

# In the Shadow of Moonlight

*According to legend, a tribe in what is now Idaho knew of a ritual that would give one who performed it the abilities of a wolf for the duration of a full moon. But there are versions of the legend that speak of some whom the wolf spirits resonated with so strongly that they abandoned their humanity for the wild...*

## Chapter 1

If Sophia envied wolves anything at that particular moment, it would have been their fur coat. Her sweatshirt seemed especially insufficient to keep out the crisp October morning air as she trudged to school. The sun was just peaking above the mountains behind her but brought little warmth. She slowed her pace to watch a man get into his car, envious that his mode of transportation had a heated interior. Unfortunately, she had not had the time or money to go through driver's ed. Right then, traveling between school and work using something other than her feet was a far-off dream. Not that she minded walking, she usually enjoyed it, but the chill off the Rocky Mountains seemed to penetrate her very core that morning.

The monotony of repeating her daily commute did even less to take her mind off her discomfort. West on Spruce Lane, turn south onto Forest Road, day in and day out. Sure, a car would keep the cold out, but it would just introduce another routine to her life. While most of her classmates were itching to go somewhere, anywhere that didn't bill itself as one of the best places to raise a family (translation: deadly boring). For her, all another town or city had to offer was a new kind of monotony and a lot of noise. Sophia much preferred the solitude, freedom and variety found in forests and fields. Woodbury certainly had that, but lately, the natural world she craved seemed as distant as the moon.

Granted, she'd have much rather been indoors where it was warm at that moment. Thankfully, after passing a dozen or so single story ranch houses, Woodbury High School finally came into view. The City of Woodbury was small, only a few thousand people, but the school was still sizable as it was the only high school for the mostly rural county. Even so, it was starting to strain to accommodate the high population growth Woodbury and the rest of eastern Idaho had experienced over the last two decades. The school itself consisted of a one-story rectangular central structure with the main entrance facing southeast, a two story gymnasium attached to the southwest and a narrow wing that had been added on during the prior decade's population boom sticking out of the northeast.

As she reached the crosswalk to cross the town's Main St, she joined several other students making the trek - two blonde girls chattering away and a boy who briefly glanced at her before nervously adjusting his tan backpack and resuming watching for the crossing signal. The boy she recognized from one of her classes, but she hadn't learned his name. Nor had she really spoken to the girls despite seeing them frequently on her treks to and from school, much less learned their names. The signal changed and they mechanically crossed the town's main road. From there, it was just a matter of passing the northeast wing and following the sidewalk that bordered the school's main drive to the entrance of the reddish-tan stone clad building. At this point, she and the small group of students she was commuting with joined the rest of the student body streaming into the building.

The building's main entrance loomed over Sophia as she approached. The unnatural lines of the large glass windows and two pairs of glass doors felt so oppressive compared to the soft curves and subtle, yet ornate patterns of nature. Reaching the steps, she found herself sandwiched between two tall boys as the mass of bodies funneled into the building. Once past the doors, the crowd thinned again as the students dispersed to their lockers and classrooms. For Sophia, this meant taking the hallway to her right after passing the main office on her left and then making her way through the throngs of noisy and often inconsiderate teens.

Sophia's locker was located two thirds of the way down the hallway on the northeastern side of the main structure. Like all the others, the locker was a nondescript dark green with 351 printed on it. Also like the others, the cold metal was an almost daily reminder of being confined to the artificial light and filtered air of the school. The locker itself had an upper shelf with a stack of her notebooks and folders, one below it with her textbooks and then a space with hooks for her sweatshirt and backpack. In the rear of the locker she had taped a drawing of her mother running with a wolf that she had made shortly after her mother's death a year prior. She felt a bit silly about it, but could never bring herself to remove it, nor obscure it when she hung her light blue sweatshirt and backpack.

*Everything has gone wrong since you died,* Sophia took a moment to look at the drawing of her mother. *I feel so lost and alone.*

The five minute warning bell interrupted her moment of sorrow, and she quickly grabbed her math text, notebook and folder. She hurried off to class, found her seat and grabbed the loose-leaf paper she had done the weekend's homework on and looked it over to make sure she had answered everything. Between working two eight hour shifts and a history paper, she had not had much time to focus on math. Thankfully, it looked like everything was at least complete,

if not correct. The bell rang and her teacher, Mr. Pindlewood, stood from his desk and began the day's lesson on geometry.

Between sleep deprivation and boredom, it wasn't long before Sophia lost track of the lecture and began doodling in her notebook, a wolf as usual. Ever since her mother had taken her to see a wolf at an animal hospital when she was little, wolves had been her favorite animal. They were majestic, loyal and lived freely. Like humans, they were social, unlike humans their loyalty to the pack never wavered. She imagined what it would be like to be part of a pack, no school, no jobs, no expectations...

"Ms. Jones? Are you still with us?" Mr. Pindlewood asked sternly, startling Sophia awake.

Several kids snickered and she flushed in embarrassment.

"Yes sir," she replied meekly.

"Good, as I was explaining before Ms. Jones' snoring interrupted, the secant of an angle is equivalent to..." Mr. Pindlewood continued.

*I wasn't snoring...* Sophia tried to shrink into her desk.

Thankfully, Sophia avoided nodding off for the rest of the period. When the bell rang, Mr. Pindlewood gave her a look and pointed at his desk. She waited for the other students to file out before walking to his desk.

"Ms. Jones," Mr. Pindlewood began. "This is the sixth time you've nodded off in my class since last Monday and you only managed a sixty-five percent on the last test. Is everything alright?"

"I've been working a lot lately," Sophia replied quietly. "My dad, well, my dad hasn't been getting much work."

Her teacher regarded her for a moment before his expression softened, "I know things must be tough for you without your mother, but school needs to be your top priority, whatever your father's issues. It may not feel like it now, but it won't be long before it's time to apply to college."

At this, Sophia winced and hastily nodded. It wasn't his business, but she held her tongue.

"I know there's a good student in there and I see you looking your homework over at the start of class," Mr. Pindlewood said in encouragement. "I'd love to see you fully apply yourself."

"Yes, thank you," Sophia replied quickly, not really feeling gratitude.

With that Mr. Pindlewood nodded and Sophia walked back to her desk, grabbed her things and hastily made her way towards her locker, feeling depressed and embarrassed. She had nearly made it to her locker when she heard the last voice she wanted to hear right then.

"The dump has been running low on inventory, right Sophia?"

Stiffening, Sophia turned to see a blonde haired girl with heavy makeup smirking at her. It was Jane, her perennial tormentor, with a few of the other popular girls who were staring at her and laughing. Sophia involuntarily glanced down at her faded long-sleeved red shirt that was noticeably fraying and blue jeans that didn't fit quite right, her face reddening. They had been among the best she could find at the local thrift store before school started.

"Then again, I wouldn't expect someone raised by wolves to understand clothes," Jane threw another barb to more snickers.

Trying to make herself small again, Sophia quickly faded into the crowd of students as tears formed in her eyes.

*It's not my fault my father can't keep a well paying job and I have to buy my own clothes!* She railed against the unfairness of it all. *Why won't people just leave me alone?*

After grabbing her material for English class from her locker, she kept her head down and made her way to her next class before anyone else could tease her.

Sitting, she toyed with her pencil anxiously as she waited for class to start. One particular boy, Logan, caught her eye as he walked in. For a moment she allowed herself to ogle his broad shoulders and dark hair, imagining his strong arms around her.

*No one would tease me while I was holding his hand,* she daydreamed. *Imagine the looks on Jane and her friends' faces if they saw that!*

Logan was on the school's track and field team and she had had a crush on him since sixth grade. Before her mother's accident, she had even flirted a bit with him. Now, she thought, he probably had forgotten she existed. His head turned towards her side of the room and she dropped her head and pretended to be looking at her notes. Then their teacher, Ms. Linden, came in and class began.

The rest of the day passed as drearily as all the others. While Sophia made it through English without drawing attention from her teacher or classmates, she managed to doze off in her 20th Century History course and had to endure another round of teacher disapproval and snickering from classmates. She did, at least, turn in the three page report she had worked on until one in the morning. In Physical Education, she managed to amuse the class when she tried

to return a serve and the tennis racket accidentally went flying out of her hand, nearly hitting Mr. Rindler.

“Sophia,” Mr. Rindler barked. “Get a better grip on that racket, or do I need to tape it to your hand?”

“Sorry,” Sophia mumbled, turning a bright crimson as the class howled with laughter.

An “errant” tennis ball then hit her as she went to pick it up, bringing even more guffaws. She gave the kid who had hit her with it a dirty look, but only received a smirk in return. Then the teacher blew his whistle and she had to scurry back to her spot.

At lunch, she scanned for her friend Candice, but the latter was on student council and often had meetings during lunch which left Sophia to eat her slice of pizza alone working on homework. In biology, she received the prior week’s test back with a red 'C-' emblazoned on it and then suffered through a lecture on cladistics. Her favorite class, drawing, was spent on contours and gave no opportunities for self-expression to her disappointment. Environmental Science and Sociology were blessedly uneventful and she made it to the end of the day without another incident.

As Sophia closed her locker after grabbing her bag and coat, a familiar voice nearly caused Sophia to drop her bag, “Hey Soph.”

Behind Sophia was a stout girl slightly shorter than she was with shoulder-length dirty blonde hair with an air of barely bound energy. It was Candice, her best friend since first grade. They had once been inseparable, but had been pulled in different directions since starting high school. Even so, they spent what time they could together.

“Oh hey Candy,” Sophia smiled tiredly. “I missed seeing you at lunch today!”

“I’m sorry!” Candice apologized. “Student Council is busy organizing the craft fair coming up over Thanksgiving weekend. You would think we’d take a break after Friday’s Halloween Party, but nope! Speaking of, I missed you there!”

“I had to work,” Sophia replied regretfully.

“Soph, you need to take more time for yourself! We’re in high school, and you’re going to spend all of it in school or a grocery store,” Candice chided her.

“Hey, look at Ms. In-Every-Extra-Curricular lecturing about free time!” Sophia teased.

“There’s the old Soph!” Candice enthused. “I’m in them because I enjoy them! You used to love the Outdoor Adventure Club in Middle School! Remember that time you wandered off following what you swore werewolf’s tracks and everyone thought you were lost? Then it turned out just to be someone’s dog!”

Sophia cracked a smile, "Ms. Chamomile was not happy as I remember."

"So? It was an adventure; you had fun!" Candice reminded her. "You used to be the one dragging me all over the place to see some neat animal or plant you found."

"I just haven't felt up to it lately," Sophia replied sadly. "I've been working as much as I can to help my dad since he doesn't make enough."

"He would if he would stop drinking!" Candice bit out and then flinched. "I'm so, so sorry!" Sophia's face fell, tears welling up.

Candice apologized. "It's just... not fair to you. You should be having fun, not working so your dad can pay a mortgage!"

"I just... wish my mother was still here," Sophia replied sorrowfully. "Everything is so hard without her."

"Let me know if there's anything I can do. Anyway, you busy tonight?" Candice changed the subject.

"I have a shift tonight," Sophia replied.

"That's too bad." Candice commiserated. "Say, what I really wanted to talk to you about is I'm having a Halloween party at my place tomorrow night. Several of the Student Council and Pep Club girls will be attending."

"My parents wouldn't let me invite any boys though," Candice rolled her eyes at that. "Want to come?"

Surprised, Sophia hesitated. Tomorrow? She ran her work schedule through her head. She happened to have the night off, although she needed to do schoolwork. However, she missed seeing Candice and it sounded like a lot of fun.

"Alright, I can do that," Sophia hesitantly replied and smiled a bit more enthusiastically this time.

"Great!" Candice exclaimed. "It starts at 6:00! Wear a costume! I have to be off! Pep Club!"

With that, Candice hurried off to wherever Pep Club was meeting. For a moment, Sophia just stood there. She felt a little guilty about going to a party instead of doing school work, but Candice was right, when was she going to live? Her spirits a bit lighter, Sophia donned her coat and slung her bag around her shoulders before closing her locker and heading for the school entrance.

In the parking lot, school buses waited to take home kids who lived outside town while those with licenses and cars swarmed the parking lot. After an envious glance at the cars lined up to leave, she headed east towards the crosswalk just past the parking lot entrance.

Thankfully, the sun was high and it was a fair bit warmer than the morning, which lifted her spirits after another gloomy school day. After crossing the street, most kids turned in the direction of the residential neighborhoods to the north and south, but a few joined her in continuing towards the more commercial parts of town.

