

Aisling

In The Land Of Wolves

By Eileen Sheehan

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Prologue

I have come to the conclusion that there can be mean girls in any species. They are not just amongst the humans. They are not limited to the teen years, either. Although, they seem to be more prevalent during that time. What led me to this conclusion was simple experience. You see, I was a victim of mean girls of the worst type starting at a rather sensitive age.

The mean girl abuse didn't start until I was in my mid-teens and my mother moved us from a small West Virginia township with a population of twenty-two that was located about two hours from Washington, DC to a community that just managed to qualify as a city with its population of twenty-five-thousand and ten. It was located just over the Virginia border, which shortened my mother's drive to her monthly meeting of the witch wannabes in downtown DC by an hour.

The little township of Bloomsburg, West Virginia consisted, mostly, of my blood relatives which were either the Loftus or the O'Shea - all of whom were fascinated with witchcraft. To my knowledge, however, none had been able to truly master it.

The small city of Meddleson, Virginia was void of any of my kin other than those in my household - my mother, one older half-brother, and one older half-sister - both of

whom left for college before we were even settled in. It did, however, possess a closely knit community of actual practicing witches. It was my mother's hope to be able to rub elbows with these magic practitioners and finally learn the art. She insisted that witchcraft was in our blood and it was simply lost to time and oppression. If we could mix and mingle with those who had not lost it, we would surely get it back.

At the time, I had no interest in learning or practicing magic, nor could I understand why my family felt it was such an important talent to possess.

My half-siblings' father died in a car accident when they were quite young. He was the love of my mother's life. No matter what room in our home that you might venture into, you were sure to find at least one photo of him.

I never knew my own father. Nor was there a photo of him for me to see. Whenever I would ask my mother to tell me about him, she would insist that he was nothing more than a sperm donor who had passed through our little borough in the night and I was to give him no more thought than that. Although I found it disappointing, it didn't bother me nearly as much as the intense emotion that I would sense pouring from every pore of my mother's body whenever I brought up the subject of my father. She would visibly tremble with what I had assumed was the desire to see him dead, or, at the very least, castrated and paraded, naked, through the streets.

This attitude around my questions, along with a certain aloofness toward me that I didn't see shared with my brother and sister, led me to believe that I was a product of rape. Not a very pleasant beginning, if I do say so.

Fortunately, my siblings didn't hold the same reservation of affection for me. They were kind, considerate, loving, and protective of me whenever they were around. The problem was that they were not around all that much. The age gap between us was such that by the time I hit the crucial and sensitive age of sixteen, they had both gone off to college. Rory was studying animal husbandry in North Carolina and Caitlin was in film school in New York City. They came back to see us on occasion, but as their lives progressed and their schedules got busier, we saw them less and less.

Don't get me wrong. My mother was not cruel to me. She held a mother's natural love for me that I knew existed. Unfortunately, it was clouded by the memories of my father - which her refusal to share past her usual snarky comment about him being a sperm donor passing through in the night- left me to my vivid imagination. There was also the matter of her obsession with witchcraft. Where it was strong in Bloomsburg, it was intense to the extent of being overwhelming in Meddleson.

She had eagerly contacted the community of witches almost before we were unpacked, only to be rejected and sent away. Sadly, their coven turned out to be a tightly knit

click that had no use for a wannabe witch. Their refusal to accept her forced my mother to continue her travels to the group in Washington, DC. Whether she found a new group there, or the one that she had been attending stepped up their meetings each month, I never did find out. All I knew was that she worked long hours in an office from Monday through Friday and then would take off every weekend to chase after her coveted witchcraft, leaving me alone to my own devices. If I was in the company of my mother for four hours a week, I considered myself lucky.

Since I was pushing seventeen by then, she felt that she was within her rights to pursue her own interests without worrying about me when I was left alone. She would have been right if she had not moved us to that cursed city with its mean girls.

If you had not guessed already, the mean girls were the daughters of the witches who had cruelly turned my mother away. Because of this, they were very much aware that I was the child of a wannabe. This left them with plenty of ammunition to taunt me with.

Their favorite tease was with my name. Where Rory and Caitlin had names that were quite normal, I was blessed with Aisling. It is of Celtic origin with a phonetic sound of Ashling, but the mean girls loved to pronounce it as Assling at every opportunity.

That is all it was for the duration of my sixteenth year. Taunting, teasing, and a good deal of loneliness. If you have

never had to move to a new school in the middle of your teenage years, consider yourself lucky. Friendship bonds are made early in the development years of life with no room for outsiders. If you didn't ride in on some popularity horse - which, of course, I didn't- then, those who were available for friendship to a new arrival were either kids who were of low character and were looking for someone new to corrupt or fellow outcasts.

