

Charming
The Alpha

LILIANA
RHODES

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by

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Chapter One

"I'm leaving in a few minutes, Mom," Hannah called out.

Dressed in her favorite outfit for luck, dark skinny jeans, worn brown leather boots, and a light blue chenille sweater with navy and white stars, she peered out the small oval window that faced the street of the old cottage she was born in.

The full moon hung large and low in the sky, lighting the road. She was

almost ready to leave and her palms began feeling a little moist as she thought about it, but she was running out of time if she wanted to see Pea.

As she finished braiding her long auburn hair, Hannah Crane wrapped an elastic around the end hoping that if her hair was neat, her grandmother wouldn't give her such a hard time about cutting it. Normally she wore it loose and wild to lengthen her round face. She loved feeling her hair sway against the middle of her back, but Pea had a hatred for long hair and Hannah desperately needed her focused on this short visit.

"Here, wear this," Eliza Crane, Hannah's mother said as she handed her a navy and red hooded cloak. "I just

finished it and it's going to get chilly tonight."

"Its just going to slow me down," Hannah said as she slipped her arms into the hidden sleeves.

"I don't want you to catch cold. Plus maybe you can hide your hair in it. I know she's been on you to cut it. She did the same thing to me when I was your age."

"Did you do it? Did you give in to her? I'm only twenty-two. Short hair is better when you're older," she said as she admired her mother's jet black shoulder length hair. "Besides, I can't pull off short hair."

Hannah was pretty sure her mother had been one of those girls she grew up

envying. She thought of the women who could do anything to their hair and still look gorgeous, and knew her mother fit in with them perfectly. Eliza's beauty was a regular topic in the town of Leeds Point, NJ and Hannah grew up hearing about it often.

The only time her mother's appearance bothered her was when people speculated about her father. They loved pointing out she looked nothing like her mom. With Eliza's warm smile and delicate features, Hannah understood everyone's infatuation with her mother. Even dressed in an old t-shirt and sweatpants like she wore now, her mother still looked stunning.

"I did give in," Eliza said quietly.

"It didn't make her happy though."

"Why not?"

"She said it was too late, the damage had been done."

"What did she mean by that?"

"Oh you know Pea, she's always dramatic. I was pregnant with you when I cut my hair. She thinks no one will look at us if we have short hair," Eliza said laughing nervously as she looked at her watch.

"Hmm that sounds about right," Hannah said, letting the subject drop. She didn't have the time to ask and she knew from experience that Eliza wouldn't say anything more.

"Are you going to tell her about school?" Eliza asked.

Hannah groaned and rolled her eyes. "College is the last thing I want to talk about, but you know how it is, Mom. I'm...I guess I'm feeling lost. And Pea has always been the one to point me in the right direction."

"Then maybe you should've spoken to her before you started cutting classes."

"Please don't start, Mom," Hannah said as she looked out the window. "Just be glad I graduated. I don't have the time to talk about this right now. Unless you want to come with me. You know Pea would be thrilled to see you."

"No, it's alright, honey. You go ahead. I'm not in the right frame of mind to see Pea anyway. Send her my love

though."

Hannah nodded at her mother but didn't say anything. She couldn't remember the last time Eliza joined her on a visit to Pea. Now wasn't the time to bring that up though. She could see just the mention of when she was pregnant made her mother shut down.

Hannah had a lot of questions about her father, but she never drummed up the courage to ask. Hearing her mom say she cut her hair was the closest she'd come to talking about him in years.

"Don't wait up," Hannah said.

After kissing her mother on the cheek, Hannah stepped outside and leaned against the heavy, white-washed wooden door of their cottage. The tiny

home had been in their family since the days of the pilgrims. It barely had enough space for the two women, but Hannah loved it.

The full moon made the grassy path curving between the tall pine trees easier to see, but Hannah didn't need it. She followed it like she did every full moon, exactly like her mother taught her years ago. She enjoyed these visits with Pea, even if they were short.

Hannah breathed the cool air in deeply, happy for fall to finally arrive in South Jersey. It had been a very humid summer and running through the woods made her easy prey for blood thirsty mosquitos. She didn't have to worry about them tonight though, and she never

gave any thought to the other creatures in the forest.

Granted, the last thing she wanted was to run into a "damned wolf", as her mother and Pea always referred to them, but that was only because they were rude, dirty, uneducated creatures. At least that's what they always told her.

When her mother and grandmother decided it was better for her to stay home, than go away to college, Hannah simply obeyed. It never occurred to her to ask why they were so protective because they always had been. Staying home cost her a social life but kept them happy. That's all she really cared about anyway. But now she was stuck trying to figure out what to do with her life.

As she approached the clearing, she slowed down to gather stones. Thankful for the unusually bright moon, she found more stones than she usually did. She was grateful for that. There were times when she only had a enough stones for a small circle and she had to stand the entire time. She preferred sitting, especially since it sometimes took Pea a long time to arrive.

Placing the stones in the center of the clearing, directly in the moon's path, Hannah waited for it to reach the right height. Spotting a frog, she remembered how much Pea hated them and quickly carried it to the base of a tree.

With the moon clearly above, she completed the circle with her seated

cross-legged inside. Hannah closed her eyes. Next she breathed in deeply and slowly let it out, letting everything on her mind go as she focused on a memory of her grandmother.

She laughed to herself remembering the winking game they played from the time she was a child, until Pea's deathbed six years ago. Even with the monthly visits Hannah missed her grandmother more than she'd ever admit. The small house she and her mother shared wasn't the same without her.

"I see you still haven't cut your hair."

Hannah smiled hearing Pea's voice before opening her eyes. Pea wore the same yellow housecoat she always wore

since her death. It was one of her favorites during her life so it didn't surprise Hannah at all. Pea's hair was still died black and cut short with curls like Elizabeth Taylor's in the fifties. Hannah knew her grandmother would be pleased if she cut her hair that short as well.

Might as well get this over with, she thought. It was 3am, the witching hour as superstitious folk liked to call it, but it was always a favorite time of night for Hannah and her family. Unfortunately it meant she didn't have a lot of time before the sun began to rise and Pea had to go back.

"Come on, Pea," Hannah groaned. "You know how much I hate short hair.

Maybe I'll cut it when I'm older like Mom."

"You're stubborn just like her."

"And she's stubborn just like you."

Pea laughed, her full figure jiggling just like Hannah remembered and she suddenly longed to be held by her and feel Pea's warmth and softness.

"Don't you dare do that, young lady! Don't you dare cry. We're lucky. Most people don't get time like this after their loved one has gone to the other side."

"I know, Pea," Hannah said swallowing hard. "I just...miss you."

"I miss you too, doll. You still need to cut your hair though. Let people see that beautiful face. You have my eyes and I like to think mine glow like

emeralds," Pea said as she blinked dramatically, her hands clasped by her cheek.

Laughing, Hannah's tears still spilled onto her cheeks anyway. Pea had a way of feigning vanity that always cheered Hannah up. Pushing aside her sadness, she figured she should get to what she wanted to talk to Pea about before their time ran out.

"Pea," Hannah said hesitantly. "I finished college—"

"That's wonderful! I wish I could go to your graduation."

"I know, but please just let me talk. I really need you right now."

"What's wrong? You've worked so hard. I'm sure—"

"Grandmother, please!" she interrupted. "I didn't work hard. I hardly went to class. I just didn't care. Now I'm supposed to get a job and I have no idea what I want to do."

"What do you mean? You used to do so well in school," Pea's voice drifted off as if it was time for her to go. She looked up at the moon still brightly lighting the clearing, then back at Hannah with a confused look on her face. "They wouldn't come here, they know better than to leave their territory."

Hannah looked around. "They? There's no one here. What are you talking about?"

"Hannah!" Pea said before fading briefly. "Please, stop being so damned

stubborn and cut your hair." She appeared solid for a moment. "It's for your own good!"

As Pea faded a look of concern then anger crossed her features. She glared at a point in the trees as Hannah leapt to her feet, staying within the circle.

"Pea! Wait!" Hannah called after her. But it was too late, she was gone.

Turning towards the area Pea stared at as she disappeared, Hannah realized it was where she placed the frog. *Geez, I know she hates frogs but they never bothered her this much before.* She broke the circle and began walking over to the tree she set the frog by, when she stopped. Something was in the woods.

Squinting, she tried to get a better

look figuring it was just a deer, a raccoon, or even a skunk. Slowly, she took a step closer hoping to not scare it away. Large yellow eyes suddenly flashed at her from within the trees.

Stunned, she gasped and stepped back. Accidentally stepping onto one of the stones she collected, she twisted her ankle and fell fast to the ground. Unsure what the eyes belonged to, she struggled to get up, thinking she should run, and ignoring the shooting pain in her leg as a large grey wolf emerged from the forest, baring its teeth.

Chapter Two

The moonlight reflected on his fangs and the silver sheen of his coat. It was enough to paralyze her for a moment. She had never seen such an enormous animal before. Unsure if she couldn't move out of fear or amazement, she willed herself to stand despite the pain in her right ankle.

"No, sit. You're hurt."

The sound was something between an animal's and a man's growl. Whipping her head around towards the wolf, she saw it was gone. In his place was a part wolf, part man creature in mid-transformation. She watched in

amazement as he stood on two legs, his snout shortening into a nose, his ears shifted along his head as they rounded into a human's ears, and lastly his fur faded.

Left in the wolf's place was a man. A naked man. One so handsome and muscular she couldn't help but stare. He was the hottest man she'd ever seen. As her eyes slowly traveled up his long legs, she shyly glanced over his impressive manhood before continuing over his chiseled torso, broad shoulders, then finally his lightly bearded face.

His eyes were no longer yellow but a dark blue the color of the night sky. His dirty blond hair was wavy, cropped close around his ears, but longer on the

top. Lastly she noticed the reflection of the moon against his perfect teeth as he grimaced at her. This was the first werewolf she had ever seen and she realized she had missed out on a lot.

"The forest is a dangerous place for a human," he said.

"I'm pretty sure you're the only danger in these woods," she snapped at him.

The man stood shamelessly, as if his nudity didn't matter. Hannah tried but couldn't keep herself from looking at him, especially *there*.

"You shouldn't be here. Where's your friend? I followed one scent but heard two voices. Stupid humans," he muttered.

"You heard Pea?" Hannah asked surprised.

Her entire life she had been ridiculed for the voices and people she saw that others couldn't. It wasn't until she was older that her mother and Pea taught her how to control it and how to protect herself in case others responded when she summoned. That's why she used the circle. But no one other than her family had ever been able to hear the voices she heard before.

"Pea? Whatever. The older woman. Of course I heard her. I hear lots of things," he grinned and flashed yellow wolf eyes at her.

"But she's..." *Dead.*

Hannah couldn't bring herself to say

the word. She hoped this rude asshole of a gorgeous man would magically read her mind and leave her alone. Then she would hobble home once the throbbing in her ankle stopped.

"I don't have time for this. I should leave you here to learn your fate," he said huskily as his gaze briefly softened. "Many wolves wouldn't be as honorable towards a lost beautiful human such as yourself."

"I'm not lost!" Hannah replied, trying to stand again. "I know exactly how to get home."

"But you can't, can you?" He said slowly as he stepped closer. Pulling his eyes from her, he looked at the ground and the stones beside her. "Witch," he

whispered. "I should've known. The most arrogant and careless of all humans."

"I'm not careless. I wouldn't have tripped if you didn't sneak up on me."

"You don't know what exists in these woods. If you know what's good for you, you won't return."

He helped her onto her feet as if she weighed nothing. His touch sent a shock through her body that ended with a throbbing between her legs. Hannah didn't know what came over her, but she felt a yearning for him, like hunger or worse. As if she didn't have him she would starve.

He inhaled deeply, still supporting her. His eyes flashed yellow and he let

out a low growl. "How? What witchcraft have you done?" He demanded as he breathed her in again.

"I...I just talked to my grandmother," she said confused, her head swimming.

"I'll help you home. This is no place for you."

He stepped back as Hannah struggled to keep her balance. Before her eyes his torso lengthened, fur sprouted, and his angelic face transformed into that of a wolf. Almost the size of a horse, Hannah realized how enormous he really was now that he was standing beside her. Amazed, she didn't know what to do next.

The wolf grunted, then lowered his head as he pushed between her legs,

forcing her to slide onto his back. Understanding he planned to carry her home, she wrapped her hands into the thick fur of his wide neck and held on tight.

"The small house at the edge of the woods. By the path," she whispered into his pointed, black and white fuzzy ear.

He sprung forward, leaping into the air, then raced along the grassy path she followed earlier. The cool air rushed past her, her heart beat wildly, and she felt like she couldn't breathe. She wanted to pinch herself to make sure this wasn't a dream, but she was too afraid to let go of him.

In the back of her mind she thought about him as the man, helping her up,

and all her lust came back to her. Pressing her face against his neck, she felt the wolf's muscles working beneath her as he made short work of the long path. Thinking about his muscles flexing and stretching when he walked earlier as a man, she let out a soft sigh. As if in reply, he growled ferociously, bringing her back to the trees racing past.

Slowing down they reached the edge of the forest. With her hands still clinging to the thick fur around his neck, Hannah sat up, her hair loosened from the ride, and pointed to the aqua clapboard cottage in the middle of the quiet street. The house was dark except for an electric candle in the oval window that faced the street. Hannah

knew her mother had gone to bed long ago. She never stayed up the nights Hannah visited Pea.

As she slid off the wolf's back in front of her porch, she used the white wooden railing to steady herself, putting her weight on her good leg. The wolf shifted back to its human form and grabbed Hannah by the arm as he lowered his face to her level.

"Never again, you understand? Stay out of the forest," he growled.

She wanted to speak, to tell him she'd keep visiting Pea no matter what, but his intense gaze made her speechless. The warmth of his breath on her skin made her want to feel the heat of his naked body against her. She felt

wanton and lustful, two words she'd never use to describe herself, at least not until tonight.

His dark blue eyes flashed yellow. Quickly pulling her closer, his lips were on hers, his head tilted. As his tongue pushed into her mouth, she reached up to slip her fingers into his hair, hoping he wouldn't stop kissing her. As his silky scruff gently scratched her chin, she attempted to press herself against him.

"No!" He barked before turning away, his eyes still glowing. "Damn human temptress. Stay out of the woods!"

Before Hannah could say anything, he was gone. She stared at the forest, disappointed in his leaving so quickly.

Wondering if he was watching her from the shadows, she silently cursed her ankle for keeping her homebound. She waited in the moonlight for a sign, some proof he was really there but none came.

Giving up, she entered her home and hobbled over to the kitchen table where she removed her boots. A lock of her hair fell into her face and she pushed it aside and over her ear like she always did. *Wait a second*, she thought. Moving her hand in front of her face again, she realized she smelled like him, a combination of the woods and fresh air mixed with his natural musk.

As she thought about him, she smiled. She couldn't explain it, but there was something about this man she found

irresistible. Something more than just his incredible looks or amazing kiss.

Removing her cloak, she sniffed it happy to find his scent there too. She carried her cloak to the couch, draped it around her, and willed herself to dream about the rugged werewolf.

Chapter Three

"Hannah, wake up," Hannah's mom said as she shook her shoulder gently. "Go to bed. The couch is no place to sleep, its uncomfortable."

Hannah slowly opened her eyes as she tried to remember what happened the night before. *Did I dream that?* Rubbing her eyes she caught the werewolf's scent again and sat up. Her mother paced the room as she spoke, reminding Hannah of a caged animal as Eliza kept her footing within the confines of the faded floral throw rug. Hannah watched her, her hands punctuating her sentences as she rambled on about things Hannah didn't

care about enough to listen to.

Glancing towards the picture window that faced the backyard, she wondered what time it was. The sky had the gentle glow of morning. She hated morning. And why was her mom already up?

It wasn't like her mother to wear the same thing twice in a row, but Hannah was sure those were the same sweats she wore when Hannah left to visit Pea the night before. Giving her mom a closer look, she also realized she had traces of makeup on. She never wore makeup unless she went out. Add to that the nervous babble her mother did after every full moon for the past few years.

The pacing confused her too.

Hannah couldn't remember when that began, but it was long enough for her to find it endearing instead of worrisome. She wondered if it had to do with her visits to Pea, but she knew what would happen if she asked. As Hannah wrapped her cloak around her like a blanket, she tuned back in to her mother's yammering.

"Pea would've killed me if I slept on the couch. And what's on your cloak? Is that mud? Oh Hannah, can't you be a little more careful? Give it to me and I'll throw it in the wash."

"No! Just leave it alone," Hannah said then realized her mother was eyeballing her suspiciously. "I mean, I'll take care of washing it myself."

"Suit yourself. How was Pea? She solve every problem you ever had?"

"Give it a rest, Mom. Why you haven't visited her? I'm sure she'd love to see you."

"Are you hungry? How about some pancakes?"

Hannah's mother always changed the subject whenever she was asked why she didn't visit Pea. Sometimes Hannah used it to her advantage, but this wasn't one of those times. Today she had something else on her mind.

