



Wild Born (Hemlock Wolf Pack: Life in the Happily Ever After Book 4)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: True-mates, Lee and Bane Hemlock-Knight, had a bumpy start to their relationship in Healer's Oath. It took a trip to the Other World to make things right. The mates have celebrated the anniversary of the trip each and every year. This year on 'Wolf Day,' a discovery in the woods changes the course of their celebrations.

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Bane

Even after more than two decades together it wasn't easy to sneak out of bed without waking up my mate. I'm never sure if my sneaking skills have diminished or if Lee's hypervigilance just never cleared up. I liked to think that it was the former, but it was probably the latter, unfortunately. The clock read shortly before 4AM. The kids were still out cold and both of us had the day off. I could've laid around longer. The warm draw of my mate's sleeping form almost kept me in bed, but it was Lee's Wolf Day, and I wasn't about to skimp on the details.

Sometimes it felt like I spent a third of my medical practice time telling other doctors and patients that every person will react differently to trauma and each one of them will need to make unique adaptations to survive. Wolf Day came from that. Not everyone has a Wolf Day. No one else that I know of celebrates one in fact. It isn't Lee's birthday or our anniversary. It's simply the day he reunited with his wolf in the winding maze of the Other World. Most folks don't go through that, hence the lack of Wolf Days in the pack.

"Your aura is going polka dotted. You're thinking about being sneaky," Lee yawned, turning onto his back.

"Is it sneaky if I do something every year?" I asked, trailing a finger down his cheek.

"Are you extra sneaky this year?" he yawned again.

"Maybe. Are you?"

“No, I’m tired.”

“Okay, Wolf Day Boy, go back to sleep.”

“You’re polka dotted,” he said, vaguely gesturing to the empty air around me.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“What are you thinking about?”

“You.”

“Me? I’m not sneaky enough to give you polka dots.”

“It’s probably all the unopened mail you hide under the sofa cushions in your office giving me polka dots,” I teased him.

“That’s my emotional support stack of mail. You can’t take it away.”

“I bet some of the senders need emotional support,” I laughed.

“Nah. If it was important they’d email or text.”

“Since I’m polka dotted, did you have something you wanted to do today?” I asked him.

“Sleep. You stay in bed and sleep. We’ll sleep the day away and cash in our sleep debt,” he grinned, rolling over to press his lean muscular body against mine.

His ginger hair stood up, pointing in all directions like he might join a boyband any second now. I smoothed it down as our lips met for a soft good morning kiss.

“What were you really getting up to do?” He asked when the kiss broke. “Surely you weren’t going to take care of my mail and count it as a gift. Not that you still have to get me gifts today---”

“No new tricks,” I teased him. “Wolf Day always starts with breakfast in bed.”

“How about we use PackPass and order breakfast from Mama Dragon’s. Then we can both stay in bed until it gets here or until one of the pups start howling their heads off.”

I grabbed my phone from the nightstand and ignored all the text messages highlighted in green. I glanced at the ones in yellow from our kids who lived further away. Terrick had sent us a photo of Scott sleeping surrounded by his pups. Lee oohed and awed until his stomach growled. Twenty minutes later, we double-checked that we had everything we needed in the cart for us and the kids. Only to have to add a few more drinks because something was always forgotten.

“They’re all going over to your brother’s after breakfast. Then we’ll have theirs on Duke’s birthday. They’re going up to Heartville,” I told Lee.

“I already knew that,” he laughed, “but your polka dots are going away.”

“Blake and Jonah babysit all the time,” I laughed. “That wasn’t being sneaky.”

“Adding five extra kids to the house for two days is being sneaky since you thought I didn’t know about it.”

“Touche, mate, touche.”

I was about to offer Lee some Wolf Day head to make up for the polka dots in my aura when the first cry broke through the house. Graylin was four and everything

scared that pup. He was always in tears come morning and had been since the day he was born.

“I’ll get him,” Lee and I said at the same time and laughed.

“We don’t both have to get up and it’s your Wolf Day,” I said, swinging my legs out of bed.

“And he’s my pup,” Lee got up too and our day began.

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Lee

It was nearly 10 AM by the time we dropped off Graylin and the other pups at Blake and Jonah's. Blake's aura was a soft baby pink. Either he was pregnant or considering expanding their family again. He always turned pink before another kid came.

"No," Graylin shook his head when I asked if he was excited to see his cousins.

"Why not, buddy?" Bane squatted down to his level.

"Stay you," Graylin nodded.

"Oh, buddy," I said, squatting down too. "It's just for a little while. I bet Uncle Jonah will play guitar."

"No," Graylin shook his head and put his hands over his ears.

"Okay, maybe he won't," Bane chuckled.

"Stay you," Graylin said.

I glanced at Bane, ready to give in and take our kids home. We managed to celebrate Wolf Day for more than a quarter century now. One of them spent at home with the kids wouldn't be the end of the world.

"Stay with your littermates?" Bane tried.

“You stay,” Graylin shook his head.

“You stay,” Bane laughed.

“You stay too.”

Blake glanced over at us as the rest of the kids ran off to the backyard to play. He made his way over and sat down on the floor next to our baby. Graylin plopped down on his lap and buried his face in his uncle’s chest.