I was so lonely that I settled for the latter, but as I tried to fit in with those comrades in rejection, I quickly discovered that we had very little in common. Before long, I found myself on my own. Needless to say that I spent many a lonely hour that year.

It was not until I entered school as a senior that a new student arrived at our school and things began to change for me. Sure, the teasing and taunting was still a daily event, but it was buffered by my friendship with the new kid on the block. The new outsider's name was Toby and, for reasons unknown to me, whenever he was around, the mean girls behaved.

“Hey, Assling! What’s your hurry? Got a hot date with Mr. Nobody?”

It was just another weekend in Meddleson, Virginia as I tried to make my way down the street to meet my friend, Toby. As soon as I saw the slim, blonde, very pretty, impeccably groomed, but evil-hearted Angel Grimes inform her little group of equally pretty and well-groomed mean girls that she had spotted me, I steeled myself for what was to come. Even though I was used to it, it still stuck in my craw that I was helpless to stop their incessant taunting.

“He is not nobody. His name is Toby, as you very well know and he is a darn sight better than the likes of you bitches,” I grumbled as I pushed my way past Angela.

“Toby, nobody, same difference,” Angela derided as she did a celebratory bump of elbows with Monica Jenkins in honor of what she considered wit. Monica’s long chestnut curls bounced against her slender shoulders from the impact.

“You and Toby are a pathetic pair,” Rhianna Bishop announced in a loud whisper in my ear as she closed in behind me. I could smell the vanilla scented hairspray that kept her excessively curly auburn hair from going wild as her long, slender fingers with pointed nails that were polished black with white tips in the shape of a ‘V’ rested on my

shoulder. “You are a waste of space. Why don’t you just do us all a favor and lay down and die?”

As per usual, the group of four mean girls -who were also up and coming witches- had managed to entrap me in a human circle. I could feel the energy of the magic that they projected as a collective against my flesh. The first time it happened, I had panicked, but, as the days turned into weeks, then months, and then years, I grew accustomed to the sensation.

“What fun would that be for you?” I boldly asked as I placed one hand on Angela’s slender and rather boney shoulder and the other on Monica’s slightly meatier one so that I could forcefully push my equally petite and slender body out of their circle that seemed to be projecting stronger and scarier energy of late.

As much as I hoped it would, breaking free from their confines didn’t free me from their menace.

Following so close that I could feel the pressure of her powerful aura against my back, Rhianna continued with, “Is your pathetic mom still trying to become one of us?”

“Why doesn’t she just take you back to Hicksville, where you came from?” Angela snidely asked. “What is the population there again? Ten, isn’t it?”

Laughter bellowed from mouths that should have been admired as beautiful, but the evil that purged from them made their perfect, kissable shapes difficult to appreciate.

Rebecca Watts was normally the quiet one of the group. Short and slight in build, with olive colored skin that was so healthy that it seemed to glow and dark eyes that looked wise beyond her years, it was rare for her to join in with the taunting.

This was one of those rare times as she hissed, “Do you know why your mom can’t do magic? It’s from the inbreeding.”

I gave her a confused look, but said nothing. It was not because I didn’t understand the statement, it was more that I was stunned into silence by the fact that the one member of the mean girls group who was normally quiet and non-threatening had actually said something that far surpassed any of the insults that preceded it over the years.

“That’s right,” she sneered. “Your mother is probably your sister or your brother is your father. That’s it!” she said with pride over her wit. “You can’t produce a father because he is your brother!”

It finally happened. They had gone too far with their taunting. And it was quiet little Rebecca who did it!

Hearing the insult tossed at my mother and brother sent my blood boiling. I lost all sense of where I was or even who I was. My only thought was to lash out at the person who had slandered my family in such a way. With my fists clenched for battle, I swung as hard as I could in Rebecca’s direction. Since I immediately felt a searing pain in my knuckles, I can only imagine what it was like for her when

my fist connected with her eye. Her screams of dismay and pain filled my ears. Instead of fulfilling my need for gratification, her wails only served to make me want to hear more from the other members of their little click.

I was like a mad woman as I attacked the girls around me. They were so surprised by this that I managed to get a few good punches in before a policewoman with a name tag that read, Officer Talgat, arrived on the scene to put a stop to it all.

“She is a lunatic!” I remember hearing Monica stressing to the policewoman. “We were just walking down the street and she attacked us for no reason.”

“She needs to be locked up,” Angela moaned as she held a tissue to her bleeding nose. “She could have killed us.”