Built in a mountain valley, Woodbury bore more resemblance to the plains of eastern Montana or Wyoming than the forest covered mountain foothills that surrounded it to the north, south and east. The town itself had mostly existed to support the agriculture and ranching that had made up the valley's economy since it was first settled by white settlers during the 19th century. However, what had been a bucolic Western town was experiencing a bit of a transformation over the last two decades. The stores and businesses that catered to the needs of the ranchers and farmers increasingly found themselves alongside those that catered to the demands of the recreational tourists that were increasingly spilling over from the nearby National Parks.

Even with the increased population and its attendant construction, Woodbury remained fairly spread out. In contrast to the small towns in the Eastern parts of the country, where the historic downtowns tended to be built compactly, Woodbury's downtown consisted of mostly one-story buildings separated by grassy or dirt spaces along wide roads. The only vegetation, other than the ubiquitous grasses, was the occasional tree or shrubs in an undeveloped lot. Along the main road were various eateries and shops. In the summer months, there would be a steady presence of tourists, but there were only a few on the eve of Halloween. While the shops and restaurants might mourn the end of the annual tourist migration, Sophia much preferred the relative quiet.

Passing in front of a kayak rental store, Sophia crossed Main and headed north towards the grocery store she cashiered at. It was a chain store, but a bit smaller than the stores found in the larger towns and cities with only a few registers at the front. Tonight, only one was open and there were few customers in the store. Sophia exchanged greetings with Karen, the middle aged woman currently working the register as she made her way to the women's bathroom in the rear of the store.

Like the rest of the store, it was small, with only two cramped stalls. Sophia entered one, did her business and then changed into the store's red button-down shirt and khaki pants she had carried in her backpack. After folding up her clothes and placing them in her backpack, Sophia left the stall, washed her hands and looked herself over in the mirror. Seeing several brown strands had managed to free themselves from the ponytail she had put her hair in that

morning, she quickly redid her ponytail. After straightening her shirt, she left the restroom and made her way into the break room.

The break room was small, with only enough room for a small fridge, a microwave, a square eggshell colored table and four black chairs. She glanced at the clock; she still had half an hour before her shift. Pulling a chair up to the table, she rummaged through her backpack and quickly realized she had left her math text at school. Frustrated, she slammed her backpack down on the floor. That meant she'd be headed to school a bit early in the morning in an attempt to finish as much as she could. Instead, she took to answering what biology questions she could until it was time to begin her shift. After stowing her backpack in a cupboard, she punched in on the timeclock and made her way to the front of the store.

"Hi Sophia!" Karen greeted her. "Working until close again?"

"Yep, 9:00 as usual," Sophia replied.

"Should be a quiet night," Karen said as she headed to punch out. "Have a good evening!"

As it turned out, the five hour shift was anything but quiet. As evening rolled around, people getting off work looking to pick up last minute Halloween candy crowded the store. With only one cashier, it wasn't long before a line of impatient people formed.

"Ms? Where is the caramel?"

"The coupon only expired yesterday!"

"I'm sorry, all I had was change." said one older man dumping a pile of nickels, dimes and quarters onto the checkout counter as three other customers reacted in annoyance.

"Don't crush my bread!"

"Watch what you're doing!" her manager chastised and rolled his eyes after she had accidentally run a transaction twice.

"Bottom of the barrel, eh?" a middle aged man said rudely when she accidentally voided his entire transaction and had to start over.

By the end of her shift, Sophia was ready to crawl under her register and refuse to come out. Finally, the store closed and she waited for her manager to count her money.

"Rough night?" he said. "You're four dollars and thirty three cents off. I hope the rest of the week is better."

*I'm trying as hard as I can! Sophia held back tears. Why can't I catch a break?*

Sophia punched out, grabbed her backpack and hurried out of the store before another disaster found her. It was dark out of course, but there was little traffic and few people were out. After another long day, the solitude and silence was welcome. As she left the store parking lot,

the stress of the day faded a bit and she relaxed her shoulders and started to imagine what it would be like to live as part of a wolf pack roaming the forest. So lost in this fantasy she was, she would have missed the very real wolf if he hadn't stepped out from the field bordering the sidewalk right in front of her, only ten feet away.

## Chapter 2

Sophia's heart beat loudly in her chest as she and the wolf regarded each other silently. Wolves usually avoided people, she knew, and to have one here, in town, was unheard of. She also knew she should be afraid to be this close to a wild predator, particularly one acting strangely. Yet, as her initial shock wore off, she realized she felt no fear towards this particular animal. On the contrary, his presence felt oddly soothing.

Sophia stared at him, and she somehow knew it was a him, mesmerized. There was just enough light from a nearby streetlight to see him. He was a beautiful creature, with dark fur on his strong back transitioning into the tan fur covering his sides and powerful legs before finally becoming the rich silvery white fur on his underside. His face and muzzle were handsome and accentuated his golden eyes. His raised tail was long and full.

*You won't hurt me, will you, her body relaxed. I don't know how I know, but I do. Will you let me touch you?*

She felt drawn to the wolf, something deep within. Her excitement building, she took a step towards him. The wolf just stood there, watching her and almost seemed to relax.

Headlights from a turning car swept across them and the moment was broken. The wolf turned and ran as the car passed by. Sophia shook her head, an odd emptiness where the feeling of connection had been. After taking a moment to compose herself, she shrugged, adjusted her bag and continued her walk home, but not without scanning the field for the wolf. Unfortunately, even in the moonlight she couldn't see any sign of him. Finally, she passed the field and tried to instead think about school and the Halloween party, but her mind kept wandering back to her encounter.

As Sophia walked, her mind kept wandering back to her encounter. It had been so surreal it had felt like a dream. Maybe she had imagined it, the longing she felt even now couldn't have arisen from briefly seeing a wolf, could it? Besides, what would a wolf be doing this close to town? It must have been a combination of her wolf obsessed imagination and her exhaustion. Too many wolves on the brain, as Candice would say. Shaking her head again, Sophia forced herself to think about how she would spend the rest of the night and somehow get her homework done.

After what felt like ages, but really was only another ten minutes of walking, she trudged up her home's driveway. Like the other houses in the neighborhood, it was a ranch style house built during the last decade's building boom. Brand new when her family had moved in eleven years before, it was starting to show signs of age. The cedar siding was starting to look weathered and the front walk had a crack or two, but otherwise it looked much the same to her

as when her family first moved in. The neglected garden and lawn, which hadn't been mowed since early September, were a reminder things were not the same, however. Sophia and her mother had once spent many a morning maintaining the flower garden that had graced the front of their home. Now, it was just a collection of various weeds among the few remaining wood chips.

Setting her backpack down on the porch, Sophia rummaged for her keys in the moonlight. Finding them, she unlocked the door and stepped in. Turning the entry light on revealed the usual mess of shoes and boots. Flecks of dry mud and dirt marked a floor that hadn't been swept in a while and a few scuffs marked the walls. The living room's hardwood floor was littered with various personal items and clothes. Several dirty dishes and empty beer cans occupied the end table next to the couch, marking where her father spent much of his time when he was home.

As Sophia walked into the kitchen, the smell of dishes which hadn't been washed and trash that badly needed to be emptied hit her. Unopened mail, two cereal boxes and a half-empty bottle of whiskey sat on the counter along with a used microwave dinner tray. Dirty dishes lay in the sink and a cupboard door had been left open. Maintaining the kitchen often fell to her and she only did it when she could no longer stand it.

Sighing, she took it upon herself to tie up and drag the trash out to the bin in the garage. The spot where her dad's truck parked was empty of course. Along the far wall were dust covered shelves and benches full of gardening equipment, tools and hardware. Her bike lay propped against the wall, its frame still waiting to be repaired after she had bent it hitting an exposed tree root while taking an impromptu trail ride the previous year. Her dad had promised to straighten it out, but that promise had remained unfulfilled like so many others.

Going back inside, she put a new garbage bag in the trash and then grabbed a microwave dinner from the freezer. After it finished heating, she sat down at the dinner table with her biology book and started working on her homework. She had barely completed two problems when she heard the garage open and her dad's truck drive in. Her father, a graying, bearded man just over six feet tall, walked into the kitchen from the garage. Sophia's nose wrinkled as the all too familiar scent of alcohol that accompanied him reached her.

"Hi dad!" Sophia greeted him, looking up from her textbook.

She was a bit disappointed when he failed to move towards her and give her a hug like he had once done.

"Evening Soph," he greeted her back, glossy red eyes staring at her. "You work tonight?"

"Yep!" Sophia replied sweetly, even if she didn't feel it. "I just got home."

*Why can't you stop drinking for even one night?* She kept her face neutral even as anger and bitterness raged. *Don't you care about me?*

"I was a bit worried," her dad told her. "Radio said a wolf had been sighted near town. A lone wolf this close to town ain't normal and they're worried it might be rabid."

"A wolf?" Sophia replied in surprise.

*So, it did happen!* Excitement swelled within her. *Should I tell him? No, he'd just get upset and ban me going anywhere alone. I really wish I could share it with him though...*

"Yeah, I know you're into wolves, but I don't want you near it if you see it," her dad instructed. "Understand?"

Sophia hesitated before answering with a brief "yes".

"Hey, I know it's getting chillier out and I thought I could drive you to school tomorrow," her dad suggested.

"I need to get there an hour early tomorrow, I forgot my math book at school," she told him.

"I'll set my alarm," he replied earnestly. "Glad you're staying on top of school work."

Sophia was skeptical that would happen, but replied, "that would be great! Thanks! Oh, dad?"

"Yeah?"

"Candice invited me to a Halloween party at her house tomorrow. I might be home a little later."

"Sounds fun, just make sure you get your homework done. Well, I'm off to bed," her dad told her with a yawn. "Busy day today. Night Soph!"

"Night dad!" Sophia replied and went back to her dinner and biology.

After doing her best to answer each question for biology, Sophia cleaned up her dinner, turned the light off in the kitchen and moved to her bedroom. Her bedroom's hardwood floor was strewn with laundry, dirty and clean, betraying her usual disorganization. The floral wallpapered walls were adorned with the various drawings she had made over the years. To the left of the door was her white dresser and past that, stacked in the corner, were her dolls and stuffed animals from when she was a little girl.

Midway down the wall to the left of the door was her bed, which was unmade of course. Above the bed hung a large poster with a photo of a wolf she had found in a gift shop some years back. On the side of the bed facing the door was an end table with an alarm clock, lamp and her favorite stuffed wolf from childhood. On the wall across from her bed was her closet and desk, which had several books on it along with the laptop her parents had bought her for high

school. A framed photo of her with her parents from her first day of her freshman year stood next to the laptop. On the far side of the room, next to the window, was the full length mirror she had inherited from her grandmother.

Setting her backpack down, Sophia climbed into bed and started reading the chapter for history or at least trying to. Her mind kept wandering back to her encounter with the wolf. She still felt that odd loneliness amidst her giddiness, though it had faded to a dull ache. Looking out her window towards the moonlit mountains and silhouetted trees, she hoped the wolf wouldn't get captured or worse. Perhaps, like her, he was searching for where he belonged. Her mind drifted, imagining befriending the wolf and playing in the moonlit forest with him; she thought she could hear a wolf howl, but perhaps it was just her imagination.

Shrill beeping tore Sophia from sleep and she quickly felt around for her alarm clock and silenced it. Fatigue still weighed heavily on her mind and she briefly considered going back to sleep, but knew she'd regret it. Opening her eyes as dreams of howling wolves faded, she looked at her clock - 5:30 in the morning. Her history text lay next to her on the bed, upside down and open. She had fallen asleep on top of the blanket still in her clothes from the previous day and had somehow still managed to get her feet tangled. Kicking free of the blanket, she sat up and then reluctantly got out of bed. After showering and brushing her hair, Sophia went back into her bedroom wrapped in a towel and started rummaging through her clothes.

*I wish Candy had invited me a few days ago, she sighed. I'd have had time to find something cool to wear to the party.*

In the past, she had put a lot of time and effort into her Halloween costumes with her mother, enjoying the annual excuse to pretend to be something else. Last year Halloween had been only a few weeks after her mother's death and she hadn't been able to bring herself to make or wear a costume; instead, she had spent the night alone in her room drawing. This year, she had a party to attend and no costume put together.

Going through her clothes was a frustrating experience. Most of her dresses no longer fit and she could hardly make a costume out of most of her everyday clothes. After several minutes of fruitless searching, she fell on her bed, defeated. Then her eyes fell on a folded red throw blanket on the top shelf of her closet and an idea struck her.

*It'll give kids something else to tease me for, but it'll be fun!* She grinned.