"Mom, have you ever met a wolf?"

"A wolf? No, of course not. Why? Did you hear differently? Because you know how the townspeople like to gossip. They'll talk about anything. Even

if its not true."

"I didn't hear anything, relax. I'm just curious. I mean we've lived here my entire life, I've heard you and Pea talk about them so I know they're around, but I've never seen one."

"Well you're not missing anything. They're wolves," Eliza said, shrugging. "Nothing more than over sized dogs. And they are dogs, trust me on that."

"Dogs are great. They're faithful, loving, and playful."

"Is that what this is about? You want a pet? We can get a goldfish or hamster if you want."

"Will you stop?" Hannah said exasperated. "I'm not five anymore. And the wolves are more than just dogs."

They're people too. But how is that? How is it possible? Maybe I've met a wolf before and didn't even know it."

"Oh you'd know it," she said as she stopped pacing. "Now tell me what Pea said."

"Stop trying to change the subject, Mom. I'm allowed to be curious about the strange beings in our town."

"Well then you're going to have to accept that I don't have all the answers. Werewolves keep to themselves, we keep to ourselves. Its better that way. There are fables and folklore of course, but who knows what's true. All I know is that they're horrible, selfish creatures. If you ever do meet one, just keep walking. Its the best thing you can do."

Eliza wrung her hands together as she finished speaking. Hannah knew something was up but she was too tired to probe. With the cloak still wrapped around her, she kissed her mom on the cheek and smelled something familiar. Her mother smelled like fresh air, like a werewolf. *That's not right*, she thought.

"You just got home, didn't you?" She asked her mom. "Why would you hide that from me?"

"I didn't want you to worry. I was getting ready for bed when I noticed you were asleep on the couch."

"Where'd you go?"

"Oh, no where. Just met an old friend for drinks."

"And is this old friend a

werewolf?"

"What? No! You don't know what you're talking about? And what if it was? But it's not," Eliza said nervously, before studying her daughter's face. "And how would you know what a wolf smells like?"

Hannah wasn't ready for the tables to turn. She wanted to keep her encounter private for a little longer, especially from her mother who would only give her grief.

"Just a lucky guess," she said hoping her mother wanted to drop it as much as she did. "Pinky has told me some things. That's all."

"Oh. Well, ok then. I'm going to bed. Good night, Hannah."

"Good night, Mom."

Chapter Four

Hannah couldn't stop thinking about the wolf. But if she was going to be honest, she couldn't stop thinking about the naked man. After convincing herself she'd still be obsessing about him even if he was dressed, she grew more curious about werewolves and wondered how she could find out more since her mother was no help. She couldn't believe that after all these years of living in Leeds Point, that she never thought to pay attention.

Thinking about her best friend, Hannah knew she was the best person to answer all of her questions. Pinky

Smythe immersed herself in the offbeat history of their town and its ties to the occult. Not wanting to hear the horrors of how her ancestors were treated, Hannah purposefully kept herself ignorant. But now she needed to find out about this werewolf. Plus, if she didn't tell someone about him she might explode.

Grabbing her cell phone, she pressed her friend's name without needing to look. Pinky answered with the sound of children playing in the background.

"Hey girlie! I was just thinking about you!" Pinky said.

"You got a minute? I wanted to chat."

"What Hannah? You still there?" Pinky asked. "I can't hear you over the kids. If you can hear me, just come over."

Hannah hung up and slipped her phone into jeans pocket before heading out the door. Pinky lived down the road in an old colonial that dated back to the 1700's. Part of the house was used as a nursery school, the rest of the home housed Pinky, her parents, and her much younger brother and sister.

Pinky's house was Hannah's home away from home. Most of the children in Leeds Point went to the Smythe's nursery school at one point or another, and Hannah and her mother weren't any different. The school was the oldest

business in the small town.

Walking behind the pale yellow shingled building, Hannah saw her friend surrounded by a group of small children while she read to them. Pinky was tall and slim. People always told her she should be a model, but she'd reply she'd rather have root canal than be a walking mannequin.

Wearing her usual dark pink high top Converse, jeans, and a loose fitting plum t-shirt, Pinky tightened her pony tail while she read one of the children's favorite fairy tales. Pinky looked up, pushed her square plastic framed glasses up her nose a bit, and waved at Hannah without skipping a beat in the story. Hannah sat crossed legged on the ground

next to the kids until the story was over and they ran to the jungle gym, leaving her and Pinky behind.

"Did you see Pea last night? How's she doing?"

"Same as always."

"Bitch to you about your hair?"

Pinky asked.

"Yup, like I said, same as always," Hannah said grinning, thankful death hadn't changed her grandmother.

"I'm telling you there's a reason for it. I'm sure of it."

"Nah, she's just nuts, and you're superstitious. Speaking of, I want to talk to you."

"Is something wrong? You never say that, we just talk."

"It's just that I know you're into all this weird stuff, like the history of Leeds Point and the strange stuff you hear about. You know, like occult stuff."

Pinky laughed. "'Occult stuff', says the witch who visits her dead grandmother every full moon," she teased.

"Yeah yeah, I get it. And I know it's crazy that I never paid attention to anything, but I think I've always been so accustomed to my own weirdness, that I never paid attention to the other strange stuff that's around us."

"Just spill it, Hannah. What are you getting at? And why are you acting so weird?"

"I met a guy last night," Hannah said

hesitantly, unable to believe what she was about to say. "Except he wasn't really a guy."

Pinky leaned forward, ready to jump out of her seat from excitement. "What was he? A ghost? A vampire? I haven't heard of any of them around, but there's always the first."

"A werewolf."

"Oooh shifters are so hot! I think the wolves are the best personally, but I definitely wouldn't turn down a bear, or even a lion."

"There are werebears and werelions too? And you've met some? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Jeez, Hannah. You never wanted to hear about anything supernatural before

so I just kept my mouth shut. I think Leeds Point is some kind of vortex and all these beings are attracted to coming here. I mean, I don't think there are that many shifters around, there are territories you know. But we've got a decent selection of them. Remember that guy Louis that I was crazy about? He was a werelion."

"Get out! I had no idea! Is that why you never let us meet?"

"Yeah, he was very open about it and I know how you are, you like your bubble. There's even a bar that caters to shifters, Night Shift. But please, tell me about the wolf you met. I'm dying to hear everything! What's his name?"

Hannah blinked. How could she not

know his name? And he knew where she lived. What was wrong with her?

"Crap, Pinky. I don't know his name. It's not like you think anyway. He was pissed I was in the woods. Said it was dangerous for me," Hannah rolled her eyes.

"But? Come on, I know there's a but."

"But I can't stop thinking about him or his kiss! He was perfect. Like one of those Greek statues. Except with a bigger package."

"You saw his..." Pinky asked, her eyes opened wide.

"He shifted from wolf to human so yeah."

"Wow. And he didn't try to cover

up?"

Hannah shook her head. "My mom and Pea always warned me about them. I'll be honest, I didn't think they existed. I thought it was just another crazy superstition of theirs. But I don't know what it is. I can't get him out of my mind. I need to see him again. I'd go back in the forest, but with the new moon approaching it'll be too dark. I guess I'll have to wait."

"Fuck that, I'll take you to Night Shift. I know the bouncer and he'll let us in. Wolf night is Thursdays. I say we go and maybe if we're lucky your wolf will be there. I know that's a few days away, but it beats waiting for weeks."

Hannah nodded, her mind spun from

agreeing. It wasn't like her to hang out at bars, especially not to look for a guy. But this wasn't just any guy. She had to see this man again. And she was damn sure she was going to get his name this time.

Chapter Five

The street was deserted except for a one story shack at the end of the block. The building tilted a bit to one side as if it would collapse with a strong wind. On the front of the dark grey shack was a green neon sign that said *Night Shift*. Surrounded by auto body shops and a now defunct processing plant, the bar was tucked away in a part of town Hannah had never been to.

Pinky parked her small sunshine yellow Toyota in the lot and stepped out of the car while Hannah quickly applied lipgloss using the mirror in the sun visor. As she exited the car, Pinky took in a

deep breath, then huffed it out and smiled as it made a cloud in the air.

"I love when it gets cold like this," Pinky said as she look over at Hannah.

"Wait a sec, you're not wearing that cloak are you?"

Hannah looked down at herself, the navy cloak her mother made her billowed around her, hiding her lucky outfit. Normally she wouldn't wear the same thing twice when seeing a guy, but he didn't see her lucky star sweater, so she figured it was alright.

"What are you talking about? You just said it yourself, its cold."

"Seriously, please take that off. We're just a few feet from the door, you're not going to freeze. I'm not

wearing a jacket," Pinky said as she twirled in a pair of relaxed fit jeans and an aqua smocked jersey top.

"What's wrong with my coat?"

"Its not a coat, its a cloak. There's no other word for it. Plus, you're wearing that damn thing and with your red hair...dammit, Hannah you don't see it? Let me put it to you this way. I'm not taking Red Riding Hood in to see the wolves."

Hannah laughed and shoved the cloak in the backseat. "Sure it'll be ok in the Yota?" she asked.

"Of course, no one's going to touch a prized vehicle such as this," Pinky said as she tapped the back of the car where it no longer said the full name of the car

brand, only 'Yota'.

Watching a group of women walk past in mini skirts, Hannah felt out of place. Each one was more beautiful than the next and each had legs that extended for miles. A couple of them looked at her as they walked past with curious expressions. It only made Hannah feel even worse.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea," Hannah said as she folded her arms in front of herself and stroked the soft fabric of her sweater. "I don't know what I was thinking wearing this cutesy sweater."

"You don't fool me, Hannah Crane. That's your good luck sweater. You're hoping to see Mr. Naked Wolfman."

"Of course, but look at those girls. He's not going to give me the time of day with them around."

Pinky shrugged. "They're not that great...ok, so they are. But, you never know. Maybe he likes stars on sweaters and is tired of gorgeous, sexy women."

Hannah shoved Pinky playfully as they walked towards the worn wooden building. The green neon sign cast a strange glow around the doorway and Hannah could feel her heart flutter nervously in her chest. She must have slowed down too much for Pinky's taste, because next thing she knew her friend grabbed her by her hand, yanked open the large wood paneled door and pulled her into the building.

As they entered the bar, a massive man blocked their way. He was easily the size of the door, with tattoos on both of his arms, and his long hair pulled back into a tight braid. Grimacing he looked down at them, then smiled sweetly.

"Pinky! Been a long time. I thought you decided to stop slummin' with our kind," he said.

"Ha, never! You know I love you guys. This is my friend Hannah."

"Ahh a first timer," he said then wrinkled his brow. "You smell...interesting. Half breed?"

"What me? No!" Hannah said shaking her head adamantly.

"Hmm ok, if you insist, but I'd bet at

least one of your ancestors was a shifter. If you're from Leeds Point like the rest of us, then its likely. Well, except for Miss Pinky here. She's just special."

"Aww Bubbles, you're too sweet," Pinky said before giving the large man a hug.

"Head on over to the bar. I'm sure Rafael wants to see you," Bubbles said as he stepped out of their way.

The room was an open space with wood paneled walls that looked sticky with use and age. At one corner a group of four muscular men played pool. A stack of dollar bills grew on the edge of the table as they continued betting.

Next to the pool table was a small dance floor with several bodies writhing

to the beat of the pulsing song coming from the nearby jukebox. At the end of the room, just beyond several round wooden tables with mismatched wooden cafe chairs, was the long bar.

Still holding her hand, Pinky snaked through the crowded room towards two empty stools at the end of the bar and waved at the bartender. Rafael was a good looking man with dark brown hair and caramel colored skin in a tight black t-shirt that accentuated his strong physique.

"Wow, its like his muscles have muscles," Hannah whispered.

"Mmm he is yummy, isn't he?" Pinky said.

Rafael refilled a couple of drinks

before sauntering over with a sly grin and a twinkle in his sky blue eyes.

"I knew you couldn't resist," he said as he leaned over the bar and kissed Pinky on the lips before turning to Hannah. "I asked her out last time she was here. She said she'd never date a bear. Talk some sense into her, will you?" He grinned mischievously before winking at Pinky and walking away to mix a couple of drinks.

"A bear?" Hannah whispered as she leaned in towards her friend. "I thought you said it was wolf night. And look at him! I can't believe you said you wouldn't date him because he's a bear."

"He works here. It's only the patrons who have to be whatever shifter night it

is. Just like Bubbles. He's not a wolf either. Anyway I only said that to get Rafael off my back. He was pushing hard for a date and it got me worried."

"Worried? Why?"

"Because I'm human. There are a lot of shifters who date humans just because we're human. They think we're easy. There's no mates or packs or anything complicated like that, so in that sense we are easy. But that's not the easy he's thinking."

Hannah looked back over at Rafael. Even though he was at the other end of the bar, his eyes were still on Pinky.

"And you don't want to sleep with him?"

Pinky laughed. "Are you kidding?"

That man is fine! No, he's *fiiiiiiiiinnne*. I'd love to sleep with him. But I know how I am. I'd get all attached and he'd get over the whole fucking a human thing and ditch me. Then what am I supposed to do? This is the only place anyone can go to meet a shifter without worrying about territory, so I'd have no choice but to see him."

"Wait, step back a sec. You keep saying things I don't understand at all. Mate? Packs? Territory? I didn't realize there was a whole vocabulary to know."

Rafael came back and set down two pink frozen drinks with umbrellas, cherries and hunks of pineapple sticking out of the tall curvy glasses. "Lava Flow. Your favorite, right Pinky? See I

remember everything."

"Thanks Rafael," Pinky said as she took a sip. "What do I owe you?"

"A date. That's all I ask. No strings attached," he said. "If you're worried about anything, bring your friend along. By the way the wolves are drooling over her I'm sure she'll have no problem finding a date."

Hannah looked around the room. She noticed how a lot of the wolves gave her the once over, but she thought it was all in her head. Scanning the room she knew they were all shifters, but she didn't know how she knew. Unfortunately the one wolf she was looking for wasn't there.

Rafael leaned in towards the two of

them. "Watch for this one," Rafael growled low, under his breath as a man made his towards them. "He's Omega."

Pinky grabbed Hannah's arm and quickly whispered, "I'm sorry, I forgot how little you know. I'll explain it all later but Omega means he doesn't have a pack."

A thin man, on the smaller side of every other wolf in the bar, with wispy light brown hair and tortoiseshell glasses sat on the stool beside Hannah. He put his hand up to order a beer, but Rafael ignored him. Feeling bad for him, Hannah reached over the bar, grabbed a glass, and poured a beer from the tap in front of her then slid it over to him.

"Thank you, but you didn't have to

do that," the Omega said with a thick southern drawl before he took a sip. "He would've given in eventually. There's no rule that says you have to be bound to a pack." He looked around as if he was speaking to all the other wolves in the bar, before focusing back on Hannah. "I'm James Renfield, or just Renfield as most people call me."

"Nice to meet you, I'm Hannah and this is Pinky," she said as Pinky turned away.

"Their Alpha knows I'm here," he said to Pinky looking hurt before focusing back on Hannah. "He's a strict wolf, but reasonable as long as you register when passing through his territory. I'm sure you know that."

"Alpha?" Hannah asked. "Sorry but all this is new to me."

"New? Really?" Renfield said excitedly. "Forgive me, I thought you were...never mind. I'm sure you heard I'm Omega."

"Yes, but I really don't understand."

"Look around. You see all those strong, beautiful bodies? Those are all grey wolves. They are also all part of the Rowan pack. A pack lives within its own territory and has its own laws and protections. These laws are created and enforced by the pack's Alpha."

"Why aren't you part of the pack? Is it because you're different?" Hannah asked.

"Ah, how nice of you to notice. I am

different. I am a red wolf, but no, that's not why I'm not part of this or any other pack. The red wolves are in danger of extinction. Because of that the Shifter Council has seen fit to allow red wolves into packs with grey wolves. I simply choose to not be part of a pack."

"But what about protection? You said the pack—"

"No," he said cutting her short, "I don't need their protection. I respect Caleb as the Alpha so I let him know of my presence. I don't need anything from them and they certainly don't want anything from me. The pack's day will come though. Mark my words." He was silent for a moment when his expression suddenly changed from anger to sadness.

"And when that happens I hope you're no where near these shifters."

"What are you talking about?"

"Stay away from them. That's all I can say. You're putting yourself in danger by coming here." Renfield drank the last of his beer and slapped a hundred dollar bill he pulled out of his wallet onto the bar. "Your drinks are on me the rest of the night. After that forget everything you learned about shifters and this place, Hannah. Their day is coming."

Before she could speak, he disappeared into the crowd. Hannah turned back to Pinky who was deep in conversation with one of the waitresses. Rafael took the cash then leaned across

the bar towards Hannah.

"Whatever he said, don't listen to him. Red wolves are known to have a few screws loose. They're a lot like coyote. Just relax and enjoy yourself. Look, you and Pinky aren't even the only humans here."