It was my intention to verbally defend myself and tell my side of the story. To my surprise, when I opened my mouth to speak, I found that my jaw didn’t want to cooperate. I had been in such a wild frenzy that I didn’t notice that, while I was swinging my fists at them, they were swinging back. I had been so pleased with the fact that my fist was hitting its target that I never felt or noticed the impact of theirs on my own person.

“There are four of you and one of her,” Officer Talgat said with disgust.

“We had to defend ourselves,” Angela indignantly argued.

The police woman looked at Angela and smiled in a way that made me think that she was amused by the situation.

I could have sworn that she was holding back a chuckle as she said, “It looks to me like she gave as good as she got. Since it was four against one, that’s saying something.”

“Aren’t you going to arrest her?” Monica practically screeched.

I could tell by the frustration in Monica’s voice that she was unhappy with the fact that the cop didn’t just whisk me off to jail. Instead, it looked like she was siding with me. If only just a bit.

“Good heavens, what happened?”

The familiar voice of Meredith Godfrey floated past the cackling of the mean girls as she pushed her full figured body through the barrier they had created between her and me.

A stout woman of medium height and peaceful countenance, Meredith was Toby’s mother and my hero. Not just for the fact that she arrived on the scene just in time to tell the cop that the girls were a nuisance to society and that they had more than likely started the fight, but because, in the absence of my mother, she took over without hesitation. I loved my mother, but I would be lying if I didn’t admit to wishing, on more than one occasion, that she embraced

some of the wonderful motherly attributes that Meredith displayed.

Like Toby, Meredith possessed a unique type of beauty - on the outside as well as the inside. In fact, if beauty was judged on loving kindness and gentility, the woman would have won every contest that she had entered... hands down.

I thought the same thing about her son. Since the moment he had arrived and witnessed the way the girls ostracized and picked at me, he'd made it a point to become my friend. Luckily, unlike the other outcasts, he and I had enough in common that our friendship needed little time to become solid.

As Meredith gently inspected my face with her emerald green eyes, I couldn't help thinking, once again since meeting her, how much she resembled a lion with her round face, flared nostrils that were on a nose that was on the small side, and thick curly copper hair that was cut in a style that made it frame her face like a lion's mane framed the face of the beast.

There was no denying that Toby was her offspring, for he too had similar striking facial features and almost identical hair. He also had a heart of gold and more compassion than any one person should possess.

I listened to Meredith blatantly lie, with virtually no visible remorse, as she looked at the policewoman and said, "Aisling's mother is out of town for the weekend. She has

been placed in my care in her mother's absence. I would like to get this settled so that I can take her home with me."

"She needs to be arrested for assault!" Angela indignantly bellowed.

Officer Talgat looked at the group of girls and with a stern voice said, "You do realize that if you press charges against her for assault, she can press them against you as well, don't you?"

After being silent since I punched her in the eye, Rebecca finally spoke up. "Why? She attacked me. My friends were just defending me."

"It's a she said situation," the cop replied. "I will leave it up to the judge to decide. Just be aware that four against one does not look good."

"Forget it," Monica snapped. "Just get her away from me."

Smiling with a mixture of relief and satisfaction, Meredith looked at the cop with a raised brow. When the police woman nodded her approval, my pseudo mom took me by the hand and pulled me behind her as she said in a loud voice, "Gladly."

“Those girls are such assholes,” Toby grumbled as he gave the bruises on my lower back a quick inspection. “I can’t believe they ganged up on you all at once. Real bravery.”

“I did swing first,” I admitted as I adjusted my shirt to cover myself again.

“That is no excuse,” he grumbled.

“Rebecca crossed the line when she accused my mom of sleeping with my brother,” I said with disgust.

“Say what?!” Toby exclaimed. “That’s beyond the line! What kind of degenerate would even think such a thing?”

“It’s bad enough that they have to constantly try to bate me about my mother wanting to be a witch or the fact that the borough I came from was tiny and pretty much made up of my relations. I can deal with most of their crap and not lower myself to their level. But that remark about my brother being my dad was just too much. What surprised me was that it was Rebecca who said it,” I informed him. “I would have expected it from Monica or Angela, or even Rhianna, but not Rebecca.”

“I noticed how she has been getting more vocal of late,” he mused.

“Have you felt a change in their energy?” I asked.

I was not worried about sounding weird with my question, since Toby was energy sensitive like me. It was one of the things that we had in common. That, and the fact that, even though I didn't want to learn magic, I believed in it. As did he.

"I did," he said with a hint of enthusiasm. "I assumed that it was just my imagination."