Sophia grabbed the blanket and then quickly located her red hooded sweatshirt. A couple safety pins later and she had a serviceable riding hood. Black leggings, blue skirt, a

white top and she was looking over her handiwork in her mirror. It wasn't much, but it was acceptable on short notice and it held a certain appeal to her. Now she just needed a basket...

Making her way to the front hall closet, Sophia grabbed the brown wicker picnic basket located there that hadn't seen daylight in years. Perfect! After fixing herself some toaster waffles and finishing her history chapter, Sophia checked her father's bedroom. The door was cracked and she could hear him still snoring away, the faint smell of alcohol still in the air. Unsurprised, but nonetheless disappointed, she grabbed her backpack and basket before heading out the door. Her mind on her math homework and party, she forgot all about the wolf from the night before.

Even starting forty minutes early to finish her math assignment, the day went by blessedly quickly. Many teachers eschewed their usual lessons for something more festive. Despite Sophia's earlier fears, enough other students wore costumes to make for a varied enough menagerie that she didn't stand out, though she did overhear several kids cracking jokes about the "wolf girl's" choice of costume. Sophia's mind was firmly focused on the evening however, and these comments didn't phase her. Although she did bask in the complements a few teachers kindly gave her makeshift Little Red Riding Hood as she walked into their classrooms. In past years, the general lack of a reaction or teasing would have bothered her, but the fact she was wearing a costume at all was a victory in and of itself. Finally, the last bell rang and she nearly dashed for the door.

After grabbing her things from her locker, she went to Candice's locker hoping to catch her. Sophia found Candice at her locker, still preparing to go home. Candice's back was turned, but Sophia could see she had dressed as a cat. A fake tail was clipped to the rear of black leggings followed by a form fitting black top. On her head was a headband with a pair of fake cat ears.

"Hey Candy!" Sophia greeted.

"Soph!" Candice reacted excitedly after turning. "Trying to attract that wolf they were talking about on the news?"

"Nope! Just what I could scrounge from my closet!" Sophia laughed aching to tell her friend about the previous night. "That would be fun though!"

"Not after it eats you!" Candice teased. "I know you though, you'd probably tame it as a pet or maybe it's a werewolf guy and you could ask him to bite you! Then the two of you could run off together!"

"Hah!" Sophia joked. "If that happens, I'll be sure to invite you to the wedding!"

"I can see it now, Sophia the werebride with her werewolf husband," Candice said, her tone airy. "You'd give 'honeymoon' an all new meaning."

Sophia couldn't help but laugh and several people looked at her.

"So you do remember how to laugh!" Candice replied in mock surprise.

"You do have your ways of getting them out of me," Sophia giggled. "When are you headed over?"

"Student Council is having a little Halloween get together in a few minutes," Candice replied. "After that, I have to pick up a few things."

"Mind if I come along?" Sophia asked hopefully. "Halloween shopping sounds fun."

"Oh, I'm picking up a surprise," Candice told her mysteriously. "Wouldn't want to ruin it!"

"Ah, well, can't wait to see it!" Sophia replied disappointed, but intrigued.

"Gotta run!" Candice said, closing her locker. "Don't run off with any prospective werewolf suitors!"

Sophia smiled and waved as her friend hurried off to the Student Council get-together. She had looked forward all day to tell Candice about the real wolf she had encountered the night before, but hadn't wanted to do so in the middle of their peers. Sighing, she adjusted her backpack and made her way to a classroom set aside for kids to use after school. It looked like she'd at least have some time to do schoolwork or maybe some drawing.

Two agonizing hours later, Sophia headed for Candice's house. Sophia hadn't been there since right after her mother had died, when she had stayed with them for a few nights, but still knew the way well. Candice's house was one of several homes built in a ovular subdivision connected by a single road a few blocks south of Sophia's home. Coming from her house, Sophia would have normally used the path that cut between several houses from the north. Unfortunately, Candice's house was located on the 'island' of homes opposite the access road, which meant she had to traverse the lower half of the 'island' coming from the west. By the time she arrived, trick or treaters had begun making their rounds.

The garden that was full of flowers in the spring and summer had been converted into a mock graveyard with plastic skeletons and a mummy randomly placed within. Sophia grinned as the animatronic vampire that had been there every year for the last six suddenly lunged out from the coffin propped next to the door and pined for her blood. Much like their daughter, when Candice's parents decided to do anything they went all out.

Walking up to the door, Sophia knocked and was surprised when the door almost immediately opened.

“Eeehehehe,” a woman wearing a witch cackled as she opened the door holding a bowl of candy. “My, my, you’ve come just in time... to provide your pretty fingers for my brew!”

“Hi Ms. Bowman!” Sophia greeted the witch. “It’s Sophia!”

“Of course you are!” Candice’s mother exclaimed. “Come in! Come in!”

Sophia stepped into the Bowman’s house. Like the outside, it was thoroughly decorated for Halloween. The smells of various treats greeted her nose, making her realize she hadn’t eaten since lunch. Candice’s younger sister, Lynn, was sitting on the couch in a fairy costume looking sullen. With Candice were two other girls Sophia had seen in passing at school. One looked to be of Asian descent wearing a princess dress and the other was a glasses wearing red-haired girl wearing a frilly, patchwork dress of some kind. Lynn gave her a glance and then went back to looking sullen while the two older girls shared shy greetings with Sophia.

“Candice isn’t back yet,” Candice’s mother informed her, shutting the door.

She gestured for Sophia to sit on a chair in the living room before continuing, “I’m sure she’ll be around shortly. How have you been?”

“I’ve been busy,” Sophia answered. “School and work.”

“I hope you’re getting to do more than just that,” Ms. Bowman said, sitting on a wood chair next to the door.

“Well, I’m thinking of joining the Outdoors Club at school,” Sophia told her, stretching the truth a bit.

“That certainly sounds right up your alley,” Ms. Bowman replied encouragingly. “Your father is still in welding?”

“He...” this was not a conversation Sophia wanted. “He still welds occasionally, among other jobs.”

“Mmm,” Ms. Bowman replied thoughtfully, glancing at the other girls.

Sophia was saved from any more uncomfortable questions by the door to the garage opening. Sophia and the other girls stood and went into the kitchen to see Candice and her father placing several paper bags against the wall. Candice’s father was a tall, husky man already and the vampire costume made him look even bigger.

“Heeey!” Candice trilled as she saw the girls. “Ready to have some fun?”

“Hi Candice!” the Asian girl responded eagerly. “Find everything?”

“Oh, I think so,” Candice replied jubilantly. “Patty here yet?”

“She’s running a bit behind,” the girl replied. “She said she’ll be by as soon as she can.”

“Well, she’ll just have to miss some of the fun then,” Candice answered and then looked at Sophia. “Sophia! You probably haven’t met these two.”

“This is Rachel,” she indicated the Asian girl she had just been talking to.

“And this is Alexa,” she gestured to the red-haired girl with glasses. “Both are on the Student Council. Rachel and I know Patty from band. Alexa and Rachel, this is Sophia! We’ve been best friends since first grade!”

“Ah!” said Alexa, examining her. “So you’re the wolf girl.”

“Yeah, that’s me,” Sophia blushed and quickly changed the subject. “What’s wrong with Lynn?”

“Oh she’s just upset mom and dad won’t let her go down to the lake with her friends,” Candice replied, rolling her eyes. “She’ll get over it.”

“Girls?” Sophia jumped in reaction to Candice’s dad’s loud, baritone voice. “Help me get the food out and we can start this party!”

The variety of Halloween snacks and treats were quite good Sophia had to admit. After stacking plates with food, Candice’s parents went outside to hand out candy to trick or treaters, leaving the girls to themselves. Sophia mostly stayed quiet as the other girls talked about boys, school and the activities they all shared. Keeping to herself wasn’t difficult as Candice generally wound up doing most of the talking no matter the situation. That all changed when the last invitee arrived almost an hour late.

“Patty!” Candice went to hug the new arrival.

“Sorry I’m late!” Patty apologized. “I had to finish up a paper for Honors English.”

Patty was a raven haired girl, a few inches taller than Sophia. She was costumed as what Sophia guessed to be Cleopatra, judging by the Egyptian-styled clothes and rubber snake around her neck.

Candice turned and introduced the others, “Sophia and Alexa, this is Patty. She plays the flute in band and is on the junior varsity basketball team.”

Sophia smiled and raised a hand in greeting.

“Well, now that we’re all here, we can move onto the surprise!” Candice announced.

Patty took a seat as Candice went into the kitchen, coming out with one of the bags her father and her had brought in.

“I managed to get a hold of something cool,” Candice teased, looking around the room. “Sophia will especially like it.”

She opened the large paper bag and pulled out something big and furry. It took a moment for Sophia to realize what it was.

"Is... that a wolf skin?" she asked anxiously as she feared the worst for the wolf she had seen.

"Yep! Don't worry, my dad got permission," Candice misinterpreted Sophia's concern. "They seized it from a poacher a decade or so ago and they wound up holding onto it. It's become something of a mascot at the sheriff's office."

"Wow, that's so cool!" Rachel reacted, awed.

"If they catch the wolf by town, are they going to skin it?" Patty asked.

*What..? No!* Sophia's relief and excitement turned immediately to horror, though everyone was too transfixed on the pelt to notice.

"Nah," Candice replied. "Unless it hurts someone, they'll try to tranq it and move it somewhere in Yellowstone or the Tetons."

"Can I... see it?" Sophia asked hopefully, barely containing herself.

"Sure!" Candice replied, handing it to her. "I mostly asked because you were coming."

"Awooo!" Patty howled teasingly.

Sophia would have much rather seen a live wolf, but a thrill still went through her as she took the skin. The gray fur along the skin's back and head was coarse to her touch and gradually became softer near the paws. It would have been a beautiful animal alive, and Sophia couldn't help but feel a little sad for the animal.

*What an awful thing to do,* she examined the hole where the bullet had passed. *Sleep well.*

After examining the pelt, Sophia passed it to Alexa who was sitting on a folding chair to her right. She took it and looked it over intently, running her hand through the fur. Rachel was next, then Patty who gave it to Lynn. Lynn immediately passed it back to her sister.

"I've seen it before," Lynn said smugly.

"I guess Little Red Riding Hood caught the wolf this time," Patty joked, grinning at Sophia.

Sophia laughed uneasily.

"You know," Rachel started thoughtfully. "The tribe that used to live in this area has a legend involving the skin of a wolf."

"Really?" Candice asked, intrigued. "What is it?"

"Well, they said members of the tribe could take on the characteristics of a wolf by performing a ritual while wearing the skin of a wolf," Rachel explained. "It's sort of like the werewolf legends of Europe, but more spiritual."

"Any idea what the ritual was?" Lynn asked curiously.

“The legend I heard doesn’t say exactly, just that it involved acting like a wolf,” Rachel told her.

“Act like a wolf?” Patty asked mischievously. “Here Candice, let me see that.”

She went over to Candice, who handed it over. Grinning, Patty put the pelt’s head over her own and started loping around.

“Awoo,” she mock-howled, prompting giggles from the other girls.

Getting to her hands and knees, she went over to Rachel and sniffed the air loudly and then pawed at her. Both girls fell into laughter. After calming down, Patty removed it from her head. She turned to Sophia, a mischievous glint in her eyes.

“I dare Little Miss Riding Hood to try!” she announced.

Sophia recoiled in surprise, “me?”

“It’s just for fun!” Patty encouraged her.

Sophia glanced around nervously. Candice looked a bit uncomfortable, but the other girls were staring at her expectantly. Uncertainly, she took the skin.

*It is a party and I guess and might be fun, she encouraged herself. It’s not like anything bad will happen and maybe the girls will like me more.*

“Alright, let’s see the big bad wolf!” Patty exclaimed, laughing.

Unsteadily, Sophia stood and put the head of the skin over her own, feeling her face heat up. Taking a breath, she started crawling around on all fours, imagining she was a wolf. She started off with an experimental howl, drawing laughter. Feeling a bit more confident, she began mimicking the behaviors of a wolf. Sniff around, eat some food off her plate with just her mouth, bound after some prey...

“Uh, Sophia,” she heard Lynn say.

Sophia was surprised to find herself with her tongue out about to lap at Lynn’s cup of punch. Quickly, she returned her tongue to her mouth and laughed nervously. The other girls broke into laughter.

*I don’t remember coming over here... Sophia tried to stop herself from trembling. What happened?*

“That was awesome!” Alexa exclaimed. “You were really getting into it!”

“Yeah,” Sophia said, trying to play along. “It was fun!”

“Alright Candice!” Patty announced. “Your turn!”