“Okay. Bye,” Graylin said a second later.

“Are you sure, buddy?” Bane asked.

“Bye, bye,” he said.

“I got him. He’ll be okay,” Blake laughed. “He’s just the sort of pup who always wants an adult around.”

Leaving my pups with anyone else has never really gotten easier. I trusted Blake with my life and soul, but anything could go wrong when the pups weren’t in my line of sight. Over the years, I grew accustomed to the worry-filled headspace that always followed dropping them off somewhere. Hell, sometimes I still had nightmares that I forgot to pick up Travis and Trista from daycare and they both had mates of their own now.

“He’ll be okay,” Bane said, taking my hand and entwining his fingers through mine.

“I know. He’s such a little guy, though,” I said, letting out a worried laugh. “Everything makes him nervous. He sorta reminds me of Scott when he was little.”

“And look at Scott now. He’s off married to a vampire prince with four pups. He’s running a baking vlog thingy and keeping spirit animals fed. He turned out okay.”

“I don’t know that Terrick would call himself a prince.”

“I know, but isn’t it my job to annoy my son-in-law a bit? It’s not like I can annoy Sheldon. He’s an omega and I think Trista annoys him and Travis enough for both of us,” Bane teased.

“She has a pregnant mate now. They have to let her annoy them. It’s the rules,” I laughed. “So, what’s first on your Wolf Day list?”

“That was breakfast in bed which turned into breakfast on the living room floor,” Bane laughed.

“Okay then, Alpha, what’s second on the list?” I teased him, squeezing his hand.

“A run through the forest to actually let your wolf have some of today,” he said, stopping and playing with the hem of my t-shirt.

“A naked run?” I arched a brow. “We’re going to streak down Mage Street? I’m in.”

“Our wolves always run naked.”

“Only, because you won’t let me buy you a wolf hat. We have a niece who makes hats for wolves and you won’t wear one.”

“Family loyalty only goes so far,” Bane said, tugging my shirt off over my head.

“So we’re finally streaking,” I nodded.

“You really like this shirt,” he said, tossing it onto Blake’s porch. “I don’t want it all ripped up. I’m not sure they still make that particular Grim Howler’s t-shirt. Though, I’m surprised Jonah hasn’t gotten tired of you walking around with his face on your belly.”

“He should be honored. Not many men get to touch my belly even by proxy,” I smirked up at him, rising to my toes to steal a kiss and unbutton the top button on his shirt.

“That’s because, my dear, I’d eat their fucking faces off,” Bane growled, and his eyes shifted to that of his wolf.

The vibration traveled through me stirring up my own inner beast. Fur tickled at the small of my back, poking out through unseen fur follicles. Bane’s fingers trailed over the fur, playing with it and making more prod out higher up on my back.

“Shoes,” I reminded him.

“Thanks, mate,” Bane said and kicked them off right there on Blake and Jonah’s walkway.

Recently, his shoes had become massacre victims any time he wore them while he shifted. I liked to tease him that his paws had gotten bigger than any mortal made shoe could handle. Then his wolf lost a dragon-made shoe in a shift, and we gave up and admitted the defeat. Bane shifted barefoot now.

We kissed as we started to give in to our inner beasts. His lips were warm against mine as our hungry tongues danced between our mouths. His fingers trailed over my bare chest teasing my nipples as fur sprouted around them and they shrank down. We dropped to our knees as fur erupted from our fingers and faces. The shift forced our mouths apart as our muzzles extended from our faces. A few seconds later we stood

side-by-side as wolves. Bane threw his head back and howled.

“Don’t get Graylin going,” I said over our mating link.

A second later, Graylin howled, a sound full of joy and playfulness.

“Blake and Jonah are going to get you later,” I said, but Bane’s paws were already propelling him forward toward the woods.

I raced on his heels until the sidewalks all ended and people randomly strolling around became sparse. He stopped at the tree line sniffing the air and waiting for me to catch up to him. I nipped at Bane’s fluffy tail as I skidded to a halt. He rubbed along my body, nuzzling me as I passed him. Then we were off.

The running trail through the Hemlock Academy hunting grounds was as familiar as our own backyard. While we didn’t hunt as often as some wolves did, we ran the trail at least twice a week to keep our wolves fit and to keep away the zoomies. No one wants to see a wolf headbutt his way out of his human host and take a zoomie trip or a dozen around a medical lab.

Bane skidded to a halt on the trail. I stopped, looking back over my shoulder as he sniffed the air.

“Are you already hungry again?” I asked him over our mating link. “We could get the deer but I’m not skinning what’s left of it after you slobber all over it.”

He didn’t answer, but instead sniffed the air again before jerking his head left for me to follow him. I sniffed the air as I padded in his direction. Someone else was around. The scent of another shifter blended in with the smell of the woods. Wild wolves were nearby too. They liked to follow shifters around when we hunted because we’d usually share with them. Darian liked to tell everyone not to feed them or we might

turn them into dogs, but no one listened. Who here was going to let a fellow wolf go hungry? Besides, it was easier to let them eat it than it was to skin and dress what was left after we finished eating.

“Do you smell that?” Bane asked over our mating link.

“Probably someone taking a nap or skipping class.”

“That smells like a baby, mate. Somewhere beyond the wild wolves’ scents. There’s a baby out here.”