Hannah followed his gaze across the dance floor, towards the tables where a beautiful woman with jet black hair sat. She wore a sparkly white top that made her look ethereal despite the plunging neckline. Seated across from her was a brawny, handsome older man with salt and pepper hair. Hannah couldn't speak. Without looking, she swatted at Pinky.

"Hey, that hurt!" Pinky said, then

noticed what Hannah was looking at.
"Holy shit! Did you tell her we were coming here?"

"Of course not! She would've freaked if she knew."

"Then why is she here?"

"I don't know, but I'm going to find out," Hannah said as she hopped off her barstool.

Hannah never lied to her mother before, but not telling something and lying we're two different things. Suddenly she realized her mother hadn't been telling her much lately either. Like why did she smell like a shifter last week? Had she been at Night Shift? Never in a million years did Hannah think she'd see her mother at a shifter

bar, or any bar, yet there she was.

"Mom? What are you doing here?" Hannah asked when she got to the table.

"Hannah?" Eliza looked confused and began nervously wringing her hands. "I suppose I could ask you the same."

"I just don't understand. All these years all you ever said..." *were bad things about werewolves*, Hannah wanted to finish saying, but couldn't.

"It's complicated. And something we can talk about another time."

"Fine, whatever. I don't think I even care, Mom. I'm just surprised to see you here." Hannah looked at the handsome man across the table from her mother and then noticed an old photograph she didn't recognize on the table. Whatever

was going on, she was done interrupting. "I'll see you later, Mom. I'm going to visit Pea."

"But its not a full moon."

"I know. I just really need her right now. Maybe I'll get lucky. You know I don't need the full moon, it just helps."

Eliza nodded and lowered her head as Hannah kissed her on the cheek. Hannah could tell whatever her mother was going through, it would take some time before she was ready to talk. She also knew it involved Pea somehow.

Hannah returned to the bar where Pinky was flirting with a tall, hunky man with dark brown hair. She hated having to interrupt, but needed to get out of there.

"I'm sorry Pinky, but can we go?"

"One sec, Hannah. I'd like to introduce you to Cade. We were just talking and I think I found your guy."

"What? How?"

Pinky left her stool and moved Hannah a couple of feet away before excitedly speaking.

"Cade was just telling me how there's been some territory problems recently. Some wolves have been found dead and others are missing. They're not sure yet whether its hunters or a rival pack, but the Rowan Alpha has taken it upon himself to patrol the area. Including parts just outside their territory."

"I'm sorry Pinky, its been a long night. Spill. What are you trying to say?"

"That man you can't get out of your head? That's their Alpha, Caleb. That's Mr. Naked Wolfman."

Hannah couldn't explain how, but she knew Pinky was right. Now more than ever, she needed to get back to the woods. She had to see him again.

Chapter Six

The night air was cool, crisp, and still. Almost too still. That meant the other creatures in the forest knew there was an intruder, for good or bad.

The rash of recent killings could have destroyed many other packs, but as Alpha he wasn't going to let that happen. Caleb heard of other Alphas being challenged and even removed for less. He'd be damned if any of his pack was going to take his place. They'd have to kill him first. But that was the risk one took in being Alpha.

Sitting on a high tree branch in human form, he looked out and below

for what the disturbance could be and spotted the small human running towards the clearing, her long dark red hair flowing behind her. Just like a human to not listen.

Stupid human! he thought to himself as he sighed. Bad enough she entranced him so she was the only thing on his mind. It had to be witchcraft.

Since he saw her, she consumed his thoughts. He needed her like the air he breathed, he knew without her he'd suffocate. Caleb couldn't forget the weight of her body on his wolf form, and how badly he wanted to shift back and take her on the forest floor. His lips still remembered her softness. And how she tasted of fresh picked berries.

Caleb heard stories of wolf charmers who could not only entrance the wolf but control shifters as well. Some of these tales ended in the old Leeds graveyard where the accused were killed by stoning, pressing, or the common death of burning. He knew these witches were still in existence today, just as his kind had lived then.

But he never heard of such a strong charm to make a shifter, and an Alpha at that, obsess about the caster of that spell. Perhaps it wasn't a spell at all. She did have the scent. Or did he imagine that?

It was the scent every shifter lives for, but few ever find. The scent was their reason for being, the acknowledgement from the beyond that

yes, there is happiness for you. It meant not just the completion, but the betterment of one's soul. One's soulmate; the fated mate.

It didn't make any sense though. While she had the scent his mind and body registered as his, the fated mate was to be one of his kind. A shifter. Werewolf to be more exact.

Her scent was one of warmth and sweetness that he could only describe as reminding him of his mother's homemade cookies. It awakened a longing and yearning in him, but also drove his wolf spirit mad with desire. The girl was human though, at best a witch. It made no sense.

Maybe it was part of her charm. She

had to be a strong witch to captivate him like this and confuse him enough to think she could be the one. Or maybe she just was.

Using his strong hands to lower himself from the tree, he beckoned his wolf spirit to take over and bring him to the clearing. The cool air rushed past his face as he ran in wolf form. Low branches from the trees and shrubs in the forest whipped against his thick coat until he slowed at the edge of the clearing to spy upon the girl.

She was collecting stones again. Her collection wasn't as large as last time and he could hear her cursing the moon for not being full. Her brazenness made him smile.

Shifting back to his human form, he inhaled deeply when he realized her scent was stronger tonight than it had been last time they met. He wondered why that was. Oddly, she smelled almost like a shifter. But not quite.

Still, her scent made his blood rush. He wanted to hold her, to feel the softness of her skin and her warm body against his. He needed to bury his face in her luscious hair and breathe her in. At a minimum, he had to be near her.

Spotting a large, white stone at his feet, he picked it up and entered the clearing. He knew if any of his pack saw him in such a vulnerable state, it could be his death. But at that moment he didn't care about being Alpha, all he cared

about was her.

With her back towards him, he watched her for a moment before stepping closer knowing she had no idea she wasn't alone. It was why she was in danger. Why he tried to warn her. None of that mattered anymore. As he moved closer to her, her scent overwhelmed him and he vowed to protect her at all costs.

"I told you to never return to these woods," he growled at her.

"Yes, yes, oh so dangerous," she said as she turned around then looked at his hand. "Is that for me? Or were you planning on using it to bash my head in?" She grinned wryly at him before picking up another rock.

"It's for you," he said as he held it out to her.

"So now you're helping me?"

"I know your kind. Stubborn, inflexible, challenging. You'll do whatever it is you want despite what I say. Maybe even because of what I said."

"So, you admit there's no danger besides yourself."

She was playing with him, of that he was certain. Growling softly he forced himself to calm down when he wondered if she was right. Maybe he was a danger to her.

"Human, my pack has seen many deaths recently. I've taken it upon myself to make sure even the neutral zones on

the outskirts of my territory remain safe."

"Are we in your territory now?" she asked with her head tilted to the side.

"No. This area, and this clearing were spoken for centuries ago by another."

"Then I don't need to worry. If anything, you're trespassing, right?"

He refused to answer. This territory hadn't been touched by a pack for as long as he could remember. There were tales the clearing was haunted, but Caleb didn't believe in such nonsense.

"The danger isn't just for my pack. Your small human mind cannot comprehend the enormity of these acts."

"Stop talking to me like that! Do you realize how much of an asshole you

are?"

"How dare you talk to me that way, witch!"

"It's Hannah."

"Hannah," he said huskily and caught her smiling. "I'm sorry I've been rude. I'm Caleb Overstreet."

"So, Caleb...don't you get cold?"

He laughed realizing she was referring to his nudity. Slowly he admitted to himself that what angered him, interested him as well. Not only did this woman have the scent of his mate, but she wasn't afraid to speak back to him. He enjoyed the challenge.

"Yes, I do feel the cold but not the way you do."

Stepping closer to her, he felt the

warmth her body gave off. As he looked into her bright green eyes he felt like he had been struck by lightning, and the world around them disappeared. The wind whipped her hair into her face and he gently pushed it back behind her ear. With his fingers now at the back of her head, he pulled her close to him, slowly tilted his head to the side as he breathed her in, and lightly touched his lips to hers.

Her heat filled him as it had during their first kiss. Softly his tongue traced her bottom lip before he pulled it into his mouth. He wanted to consume her. Pushing his tongue into her mouth, her tongue slid against his and he wondered why a human would smell and taste so

sweet to him.

But was she human? As her arms slipped around his shoulders, he noticed she felt stronger than she had when she rode him. It didn't make sense, but she definitely had a stronger scent too. He stepped back, confused and unsure if he would be able to control himself if he did more than kiss her.

Slipping his hand out of her silky hair, he rubbed his cheek against his palm letting her hair slide between. He couldn't get enough of her, but he needed to go. A run in the cold air would do him good.

"I must leave you. It's dangerous and I beg you to go," he said, unsure if he was the danger he warned her about.

"No. I just need a few minutes. I need to talk to Pea. I'm so confused. My mother...and Night Shift..."

"The bar? What were you doing there? That's not a place for someone like you. The shifters there..." he stopped speaking as he realized he was becoming possessive for no reason.

"I was looking for you," she said. Grabbing her cloak, he yanked it open as he pulled her close once more. He ran his face along her neck, breathing her in. His hands firmly moved over her soft breasts and he felt her nipples harden through her sweater. Growling, he restrained himself, fighting his desire and his hardening cock, before kissing her roughly, claiming her mouth as his.

Quickly shifting into his wolf form, he forced himself away. At full speed he plunged into the woods, his long claws ripping through the earth. He needed this run to clear his head, but he would keep an ear out in case Hannah needed him.

Chapter Seven

Breathless from his touch, Hannah stood there, her panties wet and her body needy and alive for him. Words couldn't describe the effect Caleb had on her. And with how quickly he shifted and ran, Hannah needed to pinch herself to make sure she wasn't dreaming. *Ouch! Ok, definitely not dreaming.*

Looking up at the sky, she had no idea if Pea would appear on a night like tonight. Hannah usually visited Pea during full moons because that was when she was at her most powerful, not because she couldn't summon her other times throughout the month.

Still holding the rock Caleb handed her as if it was her prized possession, she finished constructing her small circle. She didn't have much time left. The edges of the sky were already lightening into a pale blue.

As she stood in her circle, she closed her eyes and tried to clear her mind of everything except Pea. It was harder than she thought. Caleb kept creeping into her mind, making her smile and her core throb as she wondered where he was and when she'd see him again.

"It's been a long time since I've been in this clearing."

Hannah's eyes flew open when she heard the unfamiliar woman's voice.

Standing in front of her, fading in and out as if there was a bad connection, stood a woman, not much older than her, but dressed in the plain clothing Hannah recognized as what they wore in colonial times.

She wore a long pale green cotton dress with an apron over it. Even with her hair tucked into her white bonnet, Hannah could see auburn wisps brushing against her cheek and spilling onto her neck. Hannah knew her hair would do the same thing if she tried to contain it and because of that, she knew the woman was an ancestor.

"Who are you?" Hannah asked.

The woman blinked at her for a moment, a look of surprise on her face

then rushed closer to her circle. Stunned, Hannah resisted the urge to step back, reminding herself she was safe.

"It's really happening! You're really doing it!" The woman exclaimed. "The curse is being lifted. You must be the thirteenth. Oh goodness, where are my manners? I'm Rebekah Crane, but most people know me as Mother Leeds."

"Mother Leeds? As in Leeds Point? The Jersey Devil?" Hannah asked in awe.

She disappeared briefly then looked more vibrant. "I lost faith for so long. The thirteenth daughter. Oh and look, you have my hair and his—"

Mother Leeds suddenly faded and was replaced by Pea.

"Go home, Hannah! It's too dangerous here. And cut your damned hair!" Pea yelled.

"But Pea—" Hannah said, surprised at her grandmother's anger.

"I thought it was Eliza, but its you. I did what was needed to protect you both. Now please cut your hair. Your scent stems from there. It's how he found you."

Pea disappeared. Alone again Hannah tried calling either woman back, but it was useless. There was too much light in the sky. Picking up the stone Caleb gave her, she broke the circle, put the stone in her pocket, and started the walk home.

The sky was an odd combination of

blue and pale yellow layers. The sun still hadn't broken the horizon. Noticing the forest was oddly quiet, she picked up her pace. By this time the birds usually began their morning chorus, but there was nothing. As Hannah stroked the stone in her pocket, she exited the woods with the feeling she was being watched.

Feeling anxious, she ran down the road towards her home. She tried convincing herself she was just spooked, but it was no use. She couldn't shake the feeling that she wasn't alone.

As she stepped onto the sidewalk leading up to her door, a thin animal, no larger than a medium size dog stepped out of the trees. Surprised, she stopped and watched it approach as she tried to

figure out what it was. One thing was certain, it was a shifter.

The animal had a reddish coat and long pointy ears. It was too big to be a fox. A coyote? No, coyote weren't brave enough to approach alone like this. Slowly it dawned on her. Wolf. Red Wolf.

"Renfield?" she asked, remembering their conversation from earlier.

The wolf walked behind a bush and when he was done changing to human, Renfield stood up using the foliage to cover his private area. *Why did he follow her?* Something deep inside her told her to run inside the house, but she ignored that and waited to find out what he wanted.

"They look down on me," Renfield said. "They call me Omega. They're Beta. They follow their Alpha mindlessly like sheep. How does that make them better than me?"

"What are you doing here?"

"I caught your scent earlier in the woods, it's too good to pass by and its getting stronger," he said as he stepped forward, forgetting his modesty. "You haven't been claimed yet. I have no desire for a mate, but that doesn't mean I can't have a little fun."

Hannah watched in horror as Renfield quickly shifted back into the red wolf and charged towards her. Frozen to the ground in shock, she willed herself to move, to run into the

house, but she couldn't. With her breath caught in her throat as Renfield came just several feet away from her, she managed a whisper, "Caleb."

A strong gust of wind and the coarse hair of a grey wolf brush against her as it collided mid-air with Renfield. The wolves' upper bodies rose into the air as they stood on their hind legs. Caleb easily flipped the smaller wolf, pinning him down on his back, and stood over him, teeth bared and snarling.

The rush of relief that ran through her body enabled her to move once more. Taking a step towards them, she was startled when the grey wolf turned to growl at her. Understanding he wanted her away, she ran up the steps of the

cottage and waited.

Caleb focused on the smaller wolf, his teeth still bared, a low growl coming from deep in his throat. In an effort to shake the larger wolf, Renfield bucked and twisted. Caleb's jaws snapped onto his neck.

"No! Don't!" Hannah called out as she left her porch.

Caleb stopped. His teeth having punctured the skin. Slowly transforming back to human, Renfield whimpered, his neck bleeding as he turned to Hannah.

"You didn't have to do that," he said. "I was wrong. I even smelled the Alpha on you, but that didn't stop me." Caleb released Renfield who reached up to check his neck. "I've lived through

worse." Taking a step towards Hannah, the grey wolf snapped ferociously, stopping Renfield in his tracks. "Hannah, you're in danger," Renfield said. "My master knows of the Crane curse. His pack has waited centuries for you. Please, go back to your old life."

"What are you talking about?" Hannah asked.

"Your scent. He's going to follow your scent. Even if I tell him nothing, he will find you," Renfield's voice heightened with fear as he turned to the grey wolf. "He will use her to destroy our kind!"

Caleb shifted back and grabbed Renfield's arm. His eyes were intense as he loomed above the smaller man.

"Speak! What do you know?"

"Nothing, I swear I know nothing. Just that he's been looking for the emerald eyed witch who can charm wolves. The thirteenth daughter. He hates your kind." Renfield turned back to Hannah. "Your scent grows stronger the more you're with him. Please, save yourself!"

"Is your master behind the slaughter of my pack?" Caleb demanded.

Renfield yanked his arm away from Caleb. "I don't know for sure, but its why I'm here. I needed to find out more when I heard of the deaths. He is not my master by choice. He saved me and for that I owe him my life. You think of me as Omega, but I know honor and respect

like my wolf brethren. Something other shifters do not."

"Who is your master?"

"Hawthorn. Coyote."

Renfield turned around, revealing four large misshapen scars that resembled a bear's claw. He shifted back into wolf form, and trotted down the street before disappearing into the woods.

Caleb turned to Hannah and as he stepped towards her, she jumped into his arms. Relieved to be safe and in his embrace, she melted into his strong embrace and let him support her body as she clung to him.

"Thank you for saving me," she whispered as she pressed her cheek

against his scratchy beard.

"Hannah, you are in danger. He's right. Your scent grows stronger each time I see you. You're changing."

"I'm not changing. I'm the same as I've always been."

"No, Hannah. I don't understand how but you're changing. You're becoming one of us."

"No! How can that be? You're wrong," she said as she stepped back confused.

"You are. Look at your eyes," Caleb said.

Hannah didn't have to. Deep down, something within her said he was telling the truth. She felt the difference within her as the wolves fought, but didn't

understand it. Without needing a mirror,
Hannah knew her eyes glowed amber.

Chapter Eight

"How is this happening?" Hannah asked. "A person doesn't just change into a werewolf."