Sophia handed the skin to Candice and stiffly sat down. All the girls took turns acting like wolves, some more exaggerated than others. Sophia laughed with the group, but her heart wasn’t really in it. She still felt a bit embarrassed and an odd tingling throughout her body.

*What came over me?* She stared at the red indents from the carpet on her hands. *How long was I pretending?*

After each of the girls had taken a turn with the skin, the party moved to the kitchen and Candice got out a card game Sophia hadn't seen before involving kittens. It looked fun, but Sophia found herself increasingly unable to focus on the party. A headache had formed and she was starting to feel nauseous. Eating or drinking did nothing to address either.

"Are you okay Sophia?" Rachel asked after the first game, looking at her. "You look pale."

"I'm just feeling a bit off," Sophia answered in a raspy voice, trying to convince herself. "Do you have any Tylenol?"

Candice fetched two pills for her and Sophia tried to get back into the party. Midway through the second round though, she wasn't able to even fake being alright. The pills had failed to suppress her headache at all and it was quickly becoming a pounding one, the nausea was intensifying and chills were starting to rack her body. Candice went to get her parents, who had retired to their bedroom after trick or treating was over. Mr. Bowman grabbed his shoes and coat and helped Sophia to the family's car.

"Give us a call if you need us!" Mr. Bowman told Sophia after he had pulled into her driveway.

Sophia somehow managed to get the front door open and unlocked before dropping her backpack and basket before staggering to the bathroom. There, she threw up as the world spun, sweat beading on her face. Stumbling out of the bathroom, she went into her bedroom and collapsed on her bed without even trying to remove her day clothes. Burrowing under her covers, she curled into a ball and begged for unconsciousness.

## Chapter 3

*Trees whipped by as Sophia ran through the forest. She bounded over a tree log, landed on all fours and resumed chasing the deer ahead of her. The claws on her forepaws dug into the dirt...*

Sophia awoke, her stomach churning again. Head still pounding and shivering, she made it to the bathroom and suffered through another round of vomiting. After washing as best as she could, she made her way back to her bed.

*Six pups nursed from the two rows of teats along Sophia's belly as she rested. Her ears swiveled as she heard movement outside the den...*

She woke up in a puddle of sweat as her alarm went off. Nausea still racked her stomach and her head still hurt, but her fever had broken. Pushing back her blanket, she tried to get out of bed, but that only resulted in her nausea intensifying and the room spinning. She sat back down on the bed and removed her sweat-soaked sweatshirt and jeans before laying back down again.

*"Sophia, mom was in an accident... she didn't make it. Sophia?"*

"Sophia?" her father's real voice brought her to consciousness. "Are you still here? Are you sick?"

Sophia groaned, her head was feeling better, but the rest of her body was still tired and achy. She looked at the clock; school started in ten minutes! Then the taste of vomit in her mouth and her churning stomach reminded her she was in no shape to go anywhere.

"Yeah, dad?" she called shakily. "I think I caught a stomach bug. I've been throwing up all night."

"I saw the mess in the bathroom," he responded, concerned. "You weren't drinking, right?"

"What? No!" Sophia exclaimed in indignation. *Of all the people..!*

"Alright," her dad replied quickly. "You need me to call school for you?"

"That would be great," Sophia answered.

"I'll call and then I have to get to my job," he told her. "Take care of yourself and give me a call if you need anything."

"Thanks dad," she responded graciously.

He left and she quickly fell back asleep, this time blessedly unperturbed by dreams.

Several hours later, Sophia awoke feeling considerably better. She still felt fatigued and some achyness, but whatever it was seemed to have passed. Her sheets had dried, although the faint smell of vomit still pervaded the room. Sitting up, she leaned back against her headboard.

*My dreams were so vivid, so real, she thought. I've had dreams about being a wolf before, but never like this. Was it pretending to be a wolf at the party? I played like that when I was younger, but I don't remember ever dreaming like that.*

Putting it down to the stomach flu, she shook her head and cautiously got out of bed. Once she was sure she wouldn't fall over, she made her way to the bathroom and looked herself over. Her face was still a bit ashen and her brown hair was a complete mess, but she otherwise looked fine. After cleaning up the vomit that had missed the toilet, she jumped in the shower. By the time she was done, the previous night's unpleasantness was fast fading from her mind, though the dreams stayed with her.

The rest of the day Sophia spent attempting to catch up on school work, sorting the clothes on the floor into piles, drawing or watching funny videos online. By the time school normally let out, she was feeling like her old self. Well, not quite like her old self; something she couldn't put her finger on felt different.

Several times throughout the day, she found herself looking out the window at the brightly lit forest and mountains. She had always preferred the natural world, but over the last two years, before her mother had died, the feeling had become something akin to a pull. It had not been something she could explain, much less talked about. Today, though, it felt like a part of her was missing and could only be found out among the mountains and trees.

Sophia was contemplating calling into work and taking a walk to the forest when Candice called her cheap flip phone to check on her. After a brief conversation in which Sophia assured her friend it had just been some kind of stomach bug and she felt much better, she closed her phone and shook her head. No, she couldn't miss work as much as she wanted to. Missing the income wasn't something she could do and certainly not when she felt well enough to go in.

After eating her first bit of food since the previous night, she put on her work clothes and headed out the door.

Sophia's shift was, thankfully, far less stressful than Monday's. Although the illness itself seemed to have passed from her system, she was still feeling the effects from the lack of food and water. By the time her shift ended, her hunger was getting ravenous and she was eager to

get home. She purchased an energy bar to snack on and - giving into the tantalizing aroma that had been torturing her all night - a box of leftover fried chicken from the deli. Her manager looked a bit amused as he rang her up, but thankfully said nothing.

Prizes in hand, she left for home. She had planned on eating the bar first, but found herself far more interested in the chicken. Even cold, the first bite from a leg was ambrosia and she quickly stripped all of the meat off of it. Next, she grabbed a breast and proceeded to devour the meat off that too. As she walked up her driveway, she felt around for another piece and was shocked to feel nothing but bones left in the carton. Taken aback, she stopped and looked in the box for a moment.

*I can't believe I ate six entire pieces of chicken, she closed the box. I never eat that much at once. Of course, I had thrown up everything in my stomach. That's probably all there is to it, my stomach was empty from being sick.*

Feeling sated and a little embarrassed, she threw the box in the garbage bin in the garage and tucked the unopened bar in her bag. As usual, her father still wasn't home even though his job should have ended several hours before. He also hadn't even bothered to call all day to see how she was doing, she noted bitterly as she checked her phone for messages. A bit hurt, she considered waiting for him and letting him know it. However, with her hunger satisfied, fatigue was starting to weigh heavily on her and she instead began getting ready for the night.

She had just closed her eyes for the night when she heard her dad's truck pull into the driveway.

"Sophia?" her dad called from the kitchen.

"I'm in my bedroom," Sophia replied.

She heard footsteps and then a knock.

"I've just laid down," Sophia told him. "I'm still not feeling the best; I'll see you in the morning."

"I'm sorry I didn't call or check in," her dad tried to apologize. "It was a busy day."

"Well, I managed on my own," Sophia said acerbically.

"I'm really sorry," her dad apologized again. "I'll make it up to you; I promise."

*That would certainly be a first, she turned away from the door. I wonder if he would notice if I ran away or disappeared... or care if he did.*

After a few moments, she heard him walk away from her door. After a time, anger and loneliness finally gave way to sleep.

Hunger woke Sophia a few minutes before her alarm did. Usually, she only needed something small in the morning to keep her going until lunchtime. That morning though, she felt like she hadn't eaten in days and quickly found it impossible to wait even the few remaining minutes until her normal wake up time. Annoyed, she sat up and canceled her impending alarm. She then threw on a pair of sweatpants before making her way to the kitchen.

In the kitchen, she grabbed a cereal box from the counter, a bowl and a carton of milk from the fridge. She quickly fixed a bowl and barely took time to breathe as she scarfed it down. Finding she was still feeling famished, she ate another full bowl - and then another. Two tall glasses of orange juice soon followed the cereal. Finally feeling less starved, she stared at her empty bowl.

*What is going on with me? She wondered. I'm constantly hungry and just can't stop eating. Being sick can't explain how much food I'm consuming.*

After cleaning up her breakfast dishes, she set about getting ready to leave for school. By the time she was ready, she found she was hungry again and downed a couple toaster waffles and another glass of orange juice. When she finished cleaning up her second round of dishes, she quickly made her way out the door and headed towards school.

Candice surprised Sophia at her locker, giving her a hug.

"I'm glad to see you're feeling better today!" Candice exclaimed. "We were all really worried when my dad took you home. The party pretty much ended after you left."

Sophia was gratified, but brushed it off, "I'm alright, just a stomach bug. After you called I even was able to go to work. I hope no one else got sick."

"None of the other girls got sick as far as I know," Candice assured her. "I'm fine and so is Lynn. It looks like whatever you had, you kept it to yourself!"

"Glad to hear that!" Sophia replied.

With that, the warning bell rang and the two left for their separate classes. Sophia made it to her second class before the waffles and cereal completely wore off. By the third she could barely pay attention over her stomach yelling at her that it was empty. The energy bar she had luckily saved in her bag took the edge off long enough to get through gym class and get to lunch. Normally, lunch was easily enough to fill her and she often had leftovers. Today, though, she found herself still feeling hunger pangs and went back through the serving line for a second round.

"Damn girl!" Candice exclaimed after Sophia came back. "You run out of food at home?"

“I’ve just been really hungry since getting sick yesterday,” Sophia replied sheepishly, a mouthful of food. “I guess it really took a lot out of me.”

“I’ll say!” Candice replied in awe as Sophia proceeded to wolf down her second helping.

Lunch thankfully stuck better, although she still found herself getting hungry again as she left school. At the grocery store, she bought a lunchable and sports drink and consumed it before starting. Unfortunately, it was during her shift that her bladder finally took notice of her increased consumption. Thrice, she had to excuse herself to use the bathroom and, by the time her shift was over, she was getting desperate again.

“You pregnant or something?” her boss sarcastically asked as Sophia once again made a beeline for the ladies’ room.

Sophia considered buying another box of chicken, but thought better of it as it would mean she’d have to bear more disapproval and sarcasm from her manager. Instead, she grabbed her things and headed for home. As she stepped outside, the strange feeling that had been nagging at her over the last hour intensified. It felt as though every cell in her body was being tugged and she ached to be away from the world of pavement, brick and steel.

The growl from her stomach reminded her she hadn’t eaten dinner yet and she set off for home. It was fairly cloudy and the lack of natural light slowed her journey home. By the time she arrived, she was absolutely starving and quickly went about ransacking the kitchen. She didn’t even bother warming up the package of hot dogs and quickly scarfed down the four remaining dogs. Next, she thawed out two Hot Pockets in the microwave and was easily able to eat both. Finally, she grabbed the half gallon of milk and downed nearly half of it.

Pressure on her bladder reminded her that all that liquid had to go somewhere and she once again found herself perched on the toilet. It occurred to her then, that she had not needed to poop all day despite everything she had consumed. Curious, she stepped on the scale and was both unsurprised and horrified to see she had gained three pounds in her binge. Back in the kitchen, she tidied up and then headed for her bedroom. It was Thursday and her dad was rarely home before midnight.

Sitting in bed with her sketchpad, she found herself staring out the window at the nearly full moon peeking through the clouds. The moonlight was making her oddly restless and strange tingling sensations played across her skin. It was as though her body was expecting or waiting for something, yet she didn’t know what. Not knowing what else to do about her restlessness, she got out of bed and closed the curtain, leaving only the unnatural light of her lamp. It didn’t really help how she felt, but at least her attention was no longer being drawn by the moon. After

clambering back into bed, she resumed her sketch. An hour later, she had finished a detailed drawing of the wolf that had crossed her path three nights before. It was drawn entirely from memory, but overall she was pleased with it.

*Wherever you are, I hope you're safe,* she gazed at the drawing.

It was strange missing an animal she had only just glimpsed for a few seconds, but right then she ached to see him again. In all likelihood though, he was long gone and far from town. Sighing, she took one last look at her drape-covered window and turned off her lamp. She fell asleep holding her sketchpad tight against herself.

The next day, Sophia's hunger returned and she managed to finish off the box of cereal in the morning. Luckily, her body's obsession with food wasn't quite as intense as the day before and seemed to wane throughout the day. Replacing her hunger though, was an apprehensiveness she just could not explain. Her body felt like a coiled spring waiting to be unleashed and, to top it off, she felt strangely aroused. In English class, she couldn't help staring at Logan and imagining his strong arms around her... among some other things which made her feel very warm.