“People do bring their babies for walks. We’ve brought our kids out here before.”

“The wild wolves smell confused.”

“Do you think someone left a baby out here?” I asked, sniffing the air harder and discerning the shifter’s scent was that of a very small baby.

“A newborn?” I sped past Bane.

The crunching over the leaves set the wild wolves on edge. They’d calm down in their own time because I had to find the baby out in the woods. Who left their baby out here? No newborn that young could’ve made it this far by himself. Not even a shifter.

When the wild wolves finally came into sight, they were all gathered around a small den opening. The biggest one, a grey wolf, looked over his shoulder at me and then Bane following on my heels and relief washed over his scent. The wild wolves around Mage Street knew shifters meant them no harm, but I never smelled one relieved at the sight of us.

He nosed the other two wolves out of the way so I could peek inside the den. I sniffed first, blinking to clear the dirt from my eyes that fell when I shoved my head inside. There was definitely a shifter baby inside. When my eyes adjusted to the dim lighting inside the cave, I saw him suckling at the mother wolf along side two wolf pups.

“My pup,” the mother wolf whined.

My heart skipped a beat. It was rare – almost unheard of these days – for a wild wolf to give birth to a wolf shifter. It still happened. Well, we guessed it still happened since there wasn’t a reason for it to stop. Some folks theorized it was evolution. Others guessed it was reincarnation, but the soul got lost on the way to the womb.

The mother trembled nosing at the furless baby who clung to her. I could only imagine how scary it must’ve been for her to watch one of her pups lose his fur and grow into a human baby. I reached out and touched the baby’s foot. She growled low but didn’t snap at me. He was nice and warm against the pad of my paw.

“What do you want me to do, Mama?” I whined in wolf.

She lowered her eyes and gazed at the dirt floor of the den. Even if she’d never seen a wolf pup turn to a baby in the wild, she knew this pup was different. The guards outside the den probably had to chase away other wolves who would’ve made a snack of the strange pup they didn’t understand.

She licked the baby’s head and he cooed against her fur. My heart broke straight down the middle when I met her gaze. She knew the pup couldn’t stay with them. He’d grow up to be different and have needs that she couldn’t provide in the wild.

“You can visit him,” I yipped. “You’ll be able to find him.”

She licked the baby’s head while I tried to figure out how to drag the baby from the

den without leaving bite marks. Then Bane's long arm appeared beside me. The she-wolf growled and sniffed his hand. She lay against the back of the den licking her furless baby's head until the baby was out of reach. She let out a howl that finished crushing my heart into pulp as I shimmied out of the den.

Bane sat against a nearby tree in his human form with the baby clutched to his chest all wrapped up in the shirt he hadn't taken off before he shifted. The three guard wolves rushed forward. Two stopped, while the one who nosed them away stepped forward and sniffed the pup. He was the likely sire to the little shifter. He whined and wagged his tail even as the mother wolf howled her unavoidable grief. Part of me wanted to tuck the baby back into the den and leave them all be. He could shift into his wolf form and survive alongside his littermates. He could be more wolf than human and survive just fine. Only, that wasn't true. Not entirely. Other wolves had been nearby and the guards wore scratch and bite marks. Leaving the little guy out here with his mother meant a harder life for the whole pack. Giving in to what had to be I tossed my head back and howled with the she-wolf. I couldn't imagine nature forcing me to give up my baby.

"We need to get him to the clinic and look him over," Bane said to me and the male wolf now licking the sleeping baby's head. "And we should probably let Darian know too."

"I'm not giving him to Darian. We found him. I told her we'd take care of him!" I said, the fur on my back bristling.

"And we will. I just think we're going to have to explain where he came from before they think we're out here stealing babies."

"Well, we sort of are, but it can't be helped," I said over our mating link.

"This is hard. I don't like the idea of taking any baby away from their parents, but the

others are out there watching us. They're watching the baby. They don't understand the pup and well just look at these guys," he nodded to the three wolves standing close by. "He isn't safe out here. He makes the rest of their pack less safe too. I'm sorry, sweetheart. I really am."

I gave in and shifted back to my human form. After a few deep breaths and knocking the leaves out of my hair, I said, "Maybe we can try to talk to the others."

"Lee," Bane met my gaze, "I'm not saying these wolves aren't capable. I'm saying we can't leave a shifter baby out here with no other humans. It's unconscionable. We also can't take him, his littermates, and his whole pack home with us. They're our cousins on the evolutionary chain, but we're not that similar. Not similar enough for them to live inside."

"I know," I hung my head.

I knew from the moment I peeped into the den and saw the baby that he was coming home with us and we'd leave behind a broken hearted she-wolf. The three male wolves said their goodbyes, but the shewolf didn't peek out of the den. She'd miss the pup for a while, but she lived by the laws of the wild more than any of us did. She had two other pups to tend to and since they were still with her they took precedence over the soft, squishy cub we took away.

"Talk about a Wolf Day present," Bane tried to tease me, but that line wouldn't be funny until months from now.

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Bane

Sometimes being the Head Healer on campus had its perks. It meant you could be cryptic and make the pack Alpha travel across campus to see something and not tell him why over the phone or the pack link. It was less about being cryptic and more about not having every pack member who heard flood in to meet the new pup. His world had grown and changed enough for one day.