Caleb saw confusion spread across her pretty face. He knew he had to help her control it or as the wolf spirit grew, it would consume her.

"Come with me," he said as he took her hand. "We need to go somewhere safe, where we can talk."

"Then come inside. God only knows what my mother is up to, but the lights are out so I guess she's still at Night Shift." Hannah shook her head. "Don't ask."

She pulled out an old bronze key and unlocked the door. They entered a small hallway which led to an open room with a couch and the TV at one end and a kitchen at the other end. Hannah disappeared through a door then reappeared holding a pair of baby blue sweatpants and a white oversized button shirt that she handed to him.

"I'm sure they won't fit, but you have to put something on," she said.

"Why? Does it bother you that I'm naked?"

Caleb watched as her cheeks turned red. He laughed heartily, then took the clothes and pulled on the pants. They were tight, almost like a second skin and the bottoms of the sweatpants only

reached his calves. He held the shirt up to his large chest, showing her how small the shirt really was, shrugged and put it on even though he couldn't button it.

"Do you want anything? Coffee? Hot chocolate?" She asked.

He smiled. "Its very nice of you to be polite, but I know where your head is. You're thinking about your eyes and wondering what's next." As she nodded, Caleb noticed tears in her eyes. "Come sit with me," he said.

"I don't want to be a wolf. It was hard enough growing up as a witch, and that people didn't know just by looking at me. I can't walk around with yellow eyes."

"Relax," he said as he took her hand and closed his large hands around it. "I know you can do this. Just listen to me. You know how you focus on Pea in the circle to make her come?"

"Yes, but what does that have to do with anything?"

"Use that focus. Focus on your eyes and that beautiful green color they used to be."

"You think my eyes are beautiful?" she asked.

He smiled softly at her and stroked her cheek. "The most beautiful I've ever seen. Now concentrate on them. Clear everything from your mind except for what color your eyes were."

She closed her eyes for a minute

and when she opened them they were emerald again. Smiling, she slumped back against the couch and let out a long sigh.

"Thank you. Is that how you change?"

"Yes, although it becomes easier the more you do it. You need to control it so it doesn't control you. You never want to meet a shifter who isn't in control of his animal spirit, they're dangerous. There are times when circumstances force it to take control. Like earlier," he said.

"When Renfield attacked you, becoming a wolf wasn't a thought. It just came naturally because I had to protect you. I'm sure that's why your eyes turned. Your wolf spirit was ready to protect

you too."

"My wolf spirit? Nothing makes any sense anymore. My entire life I've been told wolves were awful, disgusting, and untrustworthy. And then I meet you."

"You feel what I do, don't you?" he asked softly.

Caleb had been wanting to talk to her. Although she didn't know anything about fated mates, he believed she had to feel the same thing he felt.

"I don't know. I don't know what I feel. I'm so confused. I can't explain it."

"I can't explain it either," he said feeling the pull to her grow even stronger. "Let me tell you what I do know. Every time I see you, your scent grows stronger. And your scent..." he

shook his head as he thought about the deliciousness of it, "its the most amazing thing."

"Caleb, you keep talking about scents and wolf spirits, but I don't understand. None of that means anything to me."

"No one really understands how shifters came to be. Some say we're just human hybrids, others say it's magic, or a curse."

"A curse? Like from witchcraft?" Hannah asked.

"Yes, exactly. Some of the earliest texts on werewolves link them with witches. There are accounts dating back to the witch trials in Europe accusing witches, both male and female, of being

wolf charmers."

"You mean witches that could make the wolves do what they wanted?"

"Yes, like attack a neighbor's livestock. Honestly when we first met I was so drawn to you that I was sure you charmed me."

"Well if I charmed you, I must have done a lousy job. You kept trying to get rid of me," she said laughing.

"It was your scent. You had the scent of a wolf, but it was clear you weren't. The next time we met I thought you might be a half breed, but you didn't have that scent either," he said as he shook his head, still confused. "Let me keep explaining. There are half breeds, but they're rare. And they don't have as

strong of a scent as you do. All the shifters I know can trace their animal ancestry back centuries."

"And the wolf spirit?"

"Most of the packs in Leeds Point believe that our ability to shift into animal form is from our ancestors. We can trace our roots back to people who believed an animal spirit protected and helped them. These spirits were separate from the humans at that time, but there's evidence that they eventually joined, enabling us to transform."

"So you speak to other packs? I wasn't sure since when I was at Night Shifts it was wolf only."

"There are some who won't fraternize with the other shifters, but as

Alpha I like to keep communication open so we can work together. Like now with the murders."

"Is it only wolves that are in danger?" she asked.

"So far, but you never know. There are other shifters missing. Whoever is at the root of it obviously has a problem with wolves, but from my experience if this pack gets too confident, they'll go after the others. I've been working with the bear and panther Alphas to watch the forest. The woods seem to be at the center of this. That's how I found you. I followed your scent out of my territory into the neutral zone, which is where you live."

"Neutral zone? I can't believe all of

this has been going on my entire life and I knew nothing about it."

He laughed. "You have no idea how much has gone on in Leeds Point. Where you live and where the clearing is, are all parts of an abandoned territory. They believe it was once managed by a wolf, but no one knows for sure so the shifter council declared it neutral. We can't figure out where the murders are taking place though. There are no clues, just the bodies left behind. At first we thought it was hunters, but there's been too many deaths and no signs of gunshots or bows."

"Do you think Hawthorn is behind this?"

"Renfield seemed to believe so.

And the coyote has long been an enemy of the wolf. They refuse to accept their place. Many of them let their coyote spirit rule so it wouldn't surprise me. I'll have to notify the council with an emergency meeting. I'll also have to tell them about what Renfield said about you. If the coyote believe you to be a wolf charmer then you're not safe. Your scent continues to grow stronger and they'll follow your scent just like I did."

"Maybe I need to shower more, I didn't realize I had such an odor," she said jokingly.

"I'm serious. We're shifters. We're part animal. A lot of what we do is based on scent. Its how we've survived all these centuries," he said, then paused

before continuing. "Do you believe in soulmates?"

"I...I don't know anymore. I mean when I thought about my family, none of the women in my family had ever been in a long term relationship, let alone married. So I didn't believe in it."

"Didn't?" he said noticing she spoke in past tense. "I didn't either. Not until I met you. Shifters refer to soulmates as our fated mate and we find them by their scent. No one else will have that special scent and it pulls at every cell in our body once we find that person. You are my fated mate. And I know you feel it too."

"I don't know what I feel," she said. "I've never felt like this before. I can't

explain it, but ever since we met you're all I think about. But it still doesn't explain why I'm changing. It doesn't sound like it normally happens this way."

"You're right, it doesn't. Usually the change first happens as children, but they're around shifters all the time. Maybe your wolf spirit was hibernating and I woke it. I don't know, but I'll help you learn to manage it." He smiled and kissed her lips softly then breathed in deeply and sighed. "Its late, the sun is almost up and I'm sure your mother doesn't want to find a wolf in her home."

"When will I see you again?"

"Tonight. Let me take you on a proper date. And I'd like to meet your

mother. She should feel comfortable with who is taking you out."

"You don't have to do that. She hates werewolves. At least I thought she did," Hannah said unsure. "I can date whoever I want. I don't need permission."

"Then call me old fashioned. I'm going to come here, knock on the door, and meet your mother," he said as he pressed his lips to hers and felt her body melt against his. "I have to go before I can't stop myself."

She smiled and followed him to the door. Once outside, Caleb put his hand up to say good-bye as his ears lengthened and hair slowly sprouted. He let the transformation quicken and once he was a full wolf, turned towards the

forest and ran at full speed. Feeling the cool air against his fur once again, he slowed down enjoying the cold ground underneath his paws. Thinking about Hannah, he wondered if she would enjoy the freedom of running as a wolf as much as he did.

As the sun lightened the forest, he thought about having to call an emergency meeting for the Council. But almost more importantly, he wanted to make sure Hannah had a night she would never forget.

Chapter Nine

Hannah stood on the porch, her arms wrapped around herself for warmth as she watched Caleb in wolf form enter the forest. Picking up the clothes he wore from the porch steps, she held them up to her face and inhaled deeply, enjoying his scent.

Slipping her arms into the button shirt, she grinned thinking about sleeping in that shirt so she could feel close to him. Briefly she felt the tug of her own wolf spirit, but closing her eyes she focused to contain it.

"You'll catch your death of cold out here," her mother said, startling her as

she entered the cottage.

As she followed Eliza into the house, Hannah couldn't help but remember her mother sitting at Night Shift like it was the most normal thing in the world. *How could she act like that after all the things she said about werewolves her entire life?* She needed answers, but she wanted a fight and she knew how to get one.

"I'm going on a date tonight," she said as she followed Eliza into her bedroom where she sat on her bed as she took off her heels.

"That's nice. You don't normally tell me about your dates though."

"He's a werewolf."

"A what! Hannah, you know how I

feel about that. You know—"

"No, what I know is what you've said all these years. Yet there you were tonight all dolled up and talking to one. Don't be a fucking hypocrite, Mom."

"Don't talk to me like that! You have no idea what I've been through and why I was there. You'd never raise your voice like that to Pea!"

"Pea wouldn't lie to me. She wouldn't keep things from me."

"Oh? She wouldn't? You want to know why I haven't visited your grandmother all these years?" Eliza got up and pulled a small box from a shelf in her closet. "I found this when I was going through Pea's things after she died. It's full of letters." Eliza paused,

obviously upset. "From your father."

"My father? But I thought—"

"That's what I thought too. I thought Knox just left me. He was in the Air Force. Stationed over at McGuire. We met one night at a bar and well, it just clicked. We were together every day for three months."

"Only three months?"

"One night I was out with my friends and when I got back, there was a message from him. He was being deployed that night. I raced over to the Air Force base, but I was a civilian so they wouldn't let me on base. I glamoured the MP and raced over to see him. He said he'd write and call when he could. We even talked about getting

married when he got back. But I never heard from him."

Eliza sat back down on the bed. Tears streamed down her cheeks. She held the box on her lap carefully, as if it was fragile.

"Tell me about the letters, Mom," Hannah said as she sat beside her and wrapped her arm around her shoulders.

"Pea never liked him. He was a shifter. A werewolf. She said they were untrustworthy and only interested in one thing. When I never heard from him, that's what I thought too. When I realized I was pregnant, I wanted to reach out and tell him, but I had no way to. I just didn't know how and I didn't know what to think. He had only been gone a couple of

weeks, but with Pea in my head constantly, I really thought I meant nothing to him."

"Did he ever find out?"

She nodded and held up the box before wiping away a tear. "There's so many letters. And I had no idea. In his last letter he said he heard from someone that I was pregnant. I guess someone he knew saw me in town. He was sure he was the father, but said if he didn't hear back from me he would respect my wishes and leave me alone. It had been months since he heard from me, months that he had been away, yet he never thought there was someone else. And there wasn't. There never has been since."

I felt bad. I had no idea any of this had happened. Knowing Pea was strong willed, it only surprised me a little, but I was very disappointed that she did such a terrible thing. What Pea did not only affected my mother, but me too. And I was hurt.

"Why do you think she'd do that? Why is she so against werewolves?" I asked.

Eliza sighed. "Pea believes in some curse going back to the seventeenth century. There's some folklore going back to those days that links the werewolves with our family. That's why she's obsessed with your hair. She says our hair is full of our DNA. The longer our hair is, the stronger the scent it

creates." She shrugged. "I think its bullshit, but you know Pea."

Hannah remembered what Caleb said about the witches being persecuted as wolf charmers. Wondering if that's what happened to their ancestor centuries before, she needed to push her mother even though she could tell her mom wanted to stop talking about it.

"Have you ever heard of Rebekah Crane? Did Pea ever mention her?"

"No, Pea never did, but I know her name. Come with me," Eliza said as she got up.

Hannah followed Eliza into the backyard and through the vegetable and flower gardens Pea used to spend so much time tending. Behind the gardens

was an old wrought iron gate hidden by an overgrowth of ivy. Eliza wrapped her fingers around a thick section of vines and yanked hard, opening the gate.

The section inside the gate was small, around ten feet by ten feet, bordered by the rusted fence. There was an old lawn chair to the side of the entrance and flowers growing wildly. Towards the back, Hannah noticed a slim, tilted gravestone that was darkened with age.

"I started coming here when I was little," Eliza said. "It was a good place to hide and pretend we weren't the strange witch family on the block. As you know, the cottage is very old and has been in our family for hundreds of years.

Back then families would bury their dead either in the church graveyard or in a small graveyard on their property. There's only one gravestone here though and I always wondered why that was, but I knew better than to ask Pea."

Hannah walked over to the gravestone and read it aloud. "'Here lies Rebekah Crane, Mother Leeds and unfaithful wife to Jacob.' Well that's just rude."

"I bet that's why she's back here. They considered her a disgrace. I'm sure you know Mother Leeds gave birth to the Jersey Devil, and I suspect that the curse Pea told me about has something to do with that. I'm sure if you wanted to find out more about her you could go down to

City Hall on Monday and look her up, see what you can find. And if that doesn't work just call her. You've always been much more powerful in calling than me."

"You never asked Pea about her?"

"No, I wanted my private place to stay my own. Plus, I know Pea. She always felt we should just listen to her and we didn't need to know anything else. I was stupid and never questioned her," Eliza said. "I had a different relationship with her than you did. I always felt she was resentful towards me. To me, she wasn't the warm comforting woman you know."

Nodding, Hannah knew her mother was right. The Pea she knew and the Pea Eliza grew up with were two different

women. Hannah hoped if Pea was alive she wouldn't do anything to prevent Caleb and her from being together, but she suspected Pea wouldn't do anything differently.

"Let's go back inside, Hannah. I'm tired and I'm sure you are too. Plus, you have that date tonight. I'm sorry for how I reacted earlier. I just...I guess I'm still hurt about your dad."

"Have you tried looking for him? With the internet and everything, maybe you can find him."

"I've been talking to other shifters, showing them an old picture of us, to see if anyone recognizes him. I don't even know if he came back after his deployment. For all I know, he's dead,"

she paused for a minute before continuing, "but I honestly don't think so. I've always felt he was close, I can't explain it, its just a feeling. Recently though, something has happened. I feel like he's in danger and that's why I started going to Night Shift. I needed to speak to more people. I have to find him."

Eliza pulled an old photograph out of her pocket and handed it to Hannah. It was the first time she ever saw her father before. Knox had sandy colored hair and a warm smile. His body was built similar to Caleb's, strong and muscular like most grey wolves. Looking at her mother beside him, so young and cheerful, Hannah's eyes

misted over when she realized she had never seen her mother so happy before.

"You can ask Caleb tonight," Hannah said. "Maybe he can help. He's the Alpha for Rowan so I'm sure he knows a lot of wolves."

"Thank you, hon, I will. Now go get some sleep. You've never been on a date until a wolf takes you on one," Eliza said grinning.

Hannah could tell her mother was lost in a memory about her love from long ago, Hannah's father. She kissed her cheek and left her alone with the picture and her memories.

Chapter Ten

Dressed in a black, hip hugging pencil skirt and a dark purple wool v-neck sweater, Hannah was early for the first time in her life. She looked out the small oval window that faced the street and wondered where Caleb was.

He wasn't late, she just wanted to make sure he didn't have any time alone with her mother. The last thing she wanted was for them to bond over naked baby photos of her.

Eliza was busy in the kitchen baking chocolate chip cookies, her usual treat for guests. With her mom in a pair of worn jeans and a sweatshirt, Hannah

was glad to not have one of those mothers who competed with her for a man's attention. She'd heard horror stories about that from other friends at school.

The loud growl of a motorcycle filled the air and Hannah ran over to the mirror to make sure she looked alright, before looking out the window again. Parked in front of the house was a silver Harley Davidson. Caleb got off the bike, removed his helmet, and ran his fingers through his dirty blond hair.

Unable to take her eyes off him, Hannah watched him strut up the sidewalk in a pair of tight black jeans, with his worn motorcycle boots peeking out from underneath, a grey button shirt

with buttons that strained against his muscular chest, and a thin black leather jacket.

She didn't realize her mother had come up behind her and was watching too until her mother let out a low whistle.

"Damn, he reminds me of your father. I swear when I close my eyes, its like Knox is right here beside me," Eliza said.

Hannah turned and hugged her mother tightly. "Don't worry, Mom, we'll find him. I'm sure of it."

As Caleb entered the house, Hannah reached up and gave him a kiss before leading him into the kitchen where Eliza removed cookies from the cooling rack

and put them on a plate. She set the plate down on the table and extended her hand out to him.

"I'm Eliza, Hannah's mom. Its nice to meet you."

Caleb shook her hand and smiled, then took the seat Eliza motioned for him to sit down on.

"I have to admit, I didn't think you'd want to meet me," he said.