Even without her crush distracting her, keeping focused in her other classes proved impossible. She even forgot to look for Candice at lunch. So preoccupied with trying to keep herself from finding and escaping out the nearest exit, She didn't notice Candice was already seated until her friend came and tapped her on the shoulder after she had sat down to eat.

"You okay Sophia?" Candice asked after Sophia had relocated to Candice's table.

"Hmm?" Sophia replied as she stared out the window.

"You seem really distracted today," Candice said with a worried expression, studying Sophia's face. "What's up?"

"Um," Sophia forced her attention on Candice. "I don't know; I just feel really tense about something."

"Well, at least your appetite seems to have gone down," Candice replied, looking at Sophia's tray.

"Mm hmm," Sophia absently responded, while looking past her friend and out the cafeteria window.

Candice could only laugh and shake her head.

In sociology, Sophia inadvertently started noisily drumming her pencil on her textbook, inviting a reprimand from the teacher and a flustered apology. When the last bell rang, Sophia was the first out the classroom door, nearly tripping over a kid in the back row who was getting

out of his desk. Stepping foot outside the school brought tremendous relief followed by a new round of frustration as she remembered she had work that night. Grumbling to herself, she reluctantly headed towards downtown.

“Woah, Sophia, what’s the hurry?” Karen asked as Sophia practically jogged past her.

“Just have a lot of energy today, I guess,” Sophia replied, forcing herself to stop.

After giving the older woman a reassuring smile, Sophia continued towards the breakroom, though at a slower pace. In the bathroom, she realized she had forgotten to pack her work-shirt that morning. Thankfully, the evening manager for the weekend was Linda and the woman found her a spare with barely more than a light chiding. After changing, Sophia found herself pacing in the breakroom and invariably couldn’t sit for long no matter how much she tried.

By the time her shift started, working the checkout had become a Herculean task. Several times, she forgot what she was doing while in the middle of ringing up an order and was reminded by the customer that they also didn’t want to be in the store all night. By the time the light outside started fading, she was starting to sweat and several customers commented she looked pale. Finally, two hours into Sophia’s shift, Linda came over to check on her.

“Are you feeling okay?” Linda asked Sophia with a worried expression. “You don’t look very good.”

“I... don’t know,” Sophia replied shakily.

Her clothes were starting to chafe and cling due to perspiration. Every cell in her body felt like it was vibrating, her heart was racing and her breathing was rapid. The feeling of being trapped was quickly starting to overwhelm her and it was increasingly all she could do to keep from bolting.

“Well, several customers asked if you were okay and said you had trouble with their orders,” Linda told her. “Why don’t you punch out and go home and get some rest. I can handle the register tonight. Just get that uniform laundered and back here next time you work.”

Relief flooded through Sophia and she barely managed a ‘Thank You’ as she rushed to the back of the store. She punched out and barely remembered her bag before heading out the automatic doors.

The night air was cool and a welcome respite from the fire she felt raging within. Although she was out of the store, every fiber of her being was telling her she was still in danger and she broke into a run. As she ran, her skin began to itch and she felt an odd pulling sensation begin on her ears while her gums began to ache. Heat was also building below and

she was all too conscious of the growing dampness in her underwear. A tingling sensation in her nose drew her attention and an increasing number of strange smells she couldn't identify started to bombard her brain.

Even as she neared home, strange urges were telling her she needed to get *away* from the brick, pavement and glass of town. Even the thought of seeing another person brought an unfamiliar dread. The intense feeling she needed to seek the familiarity and safety of her home warred with the equally intense feeling she needed to head towards the open fields and forest. Increasingly alarmed and confused by the cacophony of unfamiliar emotions and sensations, she settled on completing her journey home.

As quickly as she could, she unlocked the front door with a shaking hand and practically threw it open. Equally as quick, she slammed it shut and locked it, rattling the windows. Not even taking the time to turn on the lights, she headed for her bedroom. Automatically, she flipped the light switch, unexpectedly prompting her to close and shield her eyes from the sudden glare. After a moment, her eyes adjusted and she dropped her bag and tore off her shoes before heading for her mirror.

The moment she glimpsed herself in the mirror she screamed in pure terror.

## Chapter 4

Sophia stared in shock at her reflection in the mirror, her mind struggling to comprehend what it was seeing. She was flushed and sweat shone on her skin, but that wasn't what caught her attention. What had frozen her in horror were the eyes being reflected on the smooth glass weren't hers. The irises of these eyes had expanded to the point the eyes had little white visible and were now a deep golden color rather than the hazel they should have been. She closed her eyes for a few seconds, barely breathing, then reopened them. The strange eyes remained in her reflection, staring back at her. It shouldn't have been possible, but the inhuman eyes were indeed hers.

That wasn't all that was different. As she gaped at the mirror, she saw her front-most premolars had grown nearly twice as long and ended in points. Next to them, her canines were also noticeably longer and had more of a point. A tickling sensation brought her attention to her neck where short, dark hairs sparsely covered the sides of her neck, although they grew denser as they wrapped around to the back.

Scarcely believing what she was seeing and feeling, she slowly brought her right hand up to her mouth and touched the changed teeth. Her probing confirmed they were indeed longer than they had been just a few hours before. They were also a bit sharper she discovered as she pushed lightly on their tips. Next, she cautiously brought a shaking hand to the back of her neck. Her blood went cold as she brushed what were unmistakably stiff hairs. A jolt of pain as she tugged a few confirmed they were indeed growing from her skin. As she moved her hand back down, she felt her shirt rubbing against something unfamiliar on the skin of her back.

Slowly, still watching her reflection, she grabbed both sides of her shirt, but stopped as she felt an odd tingling sensation in her fingers and toes. Letting go of her shirt, she brought her right hand up to her face and looked at her fingers. The palm side of her hand looked normal, but when she turned her hand around she gasped - the nails had darkened to almost black. A sharp pain started in her fingers as the nails started reforming in their beds, causing her to gasp. As her fingernails changed in front of her eyes, a matching pain started in her toes. Looking down, she realized she was still wearing her shoes and it felt like the ends of her toes had snagged on something. Quickly, she sat on the side of her bed and bent to remove her shoes. She had managed to untie her right shoe when she was interrupted by an unpleasant twisting feeling inside her abdomen.

Next thing she knew, she was on the floor clutching her stomach in pain and moaning as she felt something - or many somethings - shifting around inside. After what felt like hours, but had really been less than a minute, the pain and twisting feeling subsided.

Panting, she sat up and leaned against her bed before quickly hiking up her shirt to look at her stomach. To her shock, she found white hairs starting as a line just below her belly button and continuing down to form a rounded triangle that disappeared beneath the top of her pants. She ran her hand over the hairs, it felt a lot like soft... fur. Besides the fur-like hair on her stomach, she saw no sign of anything that could have caused the pain. She did notice her nails had grown out a bit and seemed to have become narrower.

Remembering her feet, she finished removing her right shoe and immediately saw her toenails were poking out of her sock. They had the same almost-black coloration and shape of her fingernails. She anxiously took off her sock, groaning at the five thin holes at the ends. Her foot otherwise looked unchanged. After tossing the sock aside, she took off her other shoe and was unsurprised to see the same thing on her left foot.

"What is happening to me?" she whispered, setting her foot down and resting her head against the side of the bed.

The tingling throughout her body was subsiding, which cleared the way for her to notice something else - her room smelled *a lot*. That wasn't quite right she realized as she concentrated on what her nose was perceiving. It was more that there were a lot of smells, some strong and some faint. Meanwhile, her brain struggled to make sense of the sheer amount of new information it was receiving. She could recognize some of the aromas, but she realized she was perceiving them not as a single smell, but specific combinations of smells. Maddeningly, when she tried to analyze the component smells individually, she found she couldn't make any sense of them. It was like a language that lay just beyond her ability to read.

The shampoo she had used that morning was particularly strong and it too was made up of an ensemble of aromas she frustratingly couldn't quite make sense of individually. Then there was her deodorant, the fainter, but ubiquitous scent of the detergent used for her laundry and many others she couldn't begin to recognize. Yet, there was a set of smells that pervaded the room more than all the others. They weren't the same, yet had an odd commonality to them. She contemplated these smells, furrowing her brow. There was something familiar about them...

Her eyes widened, *these smells are from me and they're coming from everywhere!*

She could smell her own sweat, pick out the smell from her own armpits even through the deodorant, there was the faint smell of urine, the slightly stronger scent of her own vaginal secretions and some she didn't know even existed. All different smells, but each had a similar quality she somehow understood identified it as uniquely hers. At the same time, there was something slightly different about her scent diffusing the room than the scent emanating from her at that moment.

In fact, there was a rather large concentration of the altered scent over... there. Curious, Sophia crawled over to the source of both her distinct lingering odors and a large number of fainter odors. An especially strong concentration of several different kinds of her own smells drew her attention and she leaned in to get a stronger whiff. It was definitely hers, but there was something not quite right about it. Bringing her nose down even further, she tried to figure out what it was.

Her nose brushed fabric and she suddenly realized she had her nose practically buried in her own dirty underwear. The source of all of the strange scents had been the dirty clothes piled in the corner by her dresser. Recoiling in shock, disgust and horror she stood up so quickly she felt lightheaded from the sudden shift in blood pressure.

"Ewww!" Sophia exclaimed in disgust, sitting on her bed.

*I can't believe I just put my nose in my own underwear! She covered her nose with one hand. What is happening to me? Am I going to lose my mind and act like an animal for the rest of my life? Okay, panicking isn't going to help me; I need to think this through.*

Taking calming breaths, she closed her eyes and tried to get a hold of herself. It was tough as part of her wanted to curl up into a ball and never move again. At the same time, she felt as though she was trapped and needed to escape the unnatural confines of the house. Pushing both urges down, she went over what could have caused her strange predicament. She certainly had never heard of an illness that caused what she was experiencing.

Opening her eyes, she looked over at the mirror examining herself. Her face had returned to its normal color and sweat no longer glistened on her skin. Looking at her 'fangs', she experimentally closed her mouth, bringing her teeth together. Surprisingly, the changed teeth were actually offset slightly, allowing them to slide together quite naturally. She opened and closed her mouth as though she was chewing. It thankfully appeared as though the teeth wouldn't prevent her from using her other teeth as she had feared. As she fought down her fear, curiosity replaced it and she got off her bed and went back over to her mirror.

*That's... actually kind of cool, she watched her mouth open and shut several times. I wonder if anything else is different.*

Opening her mouth, she examined the rest of her teeth. The molars looked unchanged, as did her incisors. Next, she looked at her eyes. Her Irises looked like they had doubled in size and she could only see a bit of the sclera on the sides.

*There's no way anyone would miss how gold my eyes are, she thought. Come to think of it, the color looks familiar. Sort of like the color of a wolf's eyes.*

She looked at the wolf on the large poster above her bed. *In fact, the teeth also remind me of a wolf's...*

“No way,” Sophia whispered in disbelief as that realization grew. “This can’t be possible.”

Yet, it all fit - the enhanced sense of smell, the eyes and the fur-like hair on her neck. It really shouldn’t have been possible, but here she was. She had no idea what had caused it or what to do about it, but her body had indeed taken on some wolfish features.

That wasn’t all she had gained, as the unfamiliar instincts and ideas tugging at her consciousness made clear. Fighting the urge to investigate other scents in the room, she removed her shirt and undershirt. To her shock, she discovered a dense patch of white fur that started at the top of her sternum and tapered to a thin line between her breasts and ran to her navel before gradually expanding into a triangular patch that disappeared under the top of her pants. Removing her bra, she examined her small breasts. They didn’t appear any different and, to her relief, the fur didn’t extend onto them.

Turning to the side, she looked at her back. The dark hairs on her neck extended down onto her back and across to her shoulders. The hair was thickest just below her neck and thinned until it reached the tops of her shoulders and midway down her back, forming a rough v-shape. She could still easily see her skin as the hairs weren’t as long or as dense as a real wolf’s, nor was there an undercoat. Still, it would be a huge pain to try to shave it off if it came to that.

Bringing her hands to either side of her hips, she pulled off her jeans. Now down to just her underwear, she examined her legs and groaned. Hairs like those on her back and neck covered her legs making them look like they belonged more to a teenage guy than girl. With that unpleasant discovery, she took a breath and then took off her panties, leaving her completely naked.

Unsurprisingly, her pubic hair had been replaced by the same soft white fur that was between her breasts. A quick examination revealed her feminine bits remained otherwise unchanged, although they were a bit moist, reflecting her odd horniness. Finally, she checked her butt, confirming it too had been spared any changes.