While Lee and I waited on Darian, we looked him over again. He was a healthy pup with a hearty appetite. It took him a few tries to latch onto the bottle, but he eventually got there. The bloodwork was out, and Lee bounced from foot to foot awaiting the results. Not many people knew about it but there was a gene-marker for those born from wild wolves. We all had at least one copy of it, but those born into the wild had the full set of twelve. If the pup was born from the wild she-wolf he'd boast the same. If he were somehow dropped off in the wolf den by someone else, he wouldn't.

"Don't even think that," Lee stopped pacing and stared me down. "Who would do that?"

"I don't know, but it's something we have to check for," I said, smoothing down the baby's thick dark hair. "He smells wild, but we have to know for sure."

My mate frowned at me, his brow furrowing.

"Come on. Come back over here," I said, reaching out a hand to him. "Come hold the baby. What are we going to call him?"

“Are you trying to distract me?” he asked, crossing the room to join me and the little one.

“Maybe. Is it working?”

“Yes,” Lee laughed, taking the baby from me. “He’s so tiny. He does smell like the wild, huh? Even after his bath.”

“He does,” I nodded, and my wolf stood up to sniff the air again.

“If the pup hunters come, I’m devouring them whole,” he chimed off into my thoughts.

“Would-be pup hunters,” I reminded the furry guy. “His parents had a few friends that helped out.”

“Ding-dong Darian is almost here,” he said, ignoring the would-be part.

“This is why I don’t like it when you skip lunch,” Lee said. “He gets all bite-y and ready to eat everyone.”

“I’m going to eat you later tonight,” I said, standing up right before Darian rang the doorbell to gain access to the employee-only part of the clinic.

“I’m going to hold you to that. Good luck finding the time with a new baby in the house,” he laughed.

“I’ll make the time, mate. Not like we haven’t had to squeeze it in before,” I said before opening the door.

“What is it?” Darian asked without saying hello.

“What’s your issue?” I asked, stepping back to allow him into the room.

“You call me away from my mate and pups on my day off without explanation and I’m the one with an issue?” Darian asked as I shut and locked the door behind him.

“Whose baby is that?”

“A she-wolf’s,” Lee answered before I had a chance. “We’re pretty sure he’s wild-born.”

“Is that even possible?” Darian asked, taking a step closer.

“It happens a few times a century,” I told him. “We’re still waiting on the lab work but sniff him and you’ll see.”

“I’ve never smelled a wild-born wolf before,” Darian said.

“You’ll know. Your wolf will know, anyway,” Lee said.

Darian inched closer to Lee and the pup as if he was afraid Lee might bite him. I didn’t blame our Alpha for being so tentative. His true-mate, Wrynn, was known as a biter when it came to pregnancy and his children.

“We’re keeping him,” Lee said, squaring his shoulders.

“Saturn and Pluto don’t need a younger brother just yet,” Darian laughed. “He’s all yours.”

“I know. We found him. I had to take him away from his mother,” Lee said.

“Can I sniff him or not, Lee? You’re giving me mixed signals,” Darian laughed.

“You can, but he’s mine. I told her I’d take care of him,” Lee said.

Darian bent low and sniffed the sleeping baby’s belly. When he rose, his eyes had shifted to that of his wolf. The baby was wild-born and our wolves knew it on some deep, primal level. He met my gaze and nodded.

“Do we have a protocol for the paper work associated with wild-born pups?” he asked me.

I opened my mouth to tell him that as pack Alpha it was his job to know, but as usual, Lee knew what was up.

“There’s a special birth certificate we have,” Lee said. “It’s a wild-born birth certificate that also acts as an adoption record.”

“Are there health problems associated with being wild-born?” Darian asked.

“Only if he would be exposed to something before all his baby shots, but that’s the case with all babies,” Lee said.

“Do we have the form, or do we have to call Sky up on the mountain?” Darian asked.

“I have the form. It’s all part of the medical system,” Lee grinned. “I found it while Bane was feeding the baby.”

“Let’s not tell everyone about him just yet,” I cut into the conversation. “He’s a pup who’s been through an ordeal already. Let him have some time to adjust. Let’s wait until the bloodwork comes back anyway.”

“I’m not going to tell anyone, but people are going to notice you two with a new pup,” Darian pointed out.

“Maybe,” Lee grinned, “but except for a few people, it’s none of their business. He’s not some medical experiment. He’s a pup. We’ll find the proof he’s wild-born in his blood, but we’re not going to find the magic that allowed him to be born that way. Every time someone is wild-born, everyone wants answers and ---”

“He is a pup of the Hemlock Wolf Pack,” Darian interrupted him, “whether he’s wild-born or not. He’s a wolf pup born within our territory. Don’t worry. Even if the news gets out, he’s one of us.”

“Thanks, Darian,” Lee smiled and some of the tension fled his shoulders.

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Lee

We could have run the pup's bloodwork ourselves, but I didn't want to leave room for anyone to speculate that we lied about his beginnings. He was tiny, hungry, and displaced already. He didn't need to be at the center of a so-called scandal on top of everything else. So instead of running that risk in a few days, Doctor Michael Lawnery of the Guardians of Glitter Bomb would conduct his own labs to confirm what we already found. The GGBs were our allies, but not closely aligned enough to lie for us.

