. Az knew it would never be enough to illustrate his true hatred of this movement. Right now the pack might be on its way to Texas but Kendrick Kane was in Maine.

He closed his eyes for two seconds before he opened them. They'd been totally misled. It wasn't likely St. James had lied to them...not with the drug they'd injected him with. It was far more likely Kendrick had manipulated the whole thing, feeding the Senator wrong information. He'd forgotten how good at this his father really was. Cullen Murphy had mated and gone soft; Tristan's best Alpha quality was that he was nothing like Kendrick and would never think these things himself; Theo had too much on his plate; Gabriel was losing it; Rex had never known their father, not really...but Azriel should have remembered. He should have known that they never had the advantage, that every single moment of his existence had been a game to Kendrick.

Why should it have stopped now?

Kendrick had taken them all to "become men". Each one of them when they'd turned twelve had been given their turn. Michael had gone first. It had seemed simple enough.

Az hadn't been alive to see his brothers have their experiences. They'd always seemed so grown up to him, so amazingly capable, the best of the best in terms of shifters, everything he wanted to be that he feared he never actually would be.

After his father had tried to kill him as a child after he'd seen Az's strange magical abilities, things had improved for a while. Kendrick basically left him alone. Except sometimes he would catch his father staring at him when no one else watched. He'd hoped he was proving himself to be worthy of the Kane name, someone his father would want to have around. Stupidly enough, he'd looked forward to their trip away, to give him his first shift.

The whole thing had turned into a living nightmare for Az. Kendrick had set the whole thing up like a giant game. A game Az had lost. As an adult, he could reason that there was no way for him to have won. The odds were impossible for anyone. Even his brothers would have failed it. But then when he'd been so young, so desperate for approval it had sealed his belief that he was worthless to the pack, at least when it came to traits that shifters valued: strength, heroism, stoic acceptance, and the ability to get the job done.

In retrospect, for Kendrick it had been a rather simple plan. His father had told him that there was a woman missing, a human woman, presumed dead. His father knew she wasn't dead. He knew where she was. Somewhere in the state of Maine she had fallen in a hole. She was bleeding to death. The thought still made Az shiver. Humans, his father had told him, they died so damn easily.

He'd held out a piece of cloth. Shift, he told him, smell the material and use your new senses to find her. She had two hours to live. Then he'd walked away. Az had started to shake. He'd never shifted. How did you do that? Wasn't there supposed to be some ceremony, something to draw his wolf out?

For hours, even after he knew the woman was dead, he'd tried desperately to bring his wolf to life. His father had reappeared then. Az had fallen to the ground and sobbed. Please, he'd begged him, please save that woman. Don't let her die because he was inept.

Kendrick had laughed, telling him how easily each of his brothers had made the shift. Then he'd ordered Az's wolf to come to the surface. It had hurt like nothing ever had since. Having done it enough now, he knew it was because Az's wolf had been angry. Even his canine knew you weren't supposed to come into the world like that. His father had suggested he immediately commit ritual suicide since he'd never be a decent shifter.

His wolf had kept him alive and for the first time in his young life he'd looked at his father and saw him for what he was: evil.

Even if it would be a very long time until anyone else would realize it, or at least until they would say it aloud that he wasn't everything he should have been.

So there was no excuse for his having just assumed everything that was happening meant that they were somehow thwarting him. With the pack away, Kendrick could just walk into Westervelt, overcome the pregnant women they'd left behind, and take back the island that housed them for some long, the place that seemed to call magic all on its own.

He sucked in his breath. Was that what Kendrick wanted? The island...

His father stopped walking right in front of him. The man still hadn't aged. How was it possible now that he wasn't Alpha? And how had he lived through their mother's

death?

“Shift Azriel, I want to know you hear everything I say not filtered by the ears of your wolf. A beast that is too strong for the likes of you.”

His wolf growled and lunged. Az tried to hold the canine back but it was fruitless.

I will kill him if you will not.

He sighed. His wolf never understood. *I would kill him if it were that easy. I can't beat him in a physical fight, not as exhausted as I currently am. I won't let him just pick me off. We can outthink him.*

Shifting, he stared at his father with human eyes for the first time since they'd tried to take him down during Cullen's kidnapping. The man looked so much like Tristan and yet he looked completely different too. Where Kendrick's eyes were fathomless pits of fiendish hell, Tristan viewed the world with compassion. Even if he were blind he'd be able to tell just by the way the wind moved around them. Kendrick seemed to think he ran the motion of the earth and the wind seemed to always plow into him like it wanted to knock him down where he stood.

His father regarded him silently for a moment before he spoke. “When this first started and you all betrayed me and your pack, I just wanted it back. I thought I could take it by force.”

When they betrayed *him*? He opened his mouth to speak and shut it again. What was the point?