Her examination finished, she sat back on the bed and considered her options. It had been about an hour since she had gotten home and her dad never came home until the early hours of the morning. She strongly doubted a doctor would have been able to do anything for her and she suspected she would become a bit of a spectacle if she did call for medical attention. If she went outside, she wasn’t sure she’d be able to control her new urges anyway. Candice wouldn’t know how to help either...

*Wait, Candice! Her eyes widened as she thought of her friend. The Halloween party! Why didn't I think of that before? There was that tribal legend about people acting like wolves during the full moon and I played with that pelt. Was that legend true?!? I don't know how it could be real, but had to be! Maybe the other girls also changed tonight!*

Quickly, Sophia went over to her backpack and found her flip phone.

"Hey! How r u tonight?" she typed out and hit send.

She waited impatiently, fighting the sudden urge to bury her nose in her backpack. It only took a few minutes to get a text back.

"Fine, playing a family game. U?" Candice's reply read.

Sophia's heart sank as she read it. Candice and her sister evidently *weren't* experiencing anything out of the ordinary.

*If they're not changing, then why am I?* She wondered, distraught. *We all played with the wolf skin. Maybe it was something else..?*

"Ok bored," she sent a reply back and shut her phone, not in the mood to continue the conversation.

Wishing she knew the other girls' numbers right then; Sophia went over to her desk and sat in her chair. The shock of the cold wood pressing on her butt and thighs reminded her she was still naked, but she was alone in the house and the thought of putting clothes back on prompted an odd wave of anxiety in the side of her insisting she was trapped. Instead, she pulled her chair in.

Opening her laptop, she hit the power button and waited. The strong scent of electronics and plastic heating up hit her nose and the spinning of the computer's hard drive was surprisingly loud in her ears. Both were decidedly unpleasant and made her seriously consider giving into the compulsion to get away from the unnatural scents and sounds. Instead, she logged in and pulled up her browser.

This was certainly a time she was glad she split paying for the internet with her father, she thought as she typed "wolf Indian legend eastern Idaho" into the search bar. A second later, the search engine's response to the query appeared in the browser's tab. The first page of results wasn't particularly helpful and were either about the Shoshone tribe's legends or about the efforts to return wolves to the western United States. The second page was similarly frustratingly unhelpful.

She was starting to doubt the existence of the legend when she found a link to an obscure blog midway down the third page of results. The blog had been dedicated to collecting obscure legends and tales from around the world and seemed to have been quite active in its

day. Unfortunately, it looked like it had been long abandoned, with the last post from over a decade before. Yet, the title of the linked post piqued her interest: *The Weird Werewolf Legend of a Small Idahoan Tribe*.

She leaned in and read the short post:

**The descendants of one Idahoan tribe that used to live in the western foothills of the Teton Range have a curious legend about their ancestors. They say their ancestors once performed a ritual using wolfskins when the moon was at its most visible to channel the spirits of wolves for a night. While many native peoples had rituals calling upon wolf spirits to confer blessings or spirits that could take the forms of both humans and wolves, this particular legend insists those who knew a specific ritual took on the features of a wolf for the night.**

**The stories say this was difficult to perform correctly for most and only lasted for the night of the ritual or faded after one or two subsequent full moons. However, they also say that some individuals possessed the spirits of wolves and it would come forth every full moon after for them. The individual who relayed this to me, also mentioned these stories warned those individuals risked losing themselves to the wolf forever, but did not seem to know what that meant.**

Sophia sat back after finishing, a flurry of emotions running through her.

*It's only supposed to last until morning, that's good, she thought in relief. What if it doesn't though? I can shave the fur, but how would I hide the eyes or teeth? What about the ears? I'd be a freak! No guy would invite an actual wolf-girl to a school dance!*

She stood and started anxiously pacing around her room, ignoring the urge to investigate the strong scents coming from her trash can. Idly, she wondered if *she* had the spirit of a wolf and what the story meant about such individuals losing themselves forever. If she just spent the night in her room, then surely all of the changes would disappear in the morning, right? Did she really want them to? A growing pressure in her bladder interrupted her ruminations and, with her conscious mind still preoccupied with her current state, she instinctively went to a spot in front of her dresser and got on all fours. Thankfully, her brain caught up to what she was doing before she started urinating.

"What the hell!" She swore loudly.

Horrified, she got to her feet and she opened the door to the hall with a shaking hand. Immediately, the scents the closed door had muted hit her with full force and she actually took a

step back. There were her scents of course and her brain was still telling her something was wrong with them. Outside her room, however, there were another set of scents that were just as strong as hers.

Inclining her neck she sniffed the air curiously. They were different, yet had a strange commonality to them. There was also something about them that the new and unfamiliar part of her found alarming. This part of her demanded she keep her distance from whatever made it until she knew what it was and if it was edible. Though, whatever made it also didn't seem to be nearby right then at least.

After confirming the origin of the strange scents wasn't an immediate threat, the new, lupine side of her seemed to turn its attention to the other smells permeating the house. They were unfamiliar and that side pushed her to investigate them. However, Sophia pushed back against these suggestions and looked towards the bathroom.

Remembering she was still naked and determined not to let the lupine instincts get the better of her, she grabbed her light blue cotton bathrobe from next to the door. The other part of her protested against this strange outer fur, but she ignored it and tied the robe around herself. The robe felt odd against her fur, but it brought a renewed sense of confidence. She made her way down the hall to the bathroom and undid her robe before sitting on the toilet.

The smells of the bathroom were particularly strong and she did everything she could to avoid losing herself in them. The wolf part of her was prodding her to replace her wrong smelling scents with correct ones, as well as more fully investigate those from this unknown entity. The strong scent of her own urine being emptied into the toilet nearly made her give into that side and she actually had to plug her nose to overcome it. She didn't dare unplug it until the toilet finished flushing.

Quickly, she washed and dried her hands before replugging her nose. It was quickly becoming clear she had to do something to avoid being overpowered by her nose and the attendant lupine instincts. After making it into the hallway, an idea struck her and she made her way to the laundry room. To her surprise, she had to fight the impulse to get away from the strong scents of the various laundry detergents and other cleaning supplies rather than investigate them. It took holding her breath to conduct her search, but at last she found a clothespin and clipped it on her nose. Immediately, the scents stopped threatening to overpower her and she sighed. Her nose now hurt, but at least she could think. With an aching nose, she made her way back to her bedroom and plopped down on her bed, facing the mirror.

At the same time, the sheer strangeness and uncertainty of it terrified her. She had no idea what would happen if she followed the new instincts or if it truly was temporary. What would

happen if she did follow her urges to leave the house and go outside? Would she find herself changing back and lost in the middle of the forest somewhere? Maybe she'd be caught and end up as a scientific curiosity, stuck in a secret government lab for the rest of her life?

*But would remaining like this really be so bad? A voice deep within her whispered. Isn't this what I've secretly always wanted? What if this is only for one night and never again?*

Horrified, she tried to dismiss this voice, insisting it wasn't what she wanted. She was a human! There was no room in her life for being a werewolf; it would be for the best if it never happened again! Yet, as hard as the rational side of her tried to banish that voice, it couldn't. It was true, some part of her really did want to indulge this new side of her and enjoy the experience. Becoming a wolf, even a little bit and temporarily, was a dream come true.

If she kept fighting the changes, she may forever regret it. She opened her mouth and ran her tongue over her fangs thoughtfully. Part of her very much wanted to hunt with those fangs and it wasn't simply the new lupine part either. Unfortunately, it was far too dangerous to leave the house when she didn't know anything about how long the changes would last or how to control them. On the other hand, her dad would also be home in a couple of hours which made staying in the house risky.

What if she stayed in her room and let herself go a little bit? She'd keep a firm leash on the wolf currently sharing her body the whole time. That way, she wouldn't be putting herself or anyone else at risk. If this was her one and only chance, well, she'd have it to remember for the rest of her life. However, if they were permanent or recurred on the next full moon as the legend suggested, well, she'd deal with that when it happened.

*I really am a wolf-girl now, she thought soberly. I hope I'm not making a mistake.*

Emotions warring within, she warily got off the bed, closed and locked the door.

## Chapter 5

Once the door was shut, Sophia locked it. After a moment's thought, she turned off the light in her room, leaving only the light provided by the moon. While in the bathroom and hallway, she had noticed that she had little trouble seeing with the lights off. That made sense she mused; dogs and wolves could see far better in the dark than people. Indeed, with the darkness her wolf's anxiety over being in the house immediately faded, but did not disappear. Mostly she wanted to hunt now, but that wouldn't be possible in her bedroom.

*Not tonight*, she firmly told her inner wolf. *Alright, it looks like I might be stuck this way until morning... at least I hope it goes away in the morning. I might as well take advantage of it.*

Despite the chill in the room, she undid her robe and hung it on the door, leaving her completely naked again. She had always liked the liberty of being naked, and had an excuse tonight. Taking a breath, she stepped away from the door and unclipped the clothespin from her nose. Immediately, the scents the clothespin had been keeping at bay came flooding into her nose. Along with them came the lupine olfactory driven instincts she had clipped her nose to combat in the first place. This time though, she didn't try to resist them.

Dropping to the ground, she got onto her hands and knees and lowered her nose to the floor, almost touching it. She automatically began to take rapid, short breaths through her nose. Unfortunately, she soon realized this wasn't particularly effective with a still human nose as exhaling had the effect of pushing the scent carrying molecules back out of it. It also quickly resulted in her feeling short of breath. Mentally overriding the lupine instincts, she resorted to the human method of olfaction - deep inhalations through the nose. This proved far more effective and, to her surprise, she could faintly smell something she immediately recognized as her own scent. After a few moments of continued sniffing, she realized she was picking up where her bare feet had touched the floor earlier. Continuing to sniff the floor, she found herself tracing her steps from the door to the bed. As she explored, she was able to find the other places she had walked in the bedroom.

When one scent trail dead ended at the bed, she sniffed the floor for a few moments trying to reestablish it. Her nose could detect a stronger concentration of her scents and it took her a second to realize it was coming from above her. Automatically, she knelt and started sniffing the top of her bed. She then realized the stronger scents were from where she had been sitting earlier.

Its curiosity satisfied, the wolf side of her was ready to move on, but the human side of her was still in awe of the hidden world it had just discovered and she lingered over where she had been sitting. The smell she had been tracing was stronger there and covered a wider area

at one time. She could even smell where her labia had touched the blanket and she sniffed it curiously. Now that she was focused on it, she realized she could somehow tell where she was in her monthly cycle - after her period, but before she was fertile. The image of the male wolf she had seen the other night suddenly flashed through her mind unbidden and she was a bit disturbed to feel her nethers getting wet.

*Down girl*, she ordered her wolf side as she hastily shoved the idea back down as her cheeks flushed. *That really shouldn't be turning me on. Maybe this isn't such a good idea.*

Dropping to the floor, she resumed exploring her room. She picked up her scent coming from her desk chair, but as it was the same as that of the one on her bed, she ignored it. Instead, she continued to retrace her steps around her bed. On the other side of the bed, her nose caught several new smells and her wolf instincts immediately pushed her to follow them. Her nose led her straight to the discarded pile of clothing by the mirror. There, she buried her nose into her shirt, again taking rapid sniffs before her conscious mind took over.

The scents she picked up were fascinating, although they made her lupine side uneasy. Aside from her own scent, she found several others which were similar to, yet subtly different from, the one she had smelled in the hall. They were faint compared to her own, but she could definitely detect them. Her own scent was there of course, but now she had the opportunity to compare it side-by-side to the others. Getting into a kneeling position, she stared at her shirt, pondering.

Then it struck her; those were the scents of other people! The ones on it were barely detectable, but they were there. It was as though her shirt was a time capsule that had collected scents wherever she had worn it throughout her day. Where sight and hearing could only tell her about the world as it was at that moment, an enhanced scent of smell allowed her to perceive what had happened in the past. Thinking about it further, she realized the scent outside her room must have been her dad.

"This is so cool!" she said out loud, grinning. "It's like a superpower!"

Eagerly, she picked up her shirt and started taking strong whiffs to see what else she could find. Oddly, there was something different about her scent on the shirt compared to those belonging to the other people, even aside from whatever made it uniquely hers. It bothered her a little, but she mentally set the puzzle aside as she had no way of pursuing it further. Instead, she began mentally cataloging the non-human scents. She discovered the strongest scents, aside from her own, were actually the detergent used to launder her shirt and the cleaner she used to wipe down her scanner and the register belt. The wolf side of her found both decidedly unpleasant, but was intrigued by the hints of food on the shirt.