"I don't think he's going to make international news," Bane said as we settled into bed that night.

The pup, still unnamed, was tucked away in the crib in the nursery we always kept ready. We'd fostered a few pups over the years and babysat enough to know better than to think we didn't need a nursery. The kids were excited about the new baby, but we hadn't told them where he came from either. Before his bedtime, Graysin sat quietly watching the new pup. His eyes glowed with curiosity and joy. He was also very insistent that we had to name him soon, because names were how we knew we were family. At least, that's how we knew according to my kiddo.

"He could," I countered. "We're trying to keep things quiet, but we know from experience quiet is hard to maintain. The world thrives on noise. Silence is perceived as a void, everything and everyone wants to fill up. So, I'm covering our asses. Michael's a good doctor too."

"Never said he wasn't," Bane smirked at me.

“Alpha,” I groaned. “I’m too tired for everything that smirk says. I’m sorry.”

“Come here,” he tugged me closer as I told Magi to turn out the lights.

The hearth magic sunk the bedroom into darkness as Bane pulled me to his chest. He kissed the top of my head and I buried my face in his chest. His scent wrapped around me like a warm, familiar blanket and my eyes drifted closed.

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled again.

“It’s been a long day,” Bane chuckled. “There’ll be other days.”

“Thank you for not being a cave-alpha.”

“I’m too old to become one now. Besides, it’s no fun if you’re not as into it as I am,” he said and kissed the top of my head again. “I’ll take the first cry tonight. You get some rest.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, mate. Happy Wolf Day.”

That night I dreamt of Travis and Trista as little babies. The moments I first held them in my arms played out in vivid detail despite them being parents now. I woke up reaching out for Bane and straining my ears for the sound of a little cry. It had to be my turn sooner or later. No pup that age slept through the night without crying for food at least twice. Usually much more often than that.

I opened my eyes and slammed them shut again. Midmorning sunlight shined through

the window, and I was in bed alone. My wolf yawned inside his inner sanctum, and I blinked, confused. Was I still dreaming?

“Bane?” I poked him over our mating link, because in my lucid dreams and nightmares our mating link never worked. It was the one sure-fire way for me to know if I was awake for real or not.

“The kids are all at Jake’s along with Blake’s kids too for now. They’ll bring them back this afternoon. I’m in the nursery with our youngest.”

“You should’ve woken me up.”

“Nope. You were out cold all night. You were tired.”

“It was a long run and it broke my heart to leave her like that without her pup,” I yawned.

“Coffee and a bloodshake in the kitchen,” he informed me.

“Did I ever tell you how much I love you in the morning?”

“A couple times, but it’s always nice to hear.”

After swinging into the bathroom to wash my face to wake up, I grabbed the drinks from the kitchen and headed into the nursery. Bane was stretched out with his long muscular legs crossed at the ankles in the nursery’s recliner. The baby slept in his russet wolf pup form on his chest. Bane stroked his back and grinned up at me.

“How’d he do last night?” I asked before taking a sip of my shake.

“Five or six feedings. Wild-borns are known to be hungrier. The formula probably

isn't as nutrient dense as his mother's milk. So, there's that to take into account too. He'll probably eat more often with the formula."

"You should've woken me up," I told him again. "You said you'd take first cry."

"Mate, when you don't hear a crying baby, I know you're tired," he smiled up softly at me.

"But you'll be tired now."

"Eh, I'm okay," Bane shook his head. "I managed enough sleep last night. Took a nap after Gary and Jake picked up the kids too. I told Blake about him, because there was no way your brother wasn't going to ask about an extra baby when he dropped off his kids. I think he'll keep it to himself."

"He better," I laughed. "Want to switch me places."

"Not until you have a real breakfast," Bane shook his head. "Bloodshakes don't count."

"Technically they could," I pointed out.

"Feed your wolf before I eat you," Bane laughed.

"You saw how well that went last night," I laughed and headed back out into the kitchen.

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Bane

As the days passed until the Guardians of Glitter Bomb doctor arrived, we played around with name ideas for the newest member of our family. I leaned toward loving the name Wild, but gave in when Lee said his beginnings would follow him around for the rest of his life without his name giving it away. Sure, not everyone would guess it right away, but the kid himself would know. Sometimes the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves are more important than what the world says.

“Okay, then what’s your idea?” I asked Lee as he gave the baby his bottle.

“I’m thinking,” he said and pressed his lips together. “Maybe we should give him a really common name. That way he can fit in better.”

“A common name in this family? He’ll stick out like a sore thumb,” I laughed.

“Travis and Mildred are common names,” he countered.

“Mildred was common when the first Mildred was born,” I teased him.

“Fine,” Lee sighed. “So, nothing too common, but nothing too out there either.”

“What about Romul?” I asked.

“Is that from human lore?” Lee arched his brows at me.

“Almost, but I changed it. Besides, even the surviving non-shifters don’t really care

about that anymore,” I shrugged. “They took enough of our stuff over the years.”

“What about Rhomas? Like Thomas but with an ‘r’?”

“Rhomas,” I rolled the name around my tongue. “I like it. I think it fits him.”