“Now I don't want that anymore. I don't need you. I have my own wolves. I just want you dead. Sooner or later you'll all be dead. Today is your turn.”

Azriel raised an eyebrow at his father. He'd always thought that gaining an insight into his father would hit him like a truck slamming into a brick wall. It wasn't anything like that. The clouds moved from his eyes and he could see things through clarity he'd never had before. What was different? Well, that was easy. Leah St. James lived in the world. As long as she existed he could do anything, even solve a riddle that was his father.

Why had his father tried to kill him when he was a child and done everything he could to try to destroy him later on?

The answer was simple. He'd done all those things so Azriel could never do what he was about to do.

Without another thought, he placed his hand on his father and with less effort than he expected he forced himself through Kendrick's memories. The pack needed information. If he was going to be killed, the least he could do would be to collect information for Tristan before he went.

Without another person to guide, he could move quickly through the mess that was his father's psyche. In no way did he want to see memories of them as children, old pack politics, or musings on their mother. No, his destination was simple. How many wolves did Kendrick have in his league, where were the witches and what did he have planned for them?

Concrete facts were the name of the game. After all, despite his use of magic for this task, in his heart, Az was a numbers guy and that was the best shifter he could be. His father had obviously thought him completely unable to handle his powers, as if he'd truly been beaten down based on his childhood.

He got the answer to his first question much faster than he expected. Kendrick's

mind seemed desperate to give away his information. Az would have laughed if there had been time. With Claudius dead, there was obviously no one left for his father to brag to. If nothing else, Az was getting to see just how brilliantly devious Kendrick found himself to be.

There were several hundred wolves, all of them being trained to be killers. He'd brought three-dozen with him today. They were 'babies', which meant in Kendrick's mind they were only a few months made. This was a training mission.

Flashes of the sheer number of wolves Kendrick had at his disposal filled Az with a sense of dread. If things stayed as they were, there was no chance for their small pack to triumph against the numbers Kendrick could command.

He didn't have time to dwell on how horrifying the thought was and forced himself forward, commanding Kendrick's memories to show him what he wanted to know.

Where were the witches? He saw images of landscapes all over the world. Damn it. He'd really hoped there was one central location for the coven but it looked as if his father had managed to create an army of witches who didn't need to be put together to command their spells. It wasn't going to be such an easy thing to eliminate that power from Kendrick either.

He rubbed his head, which had started to pound. Would they ever get a break?

Kendrick wasn't a weak man and Az could feel him straining to remove him from his mind. He pushed and pulled at Az's consciousness, while at the same time digging his hands into Az's grip on his arm as if removing their physical proximity would eliminate the connection.

Maybe if Az had spent more time practicing with this ability he would know if the touch actually mattered. There was no time to find out right now. What were his father's plans for them? That was easy to find. Endless conversations, even Kendrick muttering aloud showed him definitively his father hadn't lied, he intended to kill them one at a time and painfully until he could take back the island uncontested.

So he'd been right, it had been all about the island. Now that was an answer he could use, why was Westervelt so special?

Az felt himself shoved out of his father's memories. Damn, it looked as if he wasn't going to answer that question today.

That's good; I want to kill him now.

He had to agree; this time he liked his wolf's bloodthirstiness.

As the light hit him, he looked around the street. They were still alone, only Kendrick's furious, strained expression meeting him where he stood.

"I should have killed you at birth."

Az nodded. "You probably should have. It's kind of convenient, isn't it?"

"What?" He could hear the growl in his father's voice and knew he was moments from shifting.

"That I have this particular, what did you call it? Oh yes, *aberration* and I can see through your memories. It's almost like when fate was dishing out powers it knew we were going to need something to beat you, like you're being set up for failure."

His father never responded as he shifted into his wolf form. Az made a quick note that the white light that accompanied their shifts was absent from his father and that he shifted more like a created wolf than a magical one. His limbs didn't reshape as seamlessly.

It didn't matter. This time Az needed to let his wolf take control or he would fail.
Just give yourself to me, Azriel. I can take care of you. I have never let you down.

It was true. Other than Leah, his wolf was the one creature on the planet who had never asked him to perform miracles that were impossible, who hadn't judged him for being able to do magic when only women should have that gift, and who hadn't tried at one time or another to kill him. Maybe it was time to let someone else run his life for a few minutes.

He ceded control. Actually, it was kind of a relief. His wolf lunged forward at Kendrick's wolf. He didn't have to think about it all. In no way was he more capable than his wolf at handling a fight. The two wolves tore at each other, each gaining and losing ground as they struggled. Blood flew in the air. Was it his? He couldn't tell and he didn't want to push his consciousness too far into his wolf's to find out. When this was over, assuming he lived, he would know one way or another.

His father backed up a few steps. Was it possible? Was his father retreating from him?