"It feels stronger," I thoughtfully said. "More powerful."

"They are learning from their parents, aren't they?" he asked.

I wore an expression of sadness and regret when I nodded.

"It's a little scary," I admitted. "If they are this bad now, I can only imagine what they will be like after they have learned it all."

"Hopefully, we will have graduated and be far away from here by then," he offered.

I studied him for a long, silent moment before asking, "Do you plan on moving away?"

"Don't you?" he asked.

"I don't know where I would go," I shrugged.

His voice held a hesitant and somewhat guilty tone as he said, "What about college?"

"I am not sure if we can afford it," I replied. "Caitlin and Rory used the insurance money from their father for their schooling. I have nothing like that, and mom's barely getting by."

One of the things that I liked most about Toby was the fact that I could tell him anything and he would remain non-judgmental. Even so, I didn't feel comfortable admitting the complete truth, which was that I didn't have a desire to go to college. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I just knew that I was done with school. At least for a while.

"I am not going to college either," he softly said. "We are heading back to my homeland after graduation."

Panic immediately took over. I had asked him on multiple occasions where his homeland was, but he would just say, in an evading sort of way, that it was far away. Now, with graduation just a few weeks away, he had finally admitted that he was leaving! I couldn't believe my ears. What would I do without him?

I felt the blood drain from my head. What was about to happen must have been clear in my face because he quickly grabbed me by my shoulders and asked me if I was okay. My sea blue eyes locked with his chocolate brown ones and I nodded just before the world went black.

When I regained consciousness, less than a minute later, my nostrils felt like they had been singed by fire. I have never had smelling salts used on me before and I hope to never experience the use of them again. They left an after sensation in my nose that stung and took a very long time to dissipate.

“Dear girl,” Meredith muttered as she wiped at my head with a damp cloth. “Times will get better. Just you wait and see.”

“You’re leaving,” I whimpered. “You’re leaving me here.”

Meredith looked at Toby with surprise as she gasped, “Have you only just told her?”

Toby’s face was so guilt ridden that I actually felt sorry for him. “I had no idea how.”

“How long have you known?” I asked.

“Since we moved here,” Meredith explained. “It was always planned that we would return home once he had graduated. He is to learn the family business and take it over in a few years.”

Although I was distraught about the fact that they were leaving and even more upset that Toby had plenty of time to prepare me for it, but had been too cowardly to do it, I was in awe and a bit envious of the fact that there was a family business waiting for him.

“You have a family business?” I longingly muttered.

“I told you that much,” he grumbled.

I strained my brain to try to remember our conversations, but I couldn’t recall a single time when he had mentioned a family business.

I stood my ground with, “I would have remembered that.”

“Well, I did,” he protested. “You must not have been paying attention.”

“What kind of business is it?” I asked in an attempt to take the emphasis off the fact that my mind tended to drift off whenever I was in a conversation that I didn’t find interesting.

“We are fur traders of a sort,” he said with absolutely zero enthusiasm. It was as if he resented having to tell me.

Feeling like he needed to be reassured that the family business was a good one, I quickly said, “That is an old and noble profession, I think.”

“I am worried about what you will do when I am gone,” he professed.

“Mom wants me to get a job,” I said. “I applied at Mimi’s diner, but I haven’t heard back yet.”

“What would you do there?” Meredith asked with concern.

I knew what both she and her son were thinking. Mimi’s diner was one of two diners in our small city and the one that was most frequented by the mean girls. No matter what position I held in that place, they would be sure to find a way to get to me.

“The only other option was a member of the housekeeping staff at Harrison’s funeral home,” I explained. My entire body shuddered at the thought of cleaning a building that dealt with dead bodies. “He said that I would

be expected to clean the room where they prepare the bodies from time to time.” With a slight shudder, I added, “No way.”

“You would at least be free of those girls,” Toby muttered.

I couldn’t believe my ears. How could Toby even think about suggesting such a disgusting job to me?

“Oh,” I indignantly breathed, “and you think that, once they caught wind of what I was doing, they would not capitalize on that?”

“She is right,” Meredith said as she set two cans of Pepsi and two plates containing tuna salad sandwiches with chips on the side onto the table next to me. “I had hoped that those girls would outgrow their vicious attitudes. Instead, they seem to be getting worse.”

“I bet that they are learning black magic,” Toby said. “You’ve met their mothers. None of them are kind. Why should their daughters be so?”

As I picked up my sandwich and took a hearty bite, I gave Toby a slight nod to show that I was with him on that one.

“It is so very sad,” Meredith sighed, “but I have to agree with you. Mean moms equal mean daughters.”