Hannah sat beside him and took a cookie and split it in half. "A lot has changed since you left last night. I have so much to tell you," she said before nibbling on one of the halves.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"My mom told me my father is a wolf shifter named Knox. Long story

short, Pea kept them apart and Mom had no idea until after she died. She's been trying to find him ever since."

"So you do have shifter blood. That explains so much," he said.

Eliza put the old photograph of her and Knox on the table in front of Caleb. "We were hoping you could help us. I've been talking to shifters around town and no one seems to know him more than saying they think he's familiar but from a long time ago," she said.

Caleb picked up the picture. With his brow furrowed he examined it, before shaking his head and putting it down. "Unfortunately he's not familiar to me either. If he was in the area since I've been Alpha, I would know him. Could I

take the photo with me? I've declared an emergency Council meeting for tomorrow night, its possible one of the other Alphas might recognize him."

"Yes, please take it," Eliza said.
"Let me know what you find out."

"I will. You have my word," Caleb said before standing. "Now if we have your blessing, I'd like to take your daughter on a date."

Eliza grinned at his formalness. "Of course you have my blessing. Take care of her for me, she's my baby you know."

Hannah sighed loudly as she got up and kissed her mother on the cheek.
"Don't wait up," she whispered into her ear.

"A mother doesn't want to hear

that," Eliza replied, laughing.

Caleb helped Hannah put on the extra helmet he brought with him before she hiked her skirt up to get on the bike. Wishing she wore pants, she held onto him as he took off down the street, the cool wind blowing her hair back. She realized she didn't know where they were going, but she really didn't care as long as she was with him.

After a short ride, the air began to smell like the ocean and Caleb slowed down as he turned onto an old winding road. The seagulls squawked as they flew overhead and the landscape changed from pine trees to tall grass. Eventually they reached an old pier on the Great Bay with several boats on the

dock and a restaurant at the end of the pier.

Caleb parked the bike next to the dock and then held her hand as they walked over to the restaurant on the worn grey boardwalk. The water in the bay was calm and other than the seagulls squawking, it was quiet. As they approached the restaurant, the sound of music and people talking wafted over to them.

At the end of the pier, they were surrounded by the Great Bay with the sun glittering on the gentle waves as it set, large and orange into the sea. Without a word from Caleb, the host took them to a table facing the water, away from the other diners.

After they sat down, Caleb reached across the table and took her hand and softly stroked his thumb over her fingers as he looked into her eyes.

"I know this is technically our first date, but I feel like I've known you forever. I don't know if its because you're my fated mate, or if its just something special about you," he said. "Because you are special, you know."

"Maybe I've just charmed you," Hannah teased.

Caleb laughed heartily then leaned close and kissed her. His lips made currents run through and pulse within her. As his mouth left hers, his deep blue eyes plunged into her soul and her heart beat wildly. Still holding her hand and

with his eyes still on hers, he gently kissed each of her fingers before turning her hand over and kissing her palm.

Lowering her hand, his thumb rubbed deep into her palm. He looked ready to devour her. With the pressure of his touch on her hand, such an innocent place, she couldn't help but imagine his hands elsewhere on her body. She crossed her legs as her apex began to throb.

"What can I get you tonight?" the waiter asked, but neither Caleb or Hannah could take their eyes off each other.

"We'll start with the caesar salad for two, then the lobster and filet special," Caleb said. "But bring it over to my

place in about an hour."

He got up, dropped a few of hundred dollar bills on the table, and pulled Hannah to her feet. They quickly left the restaurant, practically running as they made their way back up the pier. She didn't know where they were going and didn't care. Her entire body ached for him and if she didn't have him soon, she was afraid she might explode from the throbbing time bomb in her core that pulsed louder and louder.

Reaching his motorcycle, she followed him onto the dock and to a houseboat she didn't notice before. It was at the edge of the dock, on the corner, with wood shingles and an offset contemporary roof. The deck

surrounding it had a redwood stain, and there were several ornamental trees in pots lining it.

"I have to have you now," he said.

Caleb walked determinedly to the house. He pushed open the door, pulled her inside and pushed her against the wall as his lips claimed hers.

Pressed between his strong body and the wall, Hannah enjoyed his tongue hungrily exploring her mouth. Sliding her arms around his back, she pulled him closer, crushing her breasts against his muscular torso.

Leaving her mouth, his lips found a sensitive spot on her neck and she felt her legs go weak. As she ran her fingers through his hair, she lifted her leg around

his hip, letting her skirt ride up. Through her thin panties she felt the outline of his hard cock through his jeans.

He continued to kiss her neck, making her want him even more. She couldn't take it and began shifting her hips, letting herself rub against his bulge until she unbuttoned his jeans and pushed them down past his hips, releasing his member.

Wrapping her hand around him, she stroked his long, thick rod as his breath came faster. He pulled her sweater off and tossed it aside. Burying his face in her chest, his lips and tongue slid over her skin as he lowered the straps of her bra, then unhooked it.

"I want you so badly," she said

breathlessly.

Moving her hips close again, she pressed the bulbous head of his cock against the wet spot of her panties. His teeth closed around one of her stiff nipples and she gasped with pleasure. Sliding panty aside, she rubbed his tip against her clit before moving it to her entrance.

"Not yet," he said huskily.

Sucking her nipple hard, his hands went down the curve of her body. He hooked his thumbs into her panties and pushed them down her round ass. His tongue moved to her other nipple and he circled it before kissing it softly before his lips traveled down from her breasts as he slid her panties off her.

Kneeling in front of her, he smiled up at her as he lifted her leg onto his shoulder. He nipped the hip of her opposite leg, then kissed her thigh as his fingers caressed her. His teeth closed around a sensitive area on her inner thigh, near her sex and she jumped a little then giggled.

With her breathing ragged, she looked down at him and he smiled, his eyes glued to hers as his fingers slowly entered her. Moaning, she closed her eyes, her head back against the wall. Her body buzzed with excitement and desire and she couldn't control her hips from rocking, forcing his fingers in and out of her wetness.

When his firm tongue slid over her

clit, she cried out and grabbed his hair, keeping him in place. The warmth of his tongue circled her nub and rubbed as her body trembled. She didn't know if she could keep herself standing for much longer, but she didn't want him to stop.

Clutching her ass with his hand, he helped support her as his lips surrounded her swollen clit and sucked gently before his tongue continued.

"Oh, Caleb, I'm so close...but I need you inside me."

He rose to his feet, holding her leg up in his hand. Biting one of her nipples, she jumped and her body shook more, making him smile.

He rubbed his spongey tip over her clit and entrance as his tongue dipped

into her mouth, meeting her tongue. Her body pulsed strongly from her core and she couldn't take much more.

"Why are you torturing me?" she whispered.

"You have no idea what torture just being near you is," he said as he rubbed his cheek against her shoulder.

The feeling of his beard gently scratching her skin, made her head swim. Every touch pushed her closer to the edge.

"Then please..." she said gasping as he entered her briefly.

"I just want you to come. And want it to be amazing for you."

"Just fuck me already," she said grinning as she grabbed his ass firmly.

Kissing her lips, he entered her slowly, groaning. He picked her up and she wrapped her legs around him as he filled her with his length. Holding onto him tightly, she didn't think she could take him all in.

A thin sheen of sweat covered them as he began to slowly thrust his hips. Feeling him inside her, every nerve tingled with excitement and pleasure. She shifted her hips and with each time he entered her, his cock rubbed along her clit.

"Almost...so close," she breathed, amazed with how good everything felt.

Moving her hips with him, he continued to stroke her nub before his rod moved deeper into her with each

thrust. Her breath grew ragged, and she clutched him hard. His breathing was fast.

Suddenly the pressure inside her released and she cried out as her body shook and pulsed. She felt his warmth release within her and he growled softly.

Carrying her over to the black leather couch, she laid on top of him as they caught their breaths. He kissed the top of her head and then her lips when she looked up at him, exhausted.

The doorbell rang and he groaned, realizing it was the restaurant. "I guess an hour wasn't enough time," he said. "I want more of you. I need it."

She nodded, still unable to speak but wanting more of him too. Taking off

his shirt, he gave it to her to put on while he pulled on his jeans to open the door.

Setting the food down on the cocktail table, kissed her quickly and smiled. "Let's eat. Then later I'm having you for dessert." He winked and began opening the cartons then lit a couple of candles. Wondering how quickly she could eat, Hannah couldn't wait to be his final course.

Chapter Eleven

Blinded by the sun's reflection off the marble and stone building that was City Hall, Hannah squinted and kept her head down as she climbed the steps two at a time. After entering through the large wooden doors, she made her way upstairs to the Department of Public Records where a frail, bald man with a pair of thick round glasses, sat behind a desk in front of a room filled with filing cabinets.

With his head down, looking at a stack of papers on his desk, Hannah stood in front of the desk waiting for him to acknowledge her. Shifting on her feet,

and lightly tapping the top of the desk, she began to get impatient. She didn't want to be rude, but he was acting like she wasn't even there.

Clearing her throat, she waited for him to look up. Nothing. Not even a glance. She coughed loudly while looking at him, but still no response. Leaning down she put herself directly in his line of sight when he snored. Gently shaking his shoulder, she stepped back when he snorted and shook his head.

"Oh hello there, dear. I must have dozed off. What can I help you with?" he asked, his voice gritty.

"I live in Leeds Point and was wondering if you could give me some information about the house I live in and

my ancestors."

"Goodness me. You wouldn't believe the amount of records we have. And its all paper. The original documents are now all public record so if you'd like I can bring you to that area and you can look for what you're interested in."

He hobbled towards the back of the room and Hannah followed him, forcing herself to walk slow instead of running ahead like she really wanted. The area smelled musty and the florescent light overhead buzzed softly. As he tapped the top of an old, taupe filing cabinet dust flew into the air.

"These are them, dear. Unfortunately the cabinets aren't marked. If you need

any help just come get me, or ask for Abraham if I'm not around and they'll find me."

"Thank you, sir," Hannah said before he wobbled briefly then headed back towards his desk.

As she pulled open a drawer, the cabinet made a horrible scraping sound. The filing cabinets were so old they rusted years ago. She yanked open another one, letting the metallic groan fill the air.

A long row of yellowed paper greeted her. Pushing back the stack so she could look at the first one, she saw a name that began with A. *Close enough*, she thought as she skipped ahead several inches of paper to find the C's. Thumbing

through the files she saw 'Crane' flip past and went back to find it.

She couldn't believe her good luck. Excited, she pulled out the piece of paper and saw her address on top. It was the original land deed. Rebekah Crane's name was listed with her husband Jacob's, but it was neatly crossed out.

At the bottom of the deed, a notarized portion declared the land belonging to Rebekah after charges of witchcraft and wolf charming were dropped. It seemed her husband accused her of witchcraft after finding out she had an affair.

Hannah thought about the Jersey Devil tales and wondered if they all began because of an angry, jealous

husband. Yanking open several other cabinets didn't provide her with the answers she wanted.

She found the Leeds Point bible where all births were recorded and saw Rebekah listed thirteen times, once for each child. The last child had a deceased date next to him. It was enough to make Hannah realize she needed a folklore refresher. She had to find the oldest stories about the Jersey Devil.

After closing the cabinets with a strong shove, she ran through the short maze of files to Abraham's desk. Turning to thank him, she noticed he was asleep again and just kept walking. The public library was a couple blocks away and she couldn't wait to continue her

research.

The library stood at the center of a busy block. It was one of the oldest libraries in the state and had been recently renovated. Hannah remembered going there with her mother and Pea when she was a child. The lower level had a blue three story doll house Hannah always admired on their visits there.

She thought about entering on the lower level, just to walk past and see if the doll house was still there and as she remembered it, but she didn't have time for nonsense. Positive the answer would stop the murders of Caleb's pack, she needed to get to the root of Rebekah's curse.

Climbing the sandstone steps up to

the circular foyer, Hannah grew anxious. She was sure she would get some answers here. And curiosity had already gotten the better of her.

If she couldn't find out what she needed to there, she was definitely summoning Rebekah in the clearing. Another full moon was already here and she knew that, coupled with her seeing her before meant she could bring her back again.

A gust of warm air and the smell of books enveloped her as she entered the library. The main section was rounded like the building's exterior. At the center was a long rectangular desk with two academic looking people—a man with a tweed blazer, and a woman in a tan skirt

with a black turtleneck shirt. Both of them smiled as she entered the foyer with its square stained glass skylights.

"Can I help you?" the woman asked as the man went back to scanning a stack of returned books.

"Yes, where can I find articles about the Jersey Devil?"

The man's head popped up and he smiled warmly at Hannah. "I can help you with that," he said as he stepped around from the expansive desk. "I'm Brian. I'm considered the Jersey Devil expert around here. If you don't mind my talking your ear off, I'd love to help you."

"Ok great, I'm looking for the origins of the story."

Brian led Hannah through a two story archway lined with bookcases. Stopping towards the end of an aisle, he pulled out several books and motioned for her to continue following him. He placed the books down on a long table at the back of the room, near picture windows that faced the adjacent park.

"Anything in particular about the origins?" he asked as he sat down. "As I'm sure you know, there are several theories."

"I'm really looking for anything about Rebekah Crane."

"Ahh, Mother Leeds. Such a tragic story really. Most people don't even know her real name," he said as he flipped through a hardcover book and

then slid it in front of her. "This book has a collection of writings from the 1600's all based on the Jersey Devil."

"What's tragic about her story? All I know is she cursed the baby while she was in labor. I imagine she was tired of being baby making machine."

"That's the tale, but I doubt it's true. There's no evidence, but I always felt she was a victim of her time. Based on research I have done on that time period, women who cared for the land themselves were more likely to get accused of witchcraft. Many of those accusers stood to gain adjoining portions of their property if said witch was prosecuted."

"That's terrible!" Hannah said.

"Indeed. Rebekah was lucky though. Her accuser was her husband. But before his claim was finalized he came down with a brain fever and died. Many people believe Rebekah was behind it, but Jacob Leeds was well established as the town drunk, so most were happy to be rid of him."

"What happened to her after he died?"

"Unfortunately there are woefully few accounts of her after his death. I believe she shut herself away from society. Perhaps she was embarrassed after all she went through with him. As time went on though the stories Jacob told came back and grew even more fanciful. It's from these that the tales we

know as the Jersey Devil came to life."

"Wow, what a rough life that must have been. It's a shame there isn't more information. So did she really have thirteen children?"

"By all accounts, yes. But her husband didn't believe the last was his. Records of the time say the baby died soon after birth. I've often wondered if Jacob was responsible."

"Oh no!"

"It wasn't uncommon for infants to die back then, but he was a terrible man and there are letters where he said the child would never carry his name."

"So that thirteenth child would really be a Crane and not a Leeds?"

"Yes. There are stories about a

curse on the Crane family, but none of them give details. I know it sounds absurd, but I've hired witches to contact her. I'd love to see if she'd appear to tell her side of the story, but it ended up being a waste of time. She never appeared. I was just trying anything I could think of. There are reports that her husband had her gravestone carved before he died, but no one knows where she was buried. It's a shame. So much history lost."

Ready to burst from excitement from the few things she learned, Hannah nodded and thanked Brian, not wanting to give anything away as she left the library. Excited that Rebekah appeared to her and not some so-called

professionals, she knew she needed to call her as soon as the moon was right. Hannah hoped she could get the answers she needed and not only find out more about her ancestors, but finally learn the truth about the Crane curse.

Chapter Twelve

The Kapok Shifter Council was made up of the twelve most dominant breeds in the tri-state area. Councils existed throughout the world and were broken up by number of territories. The Kapok Council was known to be one of the most powerful.

Because of their connection to the past, it was a requirement of all packs within the Kapok Council jurisdiction to use Celtic tree symbolism in choosing a name. The Council believed trees were not only known for their healing properties and wisdom, but to remind the shifters of the days they hid from

society and used the trees for protection. Caleb's pack had been named Rowan for their protection and connection to nature.

Council meetings took place in the secret room of the Smithville library. The back of the library faced a wooded area that was perfect for each of their arrivals. From there they were able to descend into the basement, still in animal form and then enter a private room each of them kept a change of clothes in. For over two hundred years, this was how the Kapok Council met and no one wanted to initiate any changes.

Dressed in dark blue jeans, a black t-shirt that clung to every muscle on his chest, and his favorite pair of black

motorcycle boots, Caleb entered the room. The wood planked floor creaked with each of his steps. The room buzzed as Caleb took his seat at the antique artisan crafted round table the Council used for their meetings.

Seated around the table were the Alpha from each of the twelve groups in the tri-state area. Two Alpha's Caleb grew up with sat on either side of him. Erich, the oversized brute of a man who was the grizzly bear Alpha of the Alders. Alder was chosen to remind the bears of their endurance and strength, traits that Erich believed he embodied and would fight anyone who disagreed with him.

On the other side of Caleb was

Joaquin, the dark skinned sinewy Alpha of the panthers' Blackthorn. He believed so whole-heartedly in the discipline and control the blackthorn tree represented, that he was known to take things a little too far at times. Focused to a fault, Joaquin sometimes put Blackthorn's overall well being over those closest to him.