“Rhom for short,” Lee nodded.

“I’ll start filling out his birth certificate,” I said, standing up.

I kissed Lee’s forehead on the way out of the room. As far as I was concerned, Michael Lawngry couldn’t drag his ass to town soon enough. I always hated being in limbo and this time it wasn’t just Lee and I in limbo. It was the baby too. Once everything was officially filed our lives could move on and his could begin.

“And then maybe we can romp,” my wolf cut into my thoughts, and I shook my head.

He wasn’t wrong. Romping would definitely improve the situation, but whether or not Lee had birthed Baby Rhomas, his actions were in accordance with having a new pup in the house. We’d waited before and unless we never had another kid, I’d wait again.

Despite the wait feeling like years passing by, Doctor Michael Lawngry arrived on Mage Street exactly when he said he would. I stayed at home with Baby Rhomas while Lee showed the visiting doctor our lab. Having the dragon shifter touching all our stuff, put off my wolf. Sure, he was here to do us a favor, but the lab was sacred territory. My wolf paced inside my chest as I rocked the baby. The furry guy was certain Michael would blow up the lab before the test finished.

“Stop it,” Darian cut into my thoughts over the pack link. “Michael Lawngry isn’t

here to blow up your lab. He's here to vouch for what we already know."

"Stop listening in on me," I growled.

"Tell your wolf to quit sounding off the intruder alarms then."

"He'll be fine once everything is done and over with. You know how he is. Lee and I put a lot of our own money and resources into that lab, Alpha. It's his stomping ground."

"Well, today, he has to put up with a visitor, because we need to know if Roomba is really wild-born."

"Rhomas!" I snapped at Darian. "His name is Rhomas."

"Rhomas," Darian repeated a few times before something off the pack link distracted him.

Logically, I knew Michael wouldn't wreck the lab. Part of me figured even my wolf knew that, but he was more instinct and laws of the wild than I'd ever be. I learned to be civilized for the sake of my patients, but he was the part of me that never could be tamed. Standing, I held Baby Rhomas to my chest and walked the length of the nursery. All the other kids were back at Jake's today. They didn't know where their newest sibling came from and not a single one of them asked. They accepted that the new baby was part of our family and that was enough for them.

"Calm down. You're making me itchy," Lee cut into my thoughts over our mating link.

"Itchy?" I asked.

"When you get like this, it feels like fleas are crawling through my fur."

“Sorry, mate. On edge.”

“Michael’s cool. You know him. He’s not in here knocking everything around. He’s running a test,” Lee said as if he needed to remind me.

“How much longer?” I asked him.

“Not long now, Alpha, not long at all.”

I paced still holding Baby Rhomas to my chest. Usually I had more patience than the others around me, but it was as if all the world hung by a thread. I kissed Rhomas’s head, willing the test to process quicker. He smelled wild, but what if somewhere out there someone was looking for him? What if someone had left him out there on his own and the she-wolf just pulled him into her den to protect him? Rhomas wouldn’t be the first baby left out for someone else to find.

“Wild. All twelve are there on all three runs he did,” Lee chimed into my thoughts a few minutes later.

“You’re officially Rhomas Hemlock-Knight,” I held the pup up to look him in the eyes.

He wiggled his little limbs until I rested him against my shoulder once more. He rubbed his head against me until he found his comfy spot again. Our family had officially grown.

“His birthday is sorta Wolf Day,” Lee said, as I headed into the kitchen to make Baby Rhomas’s next bottle. “I know he was probably born a bit before that, but it’s the day we found him.”

“How do you feel about that? We could always say it was the day before,” I said, not wanting to discount the day Lee reunited with his own inner beast.

“I think it should be his birthday, Alpha. It’s the only day we know for sure. I love Wolf Day, but it can be his birthday too now.”

“Maybe that’s the Wolf Day tradition for me: Finding wolves.”

He laughed over our mating link and his tail wagged. Baby Rhomas didn’t have an easy path before him. No one born ever did, but he was ours and that meant he was safe and sound as any baby could ever be.

Chapter Six

Lee

Plenty of folks had questions about Baby Rhomas, but Bane took most of them. He was a bit better at not telling people to fuck off than I was. I didn’t mind explaining the wild-born genes or discussing theories of how a wolf’s genetic might evolve into that of a shifter in their pups. I didn’t entertain any of the mean ones that got handed down from the humans before they fell off the face of Earthside.

Each day, Baby Rhomas became a bit more ours. His wild-born scent was still there, but now he smelled like me and Bane and our kids. He smelled like Blake and Jonah and all his cousins. He smelled like pack and so he was. From time to time, the wolf we assumed was his sire came to visit. He brought dead rabbits and birds, and we always took them inside, even if there was no way we would let the baby eat them. Why discourage a father who was still trying to feed the child that civilization took away from him?

Bane skinned the rabbits and cured what was salvageable of the hides. When we had enough, we’d sew Baby Rhomas up a blanket from the gifts his wild heritage brought him. The she-wolf took longer to show, but she was nursing and focused on the two wolf pups still in her den or maybe it just took her longer to find the heart to see him again. Seeing him again meant leaving him again. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to walk

away if I were her. Only she did. She came at night and peered through the sliding glass doors. She peered through his nursery window. She never came around when we were close, but she never made an effort to whisk him away into the night dark woods either.