Just then he caught a sound from behind him. It was footsteps, a lot of footsteps heading his way and it wasn't his pack. Oh hell, Kendrick must have called for reinforcements.

His wolf looked left just in time to be pounced on by three of Kendrick's now quite visible wolves. He hit the ground hard, his head spinning. It was a tribute to just how injured he must be that even with his wolf running the show he was aware of how dizzy he truly was.

Gods, this was probably the end.

He watched out of the corner of his eye as his father ran away. Growling, his wolf did his best to leap to his feet despite stumbling once. The created wolves tried to stop him but he only had eyes for Kendrick. No way could he just let the other man get away, not this time.

Az! We're coming. Leah's voice filled him with such peace.

I think it might be too late, she-wolf. I'm sorry to have failed you.

He heard her intake of breath in his head. *No, don't you dare give up. We're almost there.*

Is Tristan there with you?

He is. The whole pack is with me.

Tell him Kendrick is here. He gasped as his wolf's mouth filled with blood. Quickly, because he knew there wasn't much time, he told her what he'd learned from Kendrick's memories and hoped she was relaying the message to Tristan.

There wasn't much time. He dodged one of the other wolves and lunged at his father. Together they rolled down the street. He could barely see. Everything had gone blurry. His father had him in a stranglehold, the other wolf's teeth digging into his throat, cutting off the airway.

Like an exploding comet, another wolf landed on top of them pushing Kendrick's wolf off of Az's. He'd know that sent anywhere. It was Gabriel and he was in a rage. Pieces of Kendrick's fur flew everywhere. Distantly, he thought he heard his father yelp and whimper in pain. He wished he could see what was happening. Everything felt as if it was moving slowly like he was moving away from where the action was happening to somewhere else. Damn, he thought remotely, he'd failed again. Once more, even at the

end of his life, his brother had to rescue him.

Don't you dare think that.

It was Tristan's voice in his head. How had he heard that thought? Was he broadcasting?

Every damn thing that you're thinking, you're wide open for all to hear.

Tristan appeared by his side still in his human form. Sounds of fighting were everywhere. His vision had tunneled, only Tristan was visible to him now. He took a deep breath, longing for Leah.

We made her stay back a ways. They're on their way now. Ashlee is here and she's going to heal you. Hold on a little bit.

Tristan knelt down next to him patting his between his ears. It was a gentle moment, not something Az had seen Tristan do lately. He'd almost forgot that out of all of them Tristan had always been considered the most sensitive, which used to make them laugh since it meant they were all pretty pathetic in terms of emotional stability.

You think you're dying and your last thoughts are to criticize me. Nice.

Az coughed as he forced the change on himself one more time. He didn't want to die in his wolf form. It would be too odd for his family to have to carry his wolf body through town. His last action could be one of consideration. Maybe it would win him points on the other side.

"How many times do I have to tell you that you're not dying today?"

He tried to laugh and choked instead. "You're my Alpha and you will it so, is that it?"

"Exactly." He could see the concern in Tristan's eyes as his brother looked off in the distance at the fight going on around them.

"Why aren't you fighting?"

Tristan grinned, the Kane side smile that meant he was about to make a joke.

"Someone has to guard your sorry ass."

Az groaned and he wished it were at the joke as his vision blurred. "You and your new expressions, they're going to get you beat up by some human." He could barely make out Tristan's face. "Cullen wouldn't let you?"

"I hate when they enact pack law. What is the point of being Alpha if they never let me fight?"

Leah's scent spread over him like the first taste of spring after a long winter. Before he could blink she was by his side. Unfortunately, he couldn't see her.

"I don't think he can see you. Move over here where I am. He'll make you out."

How had Tristan known that? Oh that's right he was broadcasting all of his thoughts.

"Az, listen to me." Oh her voice was like music, like the sweetest songbird, like Beethoven. She laughed and shook her head, tears in her eyes. "I'm perfectly prepared to follow you to the next life but not today. I had a thought on the way over here and Ashlee thinks it's plausible. I have a way with spirits. They come and take possession of my body. I'm going to hold yours here while Ash fixes you."

"How are you?" He realized for a second that he'd never finished his thought. It didn't matter. Blackness became his existence.

Chapter Thirteen

Leah felt as if she burned from the inside out. She had felt it—like a butterfly flapping its wings on her eyelashes—the second Az’s soul had left his body. She’d reached out and grabbed it with her metaphysical hands. Now she had to hold it in place. Her whole body buzzed and her ears rang. It wasn’t easy keeping his soul earthbound when it wanted to move on to the next place.

“Almost done, Ash?” She must have asked ten times already and she didn’t care if it annoyed anyone, she was just going to keep on asking.

“One more minute.” Ashlee looked pale, her hands over Az’s body as she quietly chanted words Leah couldn’t understand. Hells bells, she didn’t care if the woman was reciting her grocery list as long as it healed Az’s body enough to put his soul back into it.