Across from them sat Monica, the tall, svelte fox Alpha of Willow. She was the eldest and most outspoken of the Council. She valued the willow's intuition and used it her leadership. She believed it sometimes meant ignoring the analytical, but things always worked out for her in the end.

"This better be good, Caleb," said

Erich. "You know I despise these emergency meetings. I'm an important man."

"We're all important, Erich," Caleb snapped at him before looking around the table at each Council member.

"Thank you for coming at such short notice. We've all been concerned about the recent murders in the Pine Barrens. Right now, the grey wolves seem to be the only ones who have been killed, but each of our packs have missing members and as we all know, its only a matter of time before one of their bodies is found."

"Get to the point, I don't have all day," Erich growled.

Leaning towards Erich in his seat,

Caleb gave the bear leader a long look, matching his gaze, a low growl in his throat.

"Ok ok, that's enough boys," Monica said.

"Forgive me," Caleb said as he cleared his throat. "I have reason to believe the Hawthorn coyote pack is behind the killings and missing pack members. I've learned that the coyote Alpha, Abel believes in an ancient curse that will give him power over wolves, and possibly other shifters as well."

"Are you talking about a wolf charmer? I remember hearing stories about them years ago as a child. I didn't think those stories were more than fable though," Joaquin said. "Whatever your

plan is, know that the panthers are behind you one hundred percent."

"Unfortunately I want to be certain. Nothing has happened since we began patrolling the woods, but I believe Abel is waiting because he thinks he's close. A red wolf, an Omega named Renfield, who is in servitude to Abel, said he's after a human. A witch to be exact."

"How will he find this witch?"

"I met her in the woods one night, she knows nothing of the curse or of charming. It seems she has werewolf blood and is slowly becoming one of us," Caleb said wanting to protect Hannah as much as possible, but knowing he had to give the Council some information. "Her scent is growing

stronger. I have an old photo of her father, but she knows nothing about him. His name is Knox." Caleb, took the photo out and passed it around for the other Council members to look at.

"I believe I've seen him before," Liam of the Oak lion pride said as he ran his fingers through his blond hair. "He was living within my territory. A quiet man with an air of sadness.

Unfortunately he is one of my missing."

"I've heard of shifters of ancient blood, that do not continue their line do not shift until they're in contact with others," Monica said. "I believe its some sort of adaptation within their DNA to protect them. How much contact have you had with this girl?"

Caleb didn't want to respond. He couldn't tell them she was his fated mate. The idea of a fated mate, while important within the shifter community, wasn't something to discuss at Council where they followed their heads, not their hearts.

"Several times. She continues to enter the woods despite my repeated warnings."

"Is she in any of our territories?" Monica asked.

"No, she's in the neutral zone, not far from where the casualties have been appearing. She needs to be protected, especially if Hawthorn is after her."

"I'm sure we all agree."

After the meeting was over, Joaquin

pulled Caleb aside and Erich joined them. The three Alphas had taken it upon themselves to secure the woods.

"You look troubled, brother,"
Joaquin said to Caleb. "Is it the girl?"

"Yes, I'm worried about her. If her scent is growing stronger because of our interaction, then perhaps I need to stay away. Her best protection is for her to not complete transformation into a shifter. Once that happens her scent will be strong enough for Abel to track her."

"I've dealt with that pack of coyotes before. They're beyond dangerous. We cannot let them endanger humans as well. I'm sure whatever your decision, it'll be for the best."

Caleb snorted. He didn't like his

decision, but in the back of his mind he knew staying away from Hannah was the best thing for her. Maybe if things were different, if Abel was caught then it would be safer. Until then, she was living life as a human. She was human. And she needed to be treated as such.

"I'll forgo the neutral zone in my rounds and let her be," Caleb said. "But know this, if anything happens to her I will declare war on the Hawthorn. There is nothing that will stop me from protecting her," Caleb said as he slammed his fist into his palm.

"Finally, something I can get behind," Erich said, an evil grin spreading across his face. "You declare war and I guarantee I will be by your

side."

Caleb didn't like having his hands tied, but he knew attacking a pack without proof was one of the worse things any Alpha could do. He would wait and watch the woods. Once everything was over he could return to Hannah again. Until then, he would have to stay away from her, no matter how much pain that caused him.

Knowing he couldn't just leave her he planned to talk with her and explain why he couldn't see her anymore. Her scent and her shifting were increasing and it was only a matter of time before her transformation was complete. He would die before he let his selfishness be the reason Hannah was in danger.

Chapter Thirteen

For the first time since Pea died, Hannah wasn't going to visit her on a full moon. She missed Pea but if she wanted to call on her ancestor, Rebekah Crane she knew it was going to take every ounce of her energy.

Collecting the stones for the circle was hard enough that night. The full moon lit enough of the ground for her to find them easily, but she couldn't help but think of Caleb each time she picked one up. There was the first time they met when she tripped over one and he let her ride him home. Or the time he handed her a stone to help her with the circle.

Caleb took up so much of her thoughts that she refused to wash the button shirt he wore at her cottage. She loved how much it smelled like him and had been wearing the shirt to bed everyday since their date. She almost wore it that night with a pair of jeans, but she had to draw the line somewhere.

Unfortunately thinking about him was all she could do lately because she hadn't seen him in days. He wasn't answering his phone and he hadn't come by since their date. Hannah was beginning to feel insecure about sleeping with him, despite how wonderful it was.

She thought they had feelings for each other, but maybe she was wrong.

Maybe her mom and Pea had been right all along. Werewolves really only wanted one thing and she gave that to him the last time she saw him. If it was true, she'd never see him again.

She reminded herself to have hope. Caleb had a lot of responsibilities, after all he was Alpha. He might have gone after that coyote pack Renfield seemed so scared of.

Knowing she promised Caleb she wouldn't go into the woods, made her feel more uneasy. She didn't like breaking her promise, but she needed to reach Rebekah and using the full moon was going to be her best bet. Maybe if she had heard something from Caleb over the past few days things would've

been different, but she hadn't so she needed to do what she had to—summon Rebekah. She didn't have a choice. There were only so many full moons.

As she sat in the almost completed circle, her cloak tucked under her, she reminded herself to focus on why she was there. She needed to contact Rebekah about the curse. Whatever Rebekah knew was key to anything Hannah had been able to figure out.

Sitting down on the cold, damp, grassy floor of the clearing, Hannah was just about to close the circle. So much had happened in the last few months that she didn't want to forget and it was all because of Caleb.

Taking a deep breath, she picked up

the final stone for her circle when her senses registered the fresh air and woody, musky scent of Caleb. She smiled softly as she put down the last stone without completing the circle and fought every urge within her to run over and be near him.

"I know you're there, Caleb," she said happily.

The leaves rustled and she turned to watch as the large grey wolf stepped out from woods, his head hung low. Hannah felt sadness wash over her as the wolf came over and pushed his large head under her arm, forcing it around his neck, then rested his head on her lap.

"What's going on? Something happened. You have to tell me," she

demanded.

With her hand buried deep into his thick silvery fur, his snout and ears shortened, his eyes turned to midnight blue, and laying naked in the moonlight was Caleb.

"I have to leave you. I've learned that my presence, any presence of a shifter, is bringing out your wolf spirit. Without me around, you'll revert to human and be safe from Hawthorn," he said.

"No! I don't care about being human! I only care about being with you. You can't do this to me," Hannah pleaded. "You can protect me."

"I can't always be here, Hannah," he said as he sat up. The best way for me to

protect you is by leaving you. Your scent is growing stronger. It's only a matter of time before you have the ability to fully shift. When that happens the Hawthorn coyotes will track you down at whatever cost, putting your mother in danger as well. I can't do that. I love you too much to do that to you."

Caleb turned away. As he stood to go, Hannah clutched at his arm. "No!" she cried. "Please, don't go!"

"Leave the forest and never come back, Hannah," he growled. "Your father is one of the missing. They're getting close. You're safe if you remain human."

She couldn't let this happen. Every fiber of her being screamed at her to stop him. *How could he do this?* He

didn't look at her. With her still holding into him, tears running down her face, he quickly shifted back into a wolf and tore through the grass back into the woods.

Hannah reached for a stone and half heartedly threw it at the running wolf before collapsing back to the ground sobbing. Everything hurt. Gasping for breath while her tears blinded her, she wrapped her arms around herself for comfort.

The rest of the stones surrounding her mocked her tears, laughed at her heartbreak. Wishing she was a stone, she stuffed down her pain, ignoring the emptiness in her chest where her heart used to beat for Caleb. It was gone, yanked from her chest and stomped on

when she realized he said he loved her too much to stay.

He loved her, but he left her. *I am a rock*, she thought to herself as she headed home.

Chapter Fourteen

Hannah was grateful for the blue moon as she ran through the woods on the path to the clearing, her cloak billowing out behind her. She didn't care how many times Caleb had warned her of the danger. Danger meant even less to her since he wasn't around. In fact, she welcomed it. Maybe it would put her out of her misery. Meanwhile, Hannah had to get to the bottom of the curse and the only person who could help her with that Rebekah Crane.

Running at full speed, not wanting to miss her window like last time, Hannah felt a sharp tug at her cloak and swung a

fist as she spun around only to find she was caught on a barberry bush.

"Dammit, Hannah," she muttered.
"Get a hold of yourself."

"You haven't been yourself since..."
Pinky's voice trailed off.

Hannah knew what her friend was going to say and was grateful that she didn't. As they sat on an old orange print couch at Pinky's house, sharing a double cheese, double pepperoni pizza, a *Real Housewife* whined about her latest plastic surgery mishap. They were both dressed in yoga pants and t-shirts, not because they planned to work out, but

because they just wanted to be comfortable.

With her mouth full from her last bite, Hannah finished Pinky's sentence. "Since the last full moon. That's all I want to remember about it."

"Have you tried calling him?"

"Please, Pinky. The last thing I want to do is talk about him."

"I know but—"

"But nothing, ok?"

"No. Listen, Hannah. You know I know you better than anyone else. I mean we share a brain, right? So please just listen to me. You've never felt this way about anyone else before. I know you refuse to say it, but I really think you love him. How can you just let

something like that go so easily?"

"Because I don't have a choice. He ended it, remember? Not me. And it's all because of this damned curse. I mean obviously I don't want people dying because some nut job is out there trying to find me so he can rule the wolves," Hannah said with a roll of her eyes, "but there's nothing I can do about it. I don't even know what this curse is really about. Maybe I can charm wolves and I don't even know it."

"Have you ever tried?"

"No, why would I? I've tried to be charming, but not charm," Hannah grinned.

"Well then you need to go back into the woods and call Mother Leeds."

"She's too removed from me. I need a full moon to make sure I'm strong enough to get her."

"Are you kidding me? Man, Hannah! You're one lousy witch."

"What are you talking about?"

"Look outside. I give you not only a full moon, but a blue moon, ta-da! If you can't call her under that moon, then just give up now."

Hannah looked outside the small window facing the street and was surprised with the amount of light. Not only was this a blue moon, but it was the largest moon she had ever seen.

"Thanks for pizza, Pinky. But—"

"Just go! But be careful out there!"

The clearing was just ahead. Slowing down, Hannah wondered if Caleb would show up again. She doubted it. Not unless she was in trouble and that was the last reason she wanted to give him to show up.

Easily finding enough stones for a large circle, Hannah sat down and closed the circle as the moon reached the position she waited for. She closed her eyes and tried clearing her thoughts, but it was no use. She couldn't stop thinking about him.

Taking a deep breath, she started again. Shutting him out of her mind, she thought about the time Rebekah

appeared. Her pale green dress with the apron and her red hair tucked into her white bonnet.

Feeling something unusual, like she wasn't alone, Hannah opened her eyes to find Rebekah standing there looking around in awe. *I did it*, she thought to herself happily.

"Is that a blue moon?" Rebekah asked.

"Yes it is. I wanted to call you during the last full one, but..."

"You poor girl. He left you, didn't he?"

"How do you know?" Hannah asked, confused.

"Because you look just as miserable as I did when it happened to me."

"You mean when Jacob died?"

"Oh, no. Jacob could be sweet when he wanted to, but our marriage was one of convenience more than anything. I honestly think he kept me with child just to make sure I couldn't leave. It was a different time back then. Harsh and rough. A woman didn't have much say. I believe marriages like that are rare nowadays."

"Oh you'd be surprised," Hannah said. So, if you don't mind, who made you miserable?"

"A shifter. A werewolf to be precise. Possibly one of the firsts in the New World and my one and only love. Jacob was a drunk, but he was smart. He managed to get the deed to this land,

where we are right now, as well as the cottage, but he was too busy drinking to care for it. I really didn't mind. It gave me something to do besides raise twelve children.

"Back then we had livestock, a couple of cows for milk, sheep for wool. Jacob didn't bother clearing all of the land. Just what's cleared today for the cottage, plus a little more."

"What about the clearing here in the woods?" Hannah asked.

"No, Jacob didn't do that. That was Luke, my love. Let me explain. My family has always believed in prayer and the gifts in nature. I heard of a woman in town who helped others protect their livestock. There was

always danger from other animals, or even the neighbors who were very jealous. She recognized something in me and said she could teach me the wolf charm."

"You were a wolf charmer? I didn't think that was real."

Rebekah laughed. "Yes, it is real, just as real as you talking to me right now. There were plenty of wolves in the area, we were keeping them fat with our sheep. So I cast the charm and used some wolves to protect my livestock from the others. I cared for these animals. I gave them food and water, even shelter in the barn when the weather was bad."

"But how did you meet Luke?"

"I didn't know anything about werewolves then. When I went out to cast my charm, I called any wolves in the area. I wasn't specific. One night, Luke was in wolf form and was one of the wolves I charmed. I heard the loud snap of a bear trap followed by the howling cry of a wolf. I ran out, worried that my charm had injured one of my wolves and to my surprise the wolf changed before my eyes into the most beautiful man I ever laid my eyes on.

"I brought him into the barn so Jacob wouldn't find him and I took care of him. But as I nursed him back to health we got to know each other and fell in love."

"How did Jacob find out?" Hannah

asked.

"It was my own fault. I wanted Luke to be near so I gave him this part of the land. I didn't think Jacob would care or even notice since he never cleared the trees. Luke made the clearing and built a small house. That path you follow on your way here was originally made by us from running back and forth between houses to spend whatever time we could with each other.

"But then one day, as luck would have it, I got pregnant. Jacob and I hadn't been together in a very long time and like I said, he was a drunk, not stupid. He cursed me."

"What was the curse?" Hannah asked, her heart beating quickly, the

closer she got to finding out the truth.

"That I would wander the earth for the rest of my days, living and dead, alone. I'm earthbound. I cannot leave here. And I regret every day of my life and death that I didn't stand up to Jacob."

"What do you mean?"

"Jacob was...abusive," Rebekah said, her voice growing faint. "I was afraid of him but I couldn't leave the children. I wanted to take them with me to live with Luke, but Jacob was too smart. That's when he called me a witch and filed papers against me for the wolf charming. I was pregnant so they didn't put me in jail, but I was being watched closely. I couldn't see Luke or we would both be arrested for adultery. So I ended

it with him. To protect him."

Hannah's eyes filled with tears hearing the reason for why Caleb also left her. She tried not to think about him, but it was impossible. He was the only thing she could think of. The only thing she wanted to think about. She never realized how empty her life had been before she met him.

"My biggest regret is never going after him. After the baby died, Jacob created a tale of the baby being a devil and flying away," Rebekah said, her voice catching. "He figured it went along well with his accusations of my being a witch. I was too defeated to fight. I closed myself off from everything and after Jacob's death, I felt so liberated but

afraid that I didn't know what to do so I closed myself off from the world. I should've searched for Luke, but I didn't. I figured he was better off without me. Who wants a widow with a bunch of kids anyway?"

"I'm so sorry, Rebekah. That's so sad."

"No, what's sad is I could've changed it. Instead I created my own hell and my own curse by letting Jacob rule me even after his death. And now, the curse will never be lifted. All these centuries of loneliness would've been worth just one more day with Luke."

Tears streamed down Hannah's face. She knew what she had to do. She refused to let herself die alone, broken

hearted, and filled with regret like Rebekah. The man she loved was out there and his only reason for not being with her was protection. To hell with that! She'd be damned if she let Caleb slip away from her. She could care less about curses or packs or anything else. The only thing she wanted was to be with him.

Chapter Fifteen

The most important thing Hannah learned the night she summoned Rebekah, was that her hundreds of years of roaming the earth would have been easier if she had one more day with Luke. Hannah had enough of her own mistakes, she refused to copy someone else's.

After unlocking the padlock on the storage shed in the back yard, Hannah opened her grandmother's boxes as she searched for Pea's potion book. Pea never liked talking about it, but she was a highly skilled herbalist. It was a passion she cultivated with her own

gardens and tried to teach to her daughter and granddaughter, but they lacked the patience needed to build a strong potion.