By the time Bane's birthday rolled around, she was a normal visitor, and I sometimes left her sandwiches by the window where she usually popped up with both paws to see her sleeping baby. Since we were going up to Hemlock Mountain Lodge for Bane's birthday, I left instructions for Blake to do the same. My brother was uneasy about feeding a wild wolf and I understood his worry. She was still wild, but there wasn't a wolf attack in recorded shifter history that came from a well-fed wolf. She wasn't a danger to us and if those who worried about Rhomas's effect on the pack still remembered him, they hadn't bothered with us at all. They had more important and urgent things to concern themselves with in the woods.

I loved Hemlock Mountain Lodge and how rustic the world felt when we left the jeep behind and walked up the winding path to the actual hotel. Bane and I always made the walk hand-in-hand. We never packed much and what we did pack fit comfortably into a single suitcase that Bane carried along the way. We packed light because we hardly left the lodge and when we did it was usually in wolf form to run the trails or perhaps run straight to the top of Hemlock Mountain to see the statues of Juda and Frost.

"How are you feeling, mate?" Bane asked as we neared the lodge on foot. "About leaving the baby behind?"

"I didn't know it would be this hard," I laughed. "I should've. I've done it before. I always thought it would get easier."

"I don't think it does. Well, it does as the baby gets older, but the first time will

always be difficult. Rhomas is a special circumstance too. We have to hope that Blake and Jonah get along with his birth parents.”

“I think they will. We’re wolves after all. She’s a wolf. Wild or shifter, I don’t think it matters. She’s not going to try to fight them. I’m not sure she understood what a vacation was when I told her, but I tried. I really did.”

“She might’ve understood it,” Bane said, trying to make me feel better. “I mean, wolves leave to hunt. So she probably understands it on some level.”

“I hope so. I don’t want her to think we abandoned him after she let us take him home with us.”

“I don’t think she’ll think that and if she does, we’re only up here for the long weekend. We might even be back before she visits again. Either way, I need this and not just because it’s my birthday. It feels like we’ve been on the go since our kids started having kids. We need a slow down. Even if it’s only for three days.”

“So, more sleeping than romping?” I teased him, bumping his hip with mine.

“I didn’t say that,” he laughed. “We could slow it down too. Draw it out. Draw out your pleasure. Make you squirm.”

His words drifted down into a whisper as he opened the door to the lodge and I walked through. A blush still dotted my cheeks when the guy behind the desk, Lefly, waved and said hello to us by name. Bane checked us in and I grabbed the keycard and suitcase and sprinted up the steps. I wasn’t the first man to arrive at Hemlock Mountain Lodge ready to go and I probably wouldn’t be the last. We were all wolves after all.

The suite was beautiful as always and smelled like sandalwood and patchouli. Incense or pheromone blocker spray I wasn’t sure, but no hotel room was clean and

refreshed until pheromone blocker spray covered every inch of it. Most shifters weren't as territorial as our ancestors, but sometimes you didn't want to catch the scent of a stranger close by while you slept. Okay, all the time. For me it was all the time. Grady Moore had drilled that into my very soul.

"Don't think about him right now. He's over in the Pit being roasted or something. Okay, he's probably in group therapy, but you know how miserable everyone in group therapy is. It's probably a better punishment than being roasted," my wolf chimed off in my thoughts as I kicked off my shoes and pulled my shirt off over my head.

We didn't always jump straight to romping when we took vacations, but I was tired of wearing clothes and all the expectations that came with them. I loved my job, our pack, and kids, but sometimes I just wanted to be me. Even more so I wanted to just be me with Bane by my side. I checked my phone for texts and sent Blake a quick message to let him know we arrived safely before laying it on the nightstand and purposely forgetting about it. If there was an emergency, they could contact me and Bane over the pack or family link.

By the time the knob turned signaling my alpha's arrival to our suite I was already in my birthday suit stretched out on the bed wiggling my toes and enjoying the light breeze of the AC on my bare skin. Bane squeezed into the room, knowing that I always stripped down when we arrived at the lodge. He shut the door behind him and double-checked that it was locked. Then he told Magi to dim the lights before crawling into bed with me.

"You're still dressed," I laughed rolling over onto my side to face him.

"For now," he nodded and leaned in to steal a kiss.

Bane was greedy. It wasn't just one kiss. The first led to a second which led to a third and his tongue probing into my mouth to dance and swirl around my own. I gave into

his demanding mouth and the scent of him wrapping around me. Since having kids most of our alone time was scheduled around them and while I wouldn't have traded our babies for anything else in the world, it was nice to not worry about one of them banging down the door or a call that they wanted to come home right then. They came first, but a couple times a year we tried to get away on our own. Usually for Bane's birthday or our anniversary. Both if we were lucky. I liked to stay close to home for mine, because it didn't seem like a proper celebration without Blake around.

Bane's warm hands ran the length of my torso as our tongues danced between our mouths. My throat burnt and my tongue ached for the sweet coppery notes of his blood. I didn't always drink blood these days, but Bane was always my favorite flavor. As we kissed, I worked on the buttons that seemed to run endlessly along the length of his shirt as if the garment grew a new one each time I managed to poke one of out its tiny prison. Finally, I unfastened the last button and pushed the shirt aside to reveal his bare flesh. I reveled in how warm to the touch his skin was against mine. Pulling away from the kiss, I licked across his collarbones before licking down his chest and belly. I traced the lines of his abs with my tongue, savoring the saltiness of his skin. I licked and kissed my way back up to his chest.