Tristan placed a strong hand on her back. She wanted to flinch but supposed it wasn’t a good idea to recoil from the Alpha’s touch.

No, we love our Alpha.

Her wolf was, at least, resolute.

“He always thinks of himself as so unworthy.” Tristan’s voice sounded rough, like sandpaper being pulled tightly over a wall of wood. “We could hardly run the pack without his skills. Now we find out he’s hiding this magical ability, one he technically couldn’t have, but gods know we need.”

Didn’t the man have any idea how hard it was to speak at this moment? He wanted her to discuss emotional issues on top of that? “Tristan, my Alpha...”

He interrupted her. “Don’t talk. I just want you to listen.”

Okay, she could do that. “As if he hasn’t done enough, he takes on our father and a contingency of his wolves all by himself as he manages to collect pivotal data for the pack’s survival.”

She nodded. He had done all those things.

“I want you to know that whatever he thinks of himself, how little he values himself, we think him integral. He’s my brother. I was grown when he was born. Theo and I are close in age but Az was, in some ways, like my first child. I think he’s extraordinary.”

She knew he didn’t want her to speak but felt she had to say something to that huge statement. Opening her mouth, she never got the chance as Ashlee finally finished. Exhausted, the other woman slumped to the floor caught easily by her mate.

Leah’s job wasn’t quite done yet. Closing her eyes she willed her hands to move Az’s soul from her keeping back into his own body. It was like carrying lead. As her arms sagged under the pressure, she promised herself she would never volunteer to do this job unless the situation was dire. Messing around with souls was more than she wanted to handle.

Placing her beloved’s soul back in his body, she stared at his face for a moment before she let herself fall over his prostrate form. It was okay, she decided, if she just took a little nap...

* * * *

Leah moved slightly to the left to get a better view of Az's profile. She'd been working on getting him in all the different poses she could come up with. It was difficult considering he'd been asleep for twenty-four hours in a bed. Maybe she saw him through the eyes of love but she thought every movement of his REM sleep fascinating.

As if on command, his eyes flew open. Clearing his throat, he looked at her sideways. "How long have I been out of it?"

"For twenty-four hours. You woke up briefly when we first brought you back here and then you were out again." It had been hell. For the first few hours she'd thought his soul was about to take off again. She didn't want him to know that so she stood up before he could get too good an idea of her thoughts.

He cocked his head to the side. "You dyed your hair. It's not multicolored anymore, just two of them."

"You're so articulate." She laughed. "Yes, it is ash brown and Kool-Aid red." Hell, making the Kool-Aid and rinsing her hair with it had eaten up an hour of her worrying. "You like it?"

"I'd like you with a bag over your head but yes you look gorgeous, as always."

Standing up from her chair, she moved to the side of the bed. "You do know that you've probably turned the tide in this war. We know so much more now because of you. Tristan and Cullen have been strategizing all day and because of you the pack didn't needlessly go off to Texas leaving Westervelt unprotected."

He sat up in the bed. She didn't miss how he winced. "Is there a reason you are telling me how wonderful I am?"

"Because you thought you were going to die and all you could think was that you'd failed everyone. Tristan says he couldn't run the pack without you."

She kissed his nose loving the way his big brown eyes glowed in the light. "I don't care what anyone thinks of me, except you. I know how smart I am, the things I value about myself are not the things that other people necessarily find important in this pack, but I'm still proud of doing them."

"Az," she rolled her eyes. How could he be so blasé about what he'd done? "You took on half a wolf pack and your father all by yourself."

"And you held my soul here on this plane of existence. I guess we're both extraordinary."

She kissed him for his arrogance, loving that about him too. "What happens now?"

His eyes twinkled as he pulled her back down on him again. "We could go away together for a few months and come back when you're pregnant."

She nodded. "Or we could stay here and help the pack plan for the end of this nightmare." Moving slowly she reached out with her tongue and licked his bottom lip. "And just see what happens with the pregnancy. If the others have managed to get knocked up while they hung around here, I'm sure you and I can find a way to accomplish that as well. We seem to do *that* just perfectly."

He laughed aloud and the sound warmed her inside. "All right. Sounds like a plan. Every day with you, wherever we are, is magic."

The End

About the Author:

As a teenager, Rebecca would hide in her room to read her favorite romance novels when she was supposed to be doing her homework. She hopes that these days, her parents think it was worth it.

She is the mother of three adorable boys, and she is fortunate to be married to her best friend. They live in northern New Jersey and try not to freeze too badly during the winter months.

A hardcore fan of science fiction, fantasy, and the paranormal, Rebecca tries to use all of these elements in her writing. She's been told she's a little bloodthirsty so she hopes that when you read her work you'll enjoy the action-packed ride that always ends in romance. In her world, anything is possible, anything can happen, and you should suspect it probably will.

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