She was so engrossed in her exploration of her enhanced olfactory sense, her consciousness completely missed the sound of an approaching car. However, the wolf side of her did not and, instead of sniffing a shirt, she found herself trying to crawl under her bed. She had gotten most of her torso underneath and her butt was sticking up in the air. Slightly embarrassed despite being alone, she backed out and looked at her window as the car's headlights struck the wall. As the car came closer and then passed, she felt the strange sensation of muscles on the side of her head trying in vain to swivel her ears to track it.

*Steady Sophia, she thought. It's just a car.*

Shaken, she abandoned her examination of the shirt and just knelt for a moment, breathing.

*Alright, this is as new to you as it is to me, she again addressed her inner wolf. But you're a part of me and need to listen to me. If I can't trust you when you're inside me, then I can't ever let you hunt. Understand?*

Of course, there was no response, but it bolstered her confidence enough and she resumed her experimentation. Moving on from the shirt, she explored the scents on her other clothes. Most of her other work clothes were similar to her shirt and she didn't spend much time on them. Her shoes, on the other hand, had an overwhelming array of scents - too many to make much sense of. The inside smelled like her of course, but she noticed there were two distinct instances of her 'smell-print' as she was coming to think of it.

*Why does the stronger one smell different? She pondered, a bit worried. It doesn't seem like a sick smell, just... different. Also, I never realized how much I smelled. I really need to wash my shoes.*

As she turned the puzzle over in her head, her mind registered the taste and feel of leather in her mouth and she suddenly realized she had been chewing on the side of her shoe. Forcing herself to stop over her lupine side's protests, she examined the shoe. Thankfully, she hadn't chewed very hard, but there were definitely indents from her fangs. It wasn't too noticeable unless you looked closely and people would naturally assume it had been a dog. Still, it would do her no good to chew up her things no matter how good it felt.

*This really isn't good, she thought ruthfully. I can't lose control like this. Maybe I should pick up a chew toy just in case I'm stuck inside again... assuming I return to normal that is.*

Her stomach growled then and she realized she was getting hungry, very hungry. The desire to hunt she had been repressing came back stronger than ever, but she focused her mind on getting to the kitchen.

*Almost two in the morning, she glanced at the clock next to her bed. My dad will be home soon and he can't see me like this. I'm going to have to wait until he gets home and goes to bed.*

Searching her room both visually and olfactorily didn't turn up anything edible, unfortunately. She tried distracting herself by getting to know the other smells in the room, but found both her lupine and human sides were too distracted by her stomach. Alas, the only viable option was to wait. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, she heard the familiar sound of her dad's truck parking in the garage. This time, she was able to keep her jittery wolf instincts from sending her back under the bed. After a few minutes, she heard her father entering the kitchen.

She reflexively began sniffing in response to the noises, but with the door closed, there was nothing to smell. Playfully following the urging of the wolf in her, she got onto a crouched position on all fours. Goosebumps formed across her body and she could feel the fur on her back standing up. Unfamiliar muscles again tried to swivel her ears towards the door, though they remained quite firmly attached to the sides of her head. Her fingers and toes splayed out and she automatically tried digging her short claws into the floor in an action she recognized would have allowed a real wolf to either quickly attack or run. Unfortunately, her anatomy was still far from a real wolf for it to have been effective. Thankfully, the animal in the house was just her dad and neither running nor attacking would be necessary.

*I must look ridiculous, she mused wryly. Good thing the door is locked or my poor dad might just laugh himself to death if he entered. If he didn't die from the shock of his daughter having fangs and fur first, of course. What will he do if I still have them in the morning? What will I do?*

After a few minutes, her dad walked by her room and she heard the bathroom door shut. Air disturbed by his passing made its way under the door and reached her nose, surprising her. She could barely make it out, but she recognized the scent as the one she had noticed out in the hall earlier and later deduced was her father's. Unfortunately, along with it came the distinct smell of alcohol and she involuntarily took an unsteady step back. The smell of alcohol was never something she had liked and now, with an enhanced sense of smell, it was absolutely unbearable.

To her relief, the smell quickly dissipated and she heard the toilet flushing as her dad left the bathroom. Her dad said something she couldn't quite make out, although she thought she heard the word 'dog'. Then, there was the sound of his bedroom door opening and closing. Once again, the house was plunged back into silence. She relaxed a bit and moved from all

fours to a kneeling position. After another five minutes of silence, she was confident her dad was down for the night and it was safe for her to move again. It was a good thing too, as her empty stomach was starting to ache.

Getting to her feet, she quietly donned her robe again and quietly unlocked and opened the door. The smells of the house hit her full force again, but this time they didn't threaten to overwhelm her, though the strong scent of alcohol in the air was distinctly unpleasant. It appeared the path to the kitchen was clear and she quietly made her way down the hall. Despite her dislike for the lingering scent of spirits, she found herself constantly sniffing the air for anything unexpected.

After spending the last couple of hours getting used to her lupine instincts, she found they were far less rumbustious and were rapidly becoming just another part of her awareness. It both unsettled and pleased her that she was adapting to them so easily.

*Is the human taming the wolf or is the wolf replacing the human? Which do I even want to happen?*

Entering the kitchen, she laid aside her ponderings and set about finding something to eat. She opened the cabinet where the cereal was kept, eyed the boxes and then closed it. Cereal wasn't going to fulfill her cravings. She needed something with a bit more protein; she needed meat. Opening the freezer, she began ruffling through its contents. As she searched, her mouth watered as the scents of fish and meat filled her nostrils. Then, she smiled as she triumphantly pulled out the bag of frozen chicken breasts.

Pulling it open, she sniffed the contents of the bag. The smell of the scrumptious birds nearly led her to dive right in, but the cold of the bag was just enough to keep her at bay. Grabbing a plate, she threw three breasts on it and set the microwave to "defrost". While the breasts were thawing, she quietly grabbed a pan from the cupboard, lightly oiled it and turned it on high. The wait for the chicken to thaw was pure agony, especially as the scent of defrosting chicken began emanating from the microwave. Two minutes before the cycle was finished, she could take it no more.

She grabbed the plate from the microwave and set it on the counter. Leaning in close, she sniffed the plump bird meat and reached a hand for it. Instead of grabbing it and putting it in the heated oil though, she immediately leaned in and tore off a piece with her sharp fangs. Deep down, she knew this was probably a bad idea, but wolves knew nothing of such things and, at that moment, she was very content being a wolf.

Within minutes, she had eaten the entire tender breast. Still feeling famished, she grabbed another with her teeth and, this time, brought it to the floor. Getting to all fours, she

used the claws on her hand to pin it in place and again tore into it with her teeth. Within a few minutes, she had downed that one too and was licking the remaining juices off the floor.

*I can't believe I just ate raw chicken off the floor, she finished cleaning up the last bit of juice with her tongue and her hunger faded. It just smelled so good and... I couldn't stop myself. I hope I don't get sick.*

Standing back up she saw and smelled that the forgotten oil in the pan was starting to smoke and she turned off the stove. The smell of the last remaining breast drew her attention back to the plate. Her stomach was feeling much less empty now, but she was still feeling a bit peckish and it smelled delicious. She stared at the last breast, weighing whether she should cook it or just do what the wolf was telling her. Shrugging, she bent over the counter, grabbed it with her teeth from the plate and then pulled it back to the floor.

*It seems a little late to be worried about food poisoning and these teeth are amazing, she reasoned. It's not as good as cooked meat, but it's not bad either. I bet a freshly caught chicken would be even better. Wait, where did that thought come from?*

Setting aside her misgivings, she took her time with each bite and let the wolf do its thing. She marveled at how her teeth rended the pink meat. Tossing her head back, she swallowed a particularly sizable piece. Soon, she was licking the last juices from her hands and the sleeves of her robe. After that, she arched her back, stretched out with her hands on the floor and yawned.

*That was the strangest and most disgusting thing I've ever done, she stood back up and forced herself to wash her hands and face in the sink. I'll clean up in the morning. Hmm, I'm thirsty now.*

Grabbing a tall glass, she filled it with the sink and reflexively sniffed at it. When she was satisfied it was indeed water, she lowered her tongue into the glass and began lapping. She quickly discovered to her frustration that her short tongue was ill suited to scoop up water like a proper wolf. Sighing, she forced herself to drink like a human. To her surprise, she quickly downed two glasses.

Yawning again, she went back to her room. There, she again shut and locked the door before removing her robe. Sitting on her bed, she smelled a bit of the robe's fabric on her arm and licked it off without even thinking twice about it. Finally, she got up on the bed, positioned herself to face the mirror and sat down on her knees while propping herself up with her arms.

*Tonight has been terrifying, but admittedly fun, she reflected, looking herself over in the mirror. I don't know what's happening to me and I'm scared, but I'm also happier than I've been in a long time. There's something else though. I feel... lonely.*

It was true; while she had tentatively formed a truce with the wolf that had somehow taken up residence in her mind and body, she and it felt a longing for companionship. Not with people she realized, but other wolves. Wolves were pack animals and the lupine side of her needed a pack... or was that her yearning to be out among wolves? Definitely the wolf, she insisted to herself staring out her window at the bright moon.

*If this happens again, will I remain myself?* she looked at the small, black claws on her hands.

Turning her attention back to herself, she realized how physically tired she was. Her body had gone through quite the ordeal over the past week and after eating, it was starting to weigh on her. The desire to sleep was coming hard and fast. She looked at the clock, just after four in the morning.

*Before I go down for the night, I need to do something, just in case,* she thought. *I want proof this isn't a dream.*

Over the protests of aching muscles, she got out of bed and walked over to her shelf. There, she found the digital camera she had received for her eighth birthday and pushed the on button. It had been a little while since she had used it and was relieved when she heard it powering up. For this occasion, the poor resolution of her phone camera simply wouldn't do. Remembering the camera needed full light even if she didn't, she went over to the light switch and turned it on. Against the backdrop of her door, she turned it towards herself and opened her mouth, showing her teeth.

The flash completely blinded her dark-adjusted eyes for a moment and she let out a yelp. After her eyesight recovered, she looked at the photo. Thankfully, she had held it long enough to completely capture her upper body. Her pupils were large and wholly red, but the gold of her iris was still visible. The white fur on her chest was nicely visible between her breasts. She ran her hand through it and then took a photo of her feet. Finally, she positioned it above her and pulled her hair to the side before awkwardly snapping a picture of the fur on her back.

Satisfied, she put the camera on her desk. The wolf side of her suggested the best place to sleep for the night was under her bed where she would be well hidden. However, what she really wanted was the comfort only a bed could provide. Willing her now heavily aching and fatigued muscles forward, she made her way to her bed. She clambered onto it, curled her knees into her stomach and drifted off to sleep almost immediately.

Some time later, Sophia woke shivering, soaked in sweat. Her mouth, fingers and toes were aching and her muscles felt like they had run a marathon. To top it off, it felt like her

bladder was about to burst. Forcing herself out of bed, she hastily donned her robe. Something struck her as wrong as she felt her way to the bathroom and she realized she could barely see in the darkness. There was also very little to smell, although she thought she could smell the barest hint of dog while she sat on the toilet. Clumsily washing her hands she looked in the mirror, her eyes were their normal, boring hazel again. Her teeth and ears were normal too. She was once again her old self and she sighed in a strange combination of relief and disappointment.

Leaving the bathroom, she made her way back to her bedroom. She managed to remove her robe, but was too tired to put on pajamas. The clock showed it was about a quarter past six as she clambered into bed. Outside her window, there was the barest hint of the coming day. The experience had only lasted a night as the story had said, but it would certainly be one she would never forget.

*One month to find out how much my life has changed,* she thought as she drifted off to sleep, her mind a whirlwind of emotions. *One long month.*

## Chapter 6

Sophia slowly swam towards consciousness, her brain feeling like it was submerged in molasses. Groaning, she willed stiff muscles to move her arm to her face and rub her temples. She opened her eyes and immediately shut them as daylight blinded her. Slowly reopening her eyes to let them adjust, she tilted her head to the side and checked her clock - it was after 10:00 a.m. Panic shot through her as that meant her father was almost certainly up by now. She prayed it had either all been a dream or there hadn't been any sign of her strange night.

Grunting, she propped herself up and checked her hands over in the daylight. Instead of the dark pointed nails of the previous night, her fingers ended in familiar rounded, pink tips. Still, the nails looked quite a bit longer than they should have been, seeing as she had clipped them a few days before. Next, she ran her tongue over her teeth, they too felt normal. After that, she flipped her blanket off, uncovering her still naked body. The fur had disappeared from her chest and stomach, and her pubic hair had returned to its normal brown color and density. To her dismay, though, her legs looked like they hadn't been shaved in weeks.