Sliding the third box out, she opened it to find mounds of scrap paper with notes and diagrams on them. *Jackpot!* Pea liked to call it an organized mess, but Hannah knew better. It was really just a mess. Hannah dragged the box over to a nearby lawn chair and sat down.

Hannah had an idea. She remembered how Pea was so obsessed with wanting the cottage to smell like baked goods, that she created a scent potion. She didn't know if it would work on humans, specifically one transforming

into a werewolf, but Hannah didn't feel she had any other options. Changing her scent to enter the forest was the best protection she could think of.

She didn't want to cause trouble, but she needed to talk to Caleb. Not expecting him to be on his houseboat, she knew the guaranteed place to find him was the forest. Part of her thought of risking it, of letting the coyotes track her, but she wasn't stupid enough to put herself in danger like that just to hope Caleb would save her.

After sorting through a third of the scraps of paper, Hannah finally found the potion she was looking for written on an index card. She tossed all the paper back into the box, dragged the large box back

to the shed, and padlocked the door once again.

Scanning the ingredient list, Hannah recognized the herbs from being in Pea's garden. Luckily none of them were poisonous, but that didn't mean much. Simply combining two nonpoisonous plants didn't mean the result wouldn't be deadly. Either way the potion would taste like crap, she wondered if it would work cosmetically.

Easily grabbing the herbs she needed, she brought them into the cottage. Happy to have the place to herself while her mom ran errands, she followed the recipe to the letter. She didn't want to waste time with careless mistakes. Experimenting with a small

dose brushed on the window sill, the house suddenly smelled like freshly baked bread.

Used correctly, the scent potion only lasted a day. She had no idea how long it would last on a person. Especially one whose werewolf scent was growing stronger.

Pouring the elixir into a shot glass, she admired its deep green color. Taking a sniff, she was surprised it didn't have a scent. As she caught her reflection in the window, she noticed her hair.

Pea always hounded her to cut it. The last time she saw her she said it was the source of her scent. If that was true, she didn't have to drink the potion, she could just cover her hair with it.

Pouring the contents of the shot glass into her palm, Hannah worried if she had enough. She decided to start at the top and go down to the ends. If she ran out of the potion she would cut off the rest of her hair. Getting to the woods and talking to Caleb was more important than her stupid hair.

Somehow she had enough of the elixir, and when she sniffed her hair it smelled like bread also. She had to be safe. But if something happened, at least she could say she tried.

Changing into a pair of dark blue jeans, her old brown leather boots, and her lucky blue chenille sweater, she then put on her cloak and ran towards the grassy path that cut through the woods.

The moon had begun to wane but she didn't need the light, Hannah knew for her to find Caleb she would have to rely on the senses of her burgeoning wolf spirit.

Hearing a noise up ahead she stopped. A man called out to another, then footsteps. *Hunters?* Reorienting herself based on the moon in the sky, she realized she wasn't far from the clearing. Quietly she made her way to the clearing. A large pick up truck, its lights on and motor running, sat by the tree line not far from her. She didn't see the men but sensed other wolves close by.

Keeping within the tree line, Hannah made her way over to the truck. As she moved closer, she was able to

make out the outline of cages in the flatbed. Focusing on them, she heard the metallic scrap of paws on the metal.

She stepped out of the trees and into the clearing beside the truck. Four cages took up the flatbed and inside them were grey wolves. She couldn't tell if they were werewolves, her senses weren't developed enough yet. But she knew what she could do to find out.

Taking a deep breath, she focussed on her wolf spirit. Specifically on the deep yellow her eyes changed to when it wanted to be known. She let the wolf take over and flashed her yellow eyes at the wolves. It worked! They flashed their eyes back at her.

Returning to herself, she opened the

cages realizing these men had to work for the Hawthorn pack of coyote. She opened the cages to release the wolves, wondering why they didn't let themselves out when the men disappeared, but the wolves didn't move.

Spotting a glint from one of their necks in the moonlight, she reached around the neck of the closest wolf and felt a collar made from leather, silver, and other items she didn't recognize. It was the work of a witch.

The collars had a secret clasp she didn't have time to figure out. She opened the truck door and spotted a toolbox. At the bottom was a folded buck knife. Carefully using the large

blade, she cut through each of the collars and the wolves leapt out of the cages and into the forest. One shifted into human form, a girl probably not much older than Hannah, with short dark hair.

"Thank you, but you should run. I don't know how you did it, but I'm sure they'll take a human too," she told Hannah.

"Wait," Hannah said as she sliced a lock of her auburn hair off and handing it to her with one of the collars. "Give these to Caleb, your Alpha. He'll understand."

The girl nodded, quickly changed back into wolf, and with the collar and her hair in her mouth, dove into the forest. Hannah was alone with the truck.

She couldn't understand why hunters would need a witch to capture wolves especially when the coyote had been killing them. Then she remembered Caleb saying her father was among the missing.

She realized the Hawthorn must have grown impatient waiting to find her. They turned to other witches who claimed they were wolf charmers and tested them with captured wolves. As she turned to leave, the two men masquerading as hunters in jeans, work boots, and field coats, stepped out of the forest.

"Well what do we have here?" said the smaller of the two men.

"She's probably one of those tree

hugging activists who also saves wolves," said the taller man. "Awfully pretty too. I bet Abel would love her."

Her back was against the truck. The two men closed in. Hannah ran, hoping to get away, knowing if she could just make it back into the woods she'd be ok. But the taller man quickly grabbed her.

She kicked and flailed but it was useless. Still holding the knife, she plunged it into his bicep.

"Fuck!" he yelled as he let her go.

She ran again, but the smaller man tackled her, throwing her onto the ground where she hit her temple on one of her circle stones. The clearing went black.

Chapter Sixteen

Waking up, Hannah felt the cold, wet cement against her cheek. Slowly she opened her eyes and let them adjust to the dimly lit stucco room. As she sat up she realized she wasn't alone.

By a large, rusty iron gate stood several naked people. Each of them dirty and bruised. Werewolves.

Without any windows or furniture, the room looked like a crypt. The only entrance into the room was the gate. Walking over to it she pulled then pushed against it with all her might.

"It's locked. They might be ineffective, but they always remember to

lock it."

The voice came from a man kneeling in the corner, as dirty and abused as the others. He had sandy blond hair with grey at his temples. He reminded her of Caleb, except this man was older and not as muscular.

Moving closer to him she felt an air of familiarity even though they had never met. She was sure this was Knox, her father.

"I'm sorry, have we met?" he asked. "You're awfully familiar, but its been a long time since I've interacted with humans."

"No, we haven't met. I just have one of those faces I guess," Hannah said, not wanting to introduce herself as his

daughter while they were trapped.

"Well I'm Knox," he said, keeping himself covered.

"I'm Hannah. Any idea where we are?"

"No. I know we're near water, but that could be anywhere." He inhaled and tilted his head, looking confused.

"You're hiding something. Something on you doesn't smell right."

Hannah looked at him with worry. If he was able to tell she didn't smell right, it was only a matter of time before the other shifters in the cell realized it too. As long as everyone thought she was human, she was safe, or at least safer. Not knowing how much longer the potion would mask her hair, she knew

her time was limited.

"Please don't say anything," she whispered. "I'm going to try to get us out of here. There are people looking for you and once they realize I'm missing they'll be looking for me too."

"No offense, but how do you think you'll be able to get us out of here? You're just a human. I've been here for weeks."

"I'm not sure, but maybe I can call someone," she said.

"They're not going to let you use a phone."

"Can you keep an eye out? Make sure the others don't see what I'm doing and if anyone comes stall them."

"Sure, not like I'm doing anything

else," he said. "Plus those shifters won't notice anything, their minds are gone from the torture. Now they're like dogs at a pound waiting for rescue."

She looked back at the door and saw the shifters were still looking out, waiting. Hoping they'd stay distracted and block the doorway from anyone who passed, she looked around for something she could make a circle out of, but didn't see anything. The room was completely bare.

She knew she could summon the dead to speak to her, she couldn't see why she couldn't summon the living the same way. Frustrated, she put her hands in her cloak and felt the stone Caleb handed her not so long ago. She removed

her cloak and gave it to Knox.

"Here, I'm sure you could use something to wear," she said.

He slipped it on and smiled at her gratefully. "Do your thing and hurry. I don't know what's going on but your scent is changing quickly."

Hannah nodded and took a deep breath. Just what she needed, more pressure. Her heart fluttered in her chest and she bit her bottom lip as she wiped her moist palms on her jeans. *This has to work*, she thought.

Crouching down, she drew a circle around herself on the floor with the stone. With it still in her hand, she closed her eyes and thought about Caleb handing it to her. Then when he arrived

on his motorcycle to pick her up for their first real date. Lastly she couldn't help but smile as she remembered them running out of the restaurant on their night together.

"Hannah? Where are you?" Caleb said.

She opened her eyes to find the room dark and empty except for the soft glow of Caleb. In his hands were the collar and her lock of hair.

"The coyotes got me, Caleb. I don't know where we're at but there are a lot of shifters here. Even my...Knox."

"Your hair doesn't smell right. I can't find you if I can't smell your scent."

She was quiet for a moment. He couldn't help her if he couldn't find her

scent, but if she had her scent she was in even greater danger. In the distance she heard a bell dinging insistently. It was a familiar sound but not something she heard everyday. Slowly it dawned on her that the ringing was the drawbridge. There was only one like it in the area.

"Caleb, the drawbridge. I can hear it! And we're in a cement room that's wet."

"I know where you're at, Hannah," Caleb said. "I'm on my way."

Hannah opened her eyes and found herself back in the cell. Knox blocked the door with the others while a man yelled from the hallway. His voice was familiar and turned Hannah's blood cold.

"Where's the human! I know its her,

I recognize that cloak. Let me through!"
Renfield demanded.

Chapter Seventeen

"Where is she?!" Caleb roared at the young girl who brought him a strange collar and a lock of hair he recognized as Hannah's. The hair didn't have her scent, but he'd recognize it anywhere. "Answer me!"

Caleb was in a back room at Night Shift. All Alphas had offices there. It was a central location they could use safely with the bar as a front. The office was stark with little furniture except for a desk and a couple of chairs. Caleb didn't see the need in splurging like some of the other Alphas. The office was for utility. If he wanted comfort,

he'd go home to his den where he had privacy.

"I...I don't know! I told the human to run. We were so frightened, one else even stopped to thank her. She released us from the cages and removed those collars. I don't know what happened after I left. I came straight here to give you those things like she asked."

"Leave!" he growled.

She ran out the door and he paced the room, his boots thudding against the Formica floor. What happened to her scent? She couldn't have lost it so quickly. Something else had to be going on. Caleb wished he knew what and he blamed himself for not knowing.

Hawthorn was definitely behind

this. Just from what little that girl was able to say, and the stench of coyote on her, it was enough to go after them. But with Hannah in their clutches, he had to be extra careful.

Caleb couldn't go full steam ahead to Abel when Hannah could be located somewhere else. The fact that shifters had been missing for all this time, without a trace meant that Abel was more conniving than he thought.

He'd have to head out to the clearing, where the girl said Hannah rescued them and see if he could find a traceable scent. Sending a quick text to Erich and Joaquin of the shifter council to join him, Caleb pulled on his black leather jacket and opened the door to

leave, still holding the collar and Hannah's lock of hair.

Pain shot through his head. Clutching it, he leaned against the wall to steady himself unsure what happened. With the light of the room searing his eyes, he shut them for relief. When he opened them next, the room was dark with a single light that lit Hannah who sat crossed legged on a cement floor.

"Hannah? Where are you?" Caleb said.

"The coyotes got me, Caleb. I don't know where we're at but there are a lot of shifters here. Even my...Knox."

"Your hair doesn't smell right. I can't find you if I can't smell your scent."

She was quiet for a moment before

she spoke. "Caleb, the drawbridge, the bell! I can hear it! And we're in a cement room that's wet."

He knew exactly where she was. There weren't many drawbridges in the area that clanged a bell when they rose. And he knew from his youth of an area dubbed 'the catacombs' that was a defunct shelter during an early war.

"I know where you're at, Hannah," Caleb said. "I'm on my way."

Driving his motorcycle at top speed, Caleb arrived within minutes of speaking to her. He descended the pier near the drawbridge like he did in his youth, and entered the catacombs from the back. He knew Abel well enough to know exactly where he'd be—in the great

hall.

The corridors were empty. He tried to find Hannah's scent, or even that of the other shifters, but they were masked by the strong the salt air. As Caleb entered the great hall, Renfield slipped out of the room. No matter, Caleb would deal with him later.

"Where are they, Abel?" he growled.

Abel Barlow was a small, balding man with hunched over shoulders. There was nothing Alpha about his appearance yet he had one of the longest tenures. What Abel lacked for physically, he more than made up for with his intellect and cunning.

With a smug look on his face, Abel

sat back on his mock throne, an oversized chair with a tall back. "Took you long enough to get here. What was it? The human? Did you not care enough about your own people to try to find them until now?"

Caleb kept his head knowing Abel was trying to manipulate his anger. As he circled Abel, Caleb counted the number of coyote shifters in the room. Five. He could count on that number at least doubling once he attacked. He could take them.

"Release them all now and I promise not to kill you," Caleb growled, his teeth clenched.

Abel chuckled. "Such a sense of humor! I know you're alone, Caleb. And

I have my entire pack here. What is that? One versus one hundred?"

"I like those odds."

Hannah's scent suddenly came over Caleb. Glancing to his left he saw Renfield leading her and a small group of shifters down the corridor. Hannah saw him, her face filled with relief then fear as her large green eyes scanned the room. She grabbed Renfield and spoke hurriedly, but before Caleb could tune in to hear her, the first coyote attacked.

Caleb quickly let his wolf spirit take control. As a wolf, he dwarfed the coyotes and smacked the smaller animal out of the way with his large paw. The coyotes attacked at once. One by one he eliminated them, teeth sinking into fur or

a swift shake to break a neck, bodies tossed like garbage at the wall. Keeping an eye on Abel, he made his way closer to his throne as the coyotes slowed their attack out of fear.

"I saw how you looked at her, Caleb. She's the witch isn't she? I had all along, but she tricked me. What a powerful charmer she must be to control the likes of you."

Filled with rage, Caleb charged towards Abel. He didn't care if Abel chose to remain in human form, he'd take his life anyway. Suddenly he felt something pinch his shoulder, then a sharp pain began to spread.

He fell to the ground before reaching Abel who jumped out of the

way and ran to a beautiful woman with long blonde hair, and bright emerald eyes, holding a bow with another arrow cocked. Baring his teeth, Caleb stood, his adrenalin holding back the pain from his injury.

A group of shifters entered the room as they changed into their different animal forms. Hannah was behind them. Caleb recognized some of his missing pack members. They fought the rest of the coyotes while Caleb kept his eyes on Abel and his witch.

Hannah ran over and touched Caleb's shoulder where the arrow remained. Her eyes glowed amber, and Caleb knew this was too much for her. She could change at any minute.

Caleb charged, easily avoiding the second arrow, he looked beside him as he was joined by a bear and a panther. His friends had arrived.

Abel shifted into coyote and ran. Leaving the woman behind. Erich roared and Caleb let the bear chase after the coyote Alpha while Joaquin cornered the blonde, his teeth bared.

"Hmm a panther," she said seductively. "I haven't tried charming one of those yet."

She stared at the large cat and slowly Joaquin lowered his head. Caleb shifted back to human form, sat at Abel's throne and yanked the arrow out of his shoulder. Stunned to see his friend being charmed by the witch, he almost didn't

realize Hannah kneeled beside him to look at his wound.

"It'll be fine, it's hardly even bleeding," she said.

"I heal quickly. Hannah...the panther."

She looked in that direction, her eyes narrowing. "I've had enough of this!" she said angrily as she got up.

Hannah, her eyes glowing yellow, stormed over to the blonde witch. The panther laid at her feet, purring contently.

"Charm this, bitch!" Hannah said as her fangs sprang forth.

Hannah jumped on top of the other woman and snapped at her neck, scaring her. The blonde screamed, cutting her

charm over Joaquin who shifted back to human and sat confused with his head in his hands.

Caleb smiled, recognizing the strut of the werewolf when Hannah stood up and smiled. The blonde reached up to grab Hannah's hair but she spun around and punched her in the chin, knocking her out cold.

Hannah closed her eyes briefly and when she opened them, they were the green eyes Caleb fell in love with. He was wrong to think staying away from her would protect her. Letting her wolf spirit come forward was the best protection Hannah could ever have.

Chapter Eighteen

In the month since the Hawthorn pack had been captured, Hannah and Caleb had spent every moment together. Busy enjoying life in the present, she hadn't even gone to the clearing to speak with Pea or Rebekah.

Caleb said he needed to take care of some business, so she went home to visit her mother, Eliza. While doing some of her laundry, Eliza came out of her bedroom humming happily. Hannah had never seen her mother so happy and knew it was because of Knox.

"Its a beautiful night, Hannah," Eliza said before she walked over and kissed

her daughter on the cheek.

"You seem even happier than usual."