I loved to nibble on his neck and take blood from there, but for the sake of hickeys we kept all my biting on the shoulders or lower. No one at the lab would've dared point out that Bane had a hickey, but he'd know it was there. Usually, they were gone in a day thanks to his Alpha gene, but it was a small sacrifice I was willing to make. Besides, his blood tasted just as good coming from the spot right below his collarbone. Only he pulled away before I had a chance to sink my fangs into him.

"Good shirt, huh?" I teased him as he shrugged it off. "That's why you don't crawl into a vacation bed unless you're naked. Blood and stuff."

"Stuff, huh? Is that the official name for it, Doctor Knight-Hemlock?" Bane said, his voice low and throaty as he undid his belt and then his fly.

A happy chill shimmied down my spine. I was a doctor. I'd been a doctor for a long time, but something about my title rolling off his tongue always made me want him more.

"Stop playing with your pants," I laughed and tugged at his pants legs as I slid off the bed.

His phone fell from his pocket, and I snatched it up right before it hit the ground. Without glancing at the screen, I laid it beside mine for a nice break. Neither of them would get much use over the long weekend if I had anything to say about it.

"I'll take those too," I growled and tucked my thumbs into the waistband of his boxers.

"Thief," Bane laughed as he stretched out his long legs and let me undress him.

I was hard and slick by the time I had him naked and crawled back into bed to straddle him. He ran his warm hands over my thighs and knees as I sat just in front of his hard cock so that it pressed against my ass. A long throaty growl vibrated from deep inside his chest as he ran his hand up my spine to the back of my head to pull me in for a long, slow kiss.

As our tongues danced between our mouths, his strong, nimble fingers wrapped around my dick. I growled back at him as his warmth wrapped around my cock. He stroked me slow at first, his grip too firm to ignore even as I pressed back against his dick. His hand disappeared from the back of my neck and slid down my side. He cupped my ass cheek, massaging and kneading my flesh, digging in the pads of his fingers. I rocked my hips wanting him to go further and find out firsthand just how slick and ready I was for him.

"Can I have a taste now?" I asked, the question came out in a growl.

“Not until I’m inside you,” Bane shook his head before his tongue slid back inside my mouth.

I rocked my hips against his throbbing cock until his fingers slid between my cheeks. His desire rained down over me through our mating link when his fingers found my slickness. I rocked again, pushing back, until he finally pressed the thick, mushroom-shaped head of his cock against my needy hole. I groaned into the kiss, both satisfied and needing more of him.

Wiggling, I pressed onto him, until he was inside me and I squeezed him for a second, reveling in his warmth spreading over me from the inside out. I kissed him harder, plunging my tongue into his mouth as I sank onto him, taking him all the way inside me. Both his hands slid to my ass, guiding me over him again and again until our bodies found their familiar rhythm.

I settled onto him and let the warmth of his body spread over me. Pleasure spiraled over my cock and spine until my breath came in heavy pants. I couldn’t think about anything except how good it felt for him to pump inside me. One of his hands found the back of my head again and he pulled me down to nuzzle my cheek against his chest. My throat burnt again and my fangs elongated from my gums.

“Now,” he said, entangling his fingers in my hair.

I bit him beneath his collarbone and a second later his rich, sweet, coppery blood flooded into my mouth. I ground down harder against him, needing more of him in whatever way I could get it. Each drop of blood and thrust of our bodies grinding together stoked the fire inside me and sent us both closer to the edge. I squeezed Bane’s dick hard as I rode him and his blood flooded into my mouth. I drank him down as his dick twitched inside me. The baby hairs on the back of my neck stood on edge as his pleasure cascaded against me over our mating link. I pulled away from the bite allowing the wound to close. His hands were on my ass now and his heels dug into the bed as he thrust up deep inside me. My limbs quivered, but I held onto him as

my balls drew up tight. We moved frantically, chasing down our joint pleasure as his warm, sticky seed spilt into me and he let out a long howl that echoed around our suite. It still rang in my ears as I came from his fingers wrapping around me again. We held onto each other and didn't stop making love until every last drop of passion had spilt from us both.

"This is one of the best parts of mated life," I let out a chuckle as I panted for air and went back to lap up whatever blood was still on his chest from my bite.

"Food and romping together?" he teased and patted me on the ass.

"Exactly," I laughed and nuzzled my cheek against my quickly fading bite mark.

Bane stroked my hair and kissed the top of my head. I was tired too. Only it didn't catch up with me until after my appetites were satisfied.

"Did we do it backwards, Alpha?" I yawned.

"Ummm.... I don't think you can romp backwards."

"I mean the baby and then the romp."

"Nah," Bane shook his head. "Life only comes in the right order."

"Good," I nodded sleepily. "I love you in whichever order is not backwards. Okay, maybe backwards too."

"I love you too. I think you need that nap we talked about," he teased, but as my eyes drifted shut, I wasn't in any mind to argue with him about it.