"I asked Knox to move in and he said yes! I'm so excited, I feel like a kid again."

"That's great, Mom! I'm happy for you," Hannah said. "But I guess if Knox is going to move in, then maybe I should move out and give you two some privacy."

"You're barely home anymore as it is. Not that I don't understand of course. I'm just saying that you don't need to move out. Besides, he's your dad. Don't you want to get to know him?"

"I have plenty of time to get to know him, but I'm an adult. I don't need a dad I've never had. Right now I think its

more important that you two have some alone time together. You know, make up for lost time. Besides with my job and Caleb, maybe I should look for something closer to town."

"How is that going? I'm sure the kids love you."

Hannah had been working for the Rowan pack as a child counselor for the past couple of weeks. After growing up feeling awkward and insecure for being a witch, and recently going through the transformation into werewolf herself, Caleb told her she would be perfect to talk to the kids and help them deal with bullies and learning how to accept themselves. He was right.

"And I love them. Its really great! I

never thought my growing up differently would help in any way, but the kids and I can really relate to each other."

"That's great, hon. I'm so proud of you. Are you staying over tonight?"

"Actually I want to see if I can summon Rebekah by her grave."

"You're not going to the clearing?" Eliza asked.

"No, I feel like Pea is waiting to see me and I'm just not ready yet," Hannah said. "I know she was just trying to protect us, but I'm really having a hard time dealing with her keeping Knox from us for all those years. I grew up without a father because of her. Ok, I didn't need one, but what about you? You lost the love of your life for all those years. Pea

was always so sweet and loving to me, I'm having a hard time reconciling it. I'll talk to her eventually. I have to. And I do miss her. I have to see what she'll say for herself. But right now, I just need some space."

"That's fine, whatever you feel is best."

Hannah pulled on a heavy sweatshirt and stepped out into the backyard. The moon was high in the clear winter sky and as she breathed in the cold air, she could taste snow in the air and wondered how many inches they would get later. Snaking through Pea's old gardens, she yanked the wrought iron door to the small graveyard open.

Picking up a long stick, she drew a

circle in the dirt around her and focused on Rebekah's gravestone until appeared smiling and clasping her hands together happily.

"I've been waiting for you!"
Rebekah said. "I didn't want to leave without thanking you."

"Leave? Where are you going?"
"You did it! Just like I knew you would. You freed me!"

"But I didn't do anything," Hannah said.

Rebekah sighed. "I couldn't tell you exactly or the curse wouldn't lift. When Jacob cursed me to be earthbound and alone, he said only when the thirteenth witch of my clan charmed a wolf of her own could I be freed. He was sure it

would never happen and he chose thirteenth to remind me of my lost child with Luke."

"But you're wrong, I didn't charm Caleb at all. I wouldn't even know how to if I wanted to."

"You don't need to, my dear. The strongest of all magic is love. No one can teach you how to love, it just happens. When you and Caleb finally accepted that you were made for each other, and that nothing should keep you apart, my curse was lifted."

"Then what about Luke? Have you been able see him?" Hannah asked.

"Everyday. He's been waiting for me for all this time. And for you too," Rebekah said as she smiled at something

in the distance.

A dark haired man appeared next to Rebekah and slipped his arm around her waist. His body was strong like a werewolf's, but he glowed like the halo around a full moon. Hannah had never seen anything like it. Slowly Luke took his eyes off Rebekah and faced Hannah. She was surprised to see emerald green eyes exactly like her own staring back at her.

"Thank you, Hannah," he said.
"Thank you for opening your heart to one of my kind. And please thank him for me too. Because of you, I'm able to spend eternity with the woman I've always loved. Never take a moment with each other for granted."

He leaned towards Rebekah and kissed her forehead. Rebekah blew a kiss at Hannah, then waved before she and Luke turned and walked away, slowly disappearing into the moonlight. Hannah smiled, waving at them, happy everything worked out.

In the distance she heard Caleb's motorcycle approaching. She left the graveyard and walked through the cottage to look out the oval window facing the street. Caleb had just pulled up and as she watched him, she wondered how she could've gotten so lucky to stumble upon such a hot wolf that night in the woods. Catching her at the window, he waved and she came out to greet him.

"I heard Knox is moving in," he said before pulling her close against him and kissing her lips. "What are you going to do? I know you, you'll think you're intruding on them."

From the moment Hannah felt the first rush of his touch, she worried about losing that feeling. She didn't have to. The thrill of him, and her desire for him grew stronger daily. That was the real reason she was moving out. If her mother felt half as strongly about Knox as she did about Caleb, then she didn't want to disturb that.

"I haven't decided yet. Maybe I'll get an apartment closer to town."

"I want to show you something. Come with me," he said.

He undressed then shifted into wolf form. She climbed onto his back, holding onto his jeans and t-shirt for after he changed back. Wrapping her fingers into the coarse fur around his thick neck, she held on as he bolted into the forest.

Following the path, Hannah knew they were heading towards the clearing. Sighing, she got annoyed but knew she never told Caleb how she was still feeling about what Pea did to her and her mother.

Caleb slowed down before reaching the clearing and shifted back into his human form. Curious about what he was up to, but not wanting to spoil whatever surprise he had planned, Hannah handed him his clothes.

Dressing quickly, they entered the clearing and Celeb flicked the switch on a generator, turning on small, white lights he hung in the trees surrounding the area. The clearing looked magical, like something out of a fairy tale. It took Hannah's breath away.

"What's going on?" Hannah asked.

He slipped his hand to the back of her neck, and pulled her closer then kissed her forehead, then her lips. Taking her hand, he kissed her fingers then smiled.

"I know you haven't been here in a while because you're upset with Pea, but you've always loved this place so I couldn't think of a better place," he said as he looked into her eyes. "I also know

how you find some traditions silly, like getting down on one knee."

"What are you talking about?"

He pulled something out of his pocket and held it between them. It was a beautiful antique diamond ring with a glittering diamond surrounded by smaller ones bead-set along the intricate hand-crafted band.

"Since the moment I met you, I knew you were the woman for me. It wasn't just that you were my fated mate, but you're strong, sweet, and not afraid to talk back to me," he said laughing. "I love you, Hannah Crane. I love everything about you and I can't imagine another moment without being able to tell the world that not only are you my

mate, but my wife as well. Move in with me. Spend the rest of your life with me. Marry me."

Hannah's heart thumped in her chest and she couldn't wipe the smile off her face. Of course she'd marry him, but she couldn't help but notice he didn't ask. She wanted to remind the Alpha who was the boss.

"Is that a question?" Hannah asked giggling.

"And you said you weren't a wolf charmer," he said laughing, then kissed her. "Miss Hannah Crane, will you do me the honor of being my bride?"

"Well since you asked...yes!"

Caleb hugged her tight and Hannah held him wondering how every time she

thought she was the happiest she had ever been, she got happier. She wasn't in a rush to get married, she was just starting to figure out her life, but she knew Caleb was who she wanted to be with for the rest of her life and if she was lucky like Rebekah, for an eternity after that.

The End

Continue reading for the opening chapters of His Every Whim

His Every Whim

by Liliana Rhodes

Part One ~ July

Chapter One

Ashley

"Ashley, wait! You forgot your tie!"

I turned around when I heard Jackie call me. I took the black clip-on tie that was part of our uniform from her then clipped it in place and looked at the other girls in their pressed white shirts, black slacks, ties and vests. Had anyone told me I'd graduate from college and become a waitress, I would've told them they were full of shit. But there I was,

dressed and ready to serve cocktails at the famed Boone Art Gallery.

"Do I look alright? I can't believe you have to wear this outfit whenever you work."

"It pays the bills while I'm in school. Besides Ash, you look great. It really shows off your curves."

I rolled my eyes. She was just trying to make me feel better. I looked like a penguin and I knew everyone thought the same. I glanced over at Jackie with her dark brown hair up in a pony tail just like mine. That's where the similarities ended. Dressed alike, we looked like the before and after of a diet ad.

"Thanks for getting me this job Jackie. I don't know what I'd do

without you."

"No sweat. I know you'd do the same for me. Plus when I heard this party was at the Boone, I knew I had to get you in. Maybe you can see if they're hiring."

I nodded and hoped she'd drop the subject. I needed to put my best foot forward and get through the night. I didn't need to be reminded of my inability to get a job because I "only" had an Art History degree and no "real" work experience.

In a matter of days my world came crashing down around me. When my graduate school loans got denied at the last minute, I had to scramble to find a job to keep my apartment. Now, two

months later, not only was I still unemployed, but I was sleeping on Jackie's pull-out couch. I really didn't want to think about it.

As if she read my mind, Jackie put her arm around me and gave me a quick hug. We each grabbed a small tray of champagne filled glasses and headed out of the break room and into the crowded exhibit area.

The Boone Art Gallery buzzed with excitement. The event was invitation only for the grand opening of the Pedro Escamino exhibit—the hottest young sculptor in years. Everywhere I looked, beautiful people posed in their expensive clothes. Men strutted by in perfectly tailored suits and women

glowed in couture gowns. It reminded me that being a waitress was the closest I'd ever get to being at this kind of event.

The gallery's large, open, modern space was white and simple in order to allow the art work to pop and be the focus. Partial walls throughout the room governed the flow of traffic, and gave the viewers either the surprise of the next piece or showcased another. Throughout the gallery cozy alcoves with sleek, low European-style couches and cocktail tables invited the guests to relax.

As I walked around the room with my tray, offering the passing guests a glass of chilled champagne, Jackie

rushed over to me, her voice filled with alarm as she whispered even though she had a fake smile in place.

"See that guy over there? In the alcove to the right. Sitting by himself. Don't be obvious about it."

I casually glanced towards the alcove she mentioned and saw a man sitting by himself. His legs were stretched out in front of him as he leaned back into the couch. While he dressed like the other men, in a perfectly tailored suit, he definitely wore it much better. I never realized before how sexy a man could look in a suit.

He looked to be in his forties since his light brown hair had some grey in it, especially at his temples. He wore his

hair a little on the longer side, almost shaggy but not unkempt, and he had a closely trimmed beard which made it hard to see his face well. Regardless, it was obvious he was a very handsome man.

Complementing his charcoal grey suit, he wore an ice-blue tie. I couldn't help but wonder what color his eyes were or how rough the hair of his beard would feel against my cheek. With one glance it was obvious to whoever looked that he refused to enjoy himself, but for some reason I felt myself drawn to him.

"You mean the grump?" I asked.

"Shh! Yes!" She hissed. "He's always at these things. I've never seen

him mingle or talk to any guests. He just sits there." She paused for a moment as she snuck a quick peek at him. "Stay away from him. He always yells at the wait staff whenever we offer him anything. I think he likes to make people cry."

"Who is he?"

"Damned if I know. Just some asshole I guess but I wanted to warn you."

Jackie disappeared into the crowd while I stood near an appetizer display taking it all in. I couldn't help it, what she said intrigued me. I regularly darted my eyes over to the man in the alcove. Later, even after I made my way through the crowd again, I still checked to see if

anyone spoke to him. He remained completely alone and never once left his seat.

As the evening went on, I started to convince myself that he couldn't be all that bad. I told myself that maybe he was an asshole because no one ever offered him a drink or was nice to him. All Jackie said was that he made everyone cry. If that was the worse he could do, then why not go over?

I hemmed and hawed over it, making sure to walk past his alcove every so often to see if anyone spoke to him. I wasn't the kind of girl to be outgoing, normally I kept to myself and was shy and quiet, but eventually I couldn't help myself. I shoved away the

old Ashley and like a moth to a flame, I went over to offer him a glass of champagne.

Chapter Two

Xander

Yet another event at the Boone Art Gallery. I only attended these functions out of some bizarre sense of obligation, so there I sat again by myself in my favorite alcove. At least it gave me the chance to people watch and if I hadn't been doing just that, then I wouldn't have seen her.

She stood out from the crowd with her black, almond shaped eyes, bee stung lips, and dark brown hair. I imagined she would be even more beautiful with her hair down around her shoulders. Even in that ridiculous

catering uniform she was gorgeous. If all women had curves like that I'd be a happy man.

It was one of the things with society I didn't understand. We pushed health and eating properly yet the image of beauty that was shoved down our throats was a thin, twig of a woman. I preferred women to look healthy, have some meat on their bones, not be a bag of bones.

So for once I was glad to be at the Boone and alone. It gave me the opportunity to keep admiring her as she walked around offering champagne. I hadn't been this attracted to anyone in a long time. It was a shame I couldn't do anything about it. If this was any other place and if I hadn't hired the caterer,

things could be different.

But those were excuses. I chose to not look, to not get attached to anyone. Life was too complicated to bother.

Chapter Three

Ashley

I loaded my tray with freshly poured champagne and made my way towards his alcove. As I approached, I took a deep breath and reminded myself the worse he could do was make me cry. I was a big girl, I could handle a few tears if that was what happened. I needed to get closer to him. I entered his alcove and smiled.

"Champagne sir?"

He grunted and looked up at me. He didn't say a word, just stared. I wondered if I should leave. The old Ashley would've left, but the old Ashley

wouldn't have been in his alcove to begin with. I figured I had nothing to lose and set a glass of champagne down on the small table in front of him.

"Did I say I wanted champagne?"

His voice growled and I immediately regretted being there but I was too stubborn to run away. I summoned up all my courage, stood up straight and challenged his gaze.

"No, but you didn't say you didn't want it either."

The brief silence lasted forever but then he cracked a smile and picked up the glass I set down. For a moment I was even more frightened of him, thinking he was a wild card and absolutely crazy, until I noticed his eyes. They were ice-

blue, like his tie, and cold but I saw a flash of warmth behind them. I never saw such amazing blue eyes before. I wanted to lose myself in them.

While I braced myself for the worse, he leaned back into his seat and crossed his legs with his ankle resting on his knee. When he took a sip of champagne, I breathed a sigh of relief and turned to head back into the crowd.

"I'm not done with you."

I stopped dead in my tracks. His voice was menacing and sent chills up my spine. Oddly though I still found myself drawn to him, I couldn't help it. I turned back around to face him and saw the slightest smile playing on his lips.

"Is there anything else I can get for

you sir?"

"Sit."

At first I moved towards the couch, I wanted to do whatever he said, but then I remembered I was working.

"I'm sorry sir, but I need to continue making the rounds."

"Sit. No one is going to say anything to you about it. Join me."

"But—"

"No buts. Sit. You're a waitress right? I need you to wait on me."

I looked out at the crowded room. I wanted to get back to work and earn some money. I *needed* to earn money. Again, the old me would've done the responsible thing and return to work, but I still wasn't ready to do things the old

Ashley way. Old Ashley got me no where, it was time to change that. I set my tray of champagne down on the alcove's cocktail table and sat on the couch with him.

"Is there anything I can get you Sir?"

"Don't call me sir, call me Xander.

And you are?"

"Ashley."

"Pleasure to meet you Ashley." He extended his hand to me and I shook it, letting my hand be engulfed by his and overwhelmed when the warmth of his hand penetrated deep into my core.

"Didn't they warn you about me?"

I couldn't help it, I giggled and nodded as my cheeks turned hot. It never occurred to me that he might know of his

own reputation. I wondered how much he did to maintain it.

"They did. I guess I don't listen very well."

"We'll have to change that," he said. His voice returned to its menacing tone again and I began to worry. Was he going to turn into the jerk Jackie warned me about? Maybe he planned to report me to the catering manager, Mr. Smithfield.

I was working with Jackie for just the one night but hoped to do it regularly. Being the only recent prospect I had to earn money, I didn't want to mess it up. I kept an eye out for Mr. Smithfield, who Jackie earlier convinced to give me a chance.

"Have you been waitressing for long? I don't think I've seen you here before."

"No sir, tonight is my first night."

"Sir? What did i say?"

"Sorry...Xander."

"And on your first night you decide to bother the one person they warned you about? Interesting." He was quiet for a moment. "What did you do before this?"

I didn't answer him right away. I didn't know why he asked so many questions. His face was stoic. I couldn't tell if he was trying to be friendly or simply interrogating me. I didn't think I had a choice, I had to answer him.

"I just graduated college."

"Ahh so you just graduated college

and you're waitressing? What did you major in? A waste like Art History?"

He laughed at his own joke but I didn't find it funny. I folded my arms in front of my chest. *Great, this is how he's going to make me cry.*

"It's none of your business but yes."

He laughed even harder, the sound boomed out of him and I knew everyone heard it but no one reacted. He took a glass of champagne from my tray and handed it to me.

"I think you need this."

"No, I'm working, I can't."

"Don't make me tell your boss that you refused a simple customer request."

He had a stern look and I couldn't tell if he was joking or not but based on

what Jackie said about him before, I wasn't going to take any chances. I picked up the glass but as I took a small sip, I saw Mr. Smithfield enter the room.

There I sat, the girl Jackie begged him to let waitress, resting and drinking champagne with a guest. I couldn't risk him seeing me and both of us losing our jobs.

"I'm sorry, I have to go."

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Author's Note

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xoxo,

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