Her entire body felt stiff, and just moving her arms and upper body felt like it took a lot more effort than usual. Stretching protesting muscles, she arched her back and then reached towards her feet with her face down. A strange dark line on the bedsheet caught her eye, and she stopped stretching. Curious, she picked it up and brought it closer for a better look. When she realized what it was, her heart froze. It was a single stiff dark hair - and it certainly wasn't a human hair. All hope it had only been a dream faded

"Oh no," she whispered as she tried not to panic. *If my dad find's fur...*

Ignoring the protests of her muscles, she hastily got out of bed and threw on pajama pants and a nightgown. Looking herself over in the mirror, she saw her hair was a complete mess and took a few moments to brush it. She took another moment to confirm her eyes and ears were back to normal, before heading out of her bedroom towards the bathroom.

Once there, she took several strong sniffs, feeling blind after the night's much stronger sense of smell. Thankfully, the faint dog smell she half-remembered from waking earlier had dissipated. After emptying her bladder, she examined the bathroom floor and toilet. She saw a couple of, what might have been, wolf hairs and wiped them up just to be sure.

After quickly washing her hands, she made her way to the living room where she could hear the TV. Her dad was sitting in his usual spot, although she was surprised to see he didn't have a glass or bottle next to him. He looked up as she reached the threshold between the front hall and living room.

"Morning Soph," he greeted her cheerfully, leaning back. "Late night?"

“Morning, and yeah,” Sophia replied evenly, sitting on the couch.

“Did you have a dog in the house last night?” he asked after a beat, looking curiously at her. “I could’ve sworn I smelled dog in the bathroom last night.”

*Shit*, her mind went blank. “No, that’s really strange.”

“Huh, well, I didn’t this morning,” he said, sounding a little perplexed. “Must have been imagining things after a long day. You working today?”

Sophia nearly collapsed in relief. *I’ll have to clean up before he has a chance to notice anything else.*

“Nope, I have today off. Tomorrow though.” She hesitated and then asked softly, “you want to do something later?”

“Oh, sorry, I can’t; I have plans later,” her dad replied, shaking his head. “I’m heading out to watch the Idaho State game with some buddies in half an hour and probably won’t be back until this evening. Definitely another time though!”

“Okay,” Sophia replied, disappointed. “Well, I’m going to have breakfast and take a shower.”

“Sounds good,” her dad said absently and went back to watching the TV.

*Good talk dad*, Sophia sighed dejectedly and got up. *Your daughter* turned into a werewolf *last night and is having a bit of an emotional crisis, thanks for caring.*

In the kitchen, she saw the pan still on the stove still with oil in it and the plate with now dry chicken fat on it. Nausea floated up from her stomach as she looked at the noticeable smudge on the floor where she had eaten raw chicken. Hoping fervently she wasn’t going to get food poisoning from consuming raw meat, she wetted some paper towels and wiped up the spot on the floor. After that, she dumped the unused oil in the garbage and rinsed off the plate. Finally, she meticulously looked over the floor to see if there were any loose hairs. Once satisfied there weren’t any, she breathed a sigh of relief and turned her attention to making breakfast.

This morning, her hunger was the normal kind and not the deep, gnawing hunger she had felt throughout the last few days. Opening the fridge to grab a carton of milk for her cereal, her stomach lurched a little when she saw the package of raw bacon, and she made a point of looking away from it when she put the milk back. Sitting at the table, she took her time eating, relishing feeling satisfied with a normal breakfast for the first time in days. After emptying the bowl, she washed her breakfast dishes and grabbed her robe before heading to the bathroom.

Hanging the robe up, she eyed the tub and decided a bath sounded far more appealing to her still stiff muscles. After starting the tub, she undressed and hung a towel and washcloth

next to the tub. Once the water was high enough, she turned the faucet off, stepped in and lay in the tub, letting herself go limp. She closed her eyes and lay peacefully as the heat penetrated and loosened her muscles. After the unnatural stresses her body had been subjected to, it felt too wonderful for words.

For a time, pure contentment drove the stress and absurdity of the last week from her mind. All was as it should be, the impossible remained impossible and her life hadn't just been turned upside down. Slowly, she let her head slip below the water, soaking her hair. It had all been her silly, sleep deprived imagination; there were no such things as werewolves. After she could no longer hold her breath, she surfaced and inhaled deeply as water cascaded off her head. She smoothed her hair, rubbed her eyes and then opened them again. Just a fantasy...

Several stray wolf hairs were floating in the water. Not quite willing to let go of her reverie quite yet, she closed her eyes and counted to ten before reopening them. The hairs were still there. She reached out to one drifting above her chest and gingerly plucked it from the water. Bringing it in close to her face, she dispassionately regarded it. A single strand of hair was such a small thing really, but this one's very existence should have been impossible. Yet, there was no denying its existence as she examined it. She could feel the silvery strand as easily as the hair on her head or the water covering her submerged body. There was also no use denying the hair had somehow been grown and shed from her own body.

*Am I still... human?* She let the hair go as her hand sank limply back into the water.  
*What am I now?*

Sitting back up, she grabbed the bottle of shampoo on the rim of the tub. She squeezed some into her hand and rubbed it vigorously into her hair.

*Where did all of the other fur go?* She worked the shampoo down the length of her hair.  
*Where did it come from anyway? Did the moon do it...? How?*

Finishing lathering her hair, she lay her head back into the water and held her breath as she submerged her head. She combed her hair with her hands, thoroughly rinsing her hair. She surfaced, took a deep breath and grabbed the conditioner.

*I thought werewolves became mindless beasts,* she repeated the process with the conditioner. *Will that happen to me next full moon? When is the next full moon? Could it happen tonight?*

After finishing with the conditioner, she grabbed the washcloth and began gently scrubbing her arms. Several more wolf hairs were floating in the tub than there were before she had washed her hair. She did her best not to look at them.

*There must be other people like me out there, right? She scrubbed her neck and back. I can't be the only werewolf. There must be someone who can give me answers. Right?*

Moving down her body, she scrubbed her legs and feet with the cloth. She couldn't help noticing her toenails were definitely longer, but also looked a bit smoother than they had been. Maybe there were some perks to monthly transformations at least. Once finished scrubbing herself down, she opened the drain and watched the water flow out of the tub.

*People become werewolves after getting bitten by another werewolf in stories, several hairs disappeared down the drain. But that's not what happened to me. What else were the stories wrong about? What happens if I start changing during the day?*

A couple hairs lingered on the bottom of the tub after the water drained. Getting to her feet, she grabbed the shower head and quickly rinsed the evidence of her nocturnal escapade down the drain. She hung the shower head back up, closed the curtain and quickly rinsed her body off. After aiming the shower head straight down, she grabbed her shaving gel and began applying it to her legs.

*Inconvenient hair growth and longer nails aren't so bad at least, she grabbed her razor and began sliding it down her legs. I miss feeling like a wolf though.*

Stopping shaving for a moment, she shook her head to clear that treasonous thought. She *didn't* want to be a werewolf; she was *human*. Distracting herself, she concentrated on removing the unwelcome holdover from the night.

Slide the razor down her leg, rinse it off in the shower.

Slide the razor down her leg, rinse it off...

Finishing with her right leg, she rinsed it off under the falling water. She began removing the hair on her other leg and then stopped in surprise. The scar she had sported on her knee from her bike accident was missing. Forgetting shaving for a moment, she gently moved the skin on her knee around, examining it. The scar was definitely gone.

*Now that's cool, she checked the underside of her arm above the elbow where she had a scar from a nasty fall she had suffered as a kid to find it too was gone. Do I just heal when I change..?*

She considered intentionally nicking herself with the razor, but thought better of it when she remembered how much razor cuts tended to sting and bleed. Instead, she got out of the shower and found a needle in the bathroom vanity. After washing it with soap and water, she gave her right index finger a prick. Blood immediately started to trickle out of the self-induced puncture, and she was disappointed to see it didn't close up immediately. Feeling a bit silly, she washed off her finger and returned to the shower.

*What good is rapid healing if it only happens once a month?* She resumed shaving her left leg. *So much for Wonder Sophia the Werewolf Girl.*

After her leg was free of the unwanted growth, she rinsed it. Before shutting off the water, she shaved her armpits which also annoyingly looked like they had never been shaved. She grabbed her towel, dried her upper body off and then wrapped her hair in it. Locating a nail clipper, she set about removing the last physical remnant of her transformation.

*That takes care of that*, she examined her nails in satisfaction.

Wiping the condensation off the mirror, she looked herself over. As far as she could tell, there wasn't any indication something had ever been amiss. Though, she did note any freckles that had been on her skin had completely disappeared. The image of a snake shedding its skin came to her mind and she giggled. Curious, she removed the towel and stepped on the scale. To her surprise, her weight had returned to what it had been before the party. Stepping off the scale, she turned and grabbed her robe from the hook on the door.

She was just about to put it on when she noticed several lupine hairs on the neckline. Frowning, she opened it to find the inside of it was littered with wolf fur. Grumbling to herself, she hung the robe back up and wrapped a towel around herself before gathering her discarded clothes and heading for her bedroom. Unfortunately, one look at her bed made it obvious her robe wasn't the only item in need of laundering. Resigning herself to some deep cleaning, she threw on a loose t-shirt and sweats. Once decent, she stripped her bed and set to work.

As it turned out, she was quite glad her father had left for the day. It took her over an hour to be satisfied she had removed all evidence of the prior night. With her clothes and bedsheets in the dryer, she fixed herself a sandwich for lunch and then settled down at her laptop. There were questions to answer.

Bringing up her social media profile, she was embarrassed to see she had missed several messages from Candice checking up on her while she was sick Wednesday. While she tried to keep her profile updated, it wasn't unusual for Sophia to go days at a time between checking her profile. Dismissing the notifications, she instead navigated to Candice's page. Ever the indefatigable social butterfly, Candice had been active the night before and had already posted to her timeline several times that morning. Corroborating their brief text conversation, Sophia saw nothing indicating anything out of the ordinary had happened. She did note, with some jealousy, that Candice's most recent post had been just half an hour before and was of her posing with Patty, Rachel and a guy the site helpfully identified as "Joe". The attendant message simply read "Warming up for Saturday morning band practice!".

In the picture, Rachel and Candice were smiling broadly, while Patty looked like she had just been dragged out of bed. Clicking on Rachel's profile, she saw the girl's last post was Wednesday. Scrolling through Rachel's profile, Sophia noted she was an infrequent poster like herself. Going back to Candice's picture, Sophia clicked on the link to Patty's profile. To her utter lack of surprise, Patty rivaled Candice in her social output and had updated her page multiple times over the last twenty-four hours. The posts from the previous night indicated Patty had attended a party and were more than a little suggestive of underage drinking, but none of them had anything to do with wolves or the moon.

Feeling puzzled, Sophia went back to Candice's page and tried to remember the last party attendee's name. To her frustration, she just could not recall it. Scrolling through Candice's extensive friend's list, Sophia watched for either a familiar name or picture. About two thirds of the way down, she finally found a profile picture of the other person at the party. She clicked Alexa's profile and waited for it to load.

To her disappointment, she immediately saw Alexa had posted the prior evening. It was something to do with politics, but Sophia assumed Alexa probably didn't post it while sporting fangs and fur. Drumming her fingers, Sophia stared at her screen. Why was she apparently the only one at the party affected? Granted, she technically had no evidence Rachel hadn't been affected, but the girl certainly didn't look as rough as Sophia felt. Not sure what else to do, Sophia absently scrolled down Alexa's wall.

A couple posts down, Alexa had shared a picture of the Halloween Party on her timeline which had depicted all the other girls who had been there... except Sophia. Looking for the date, she saw the picture had been posted by Patty late Tuesday night. The card game on the table indicated it had been taken after Sophia had come down sick.

*I actually go to a social gathering and of course I'm left out of the pictures,* Sophia's mood soured.

Feeling dejected, Sophia opened a chat with Candice and prepared to type a message asking if her friend was able to hang out later. However, she just couldn't get herself to start typing. What help would Candice be able to give her anyway?

*Hey Candice! Your best friend is literally a wolf girl now!* Candice would rightly think she had lost her mind.

Feeling frustrated, Sophia closed the chat and opened a new tab instead. In the address bar, she typed "real werewolves". The first result was just an article about the history of werewolf legends and she skipped it. The next link was a bit more promising and covered historical

claims of 'real' werewolves. Unfortunately, the gruesome fates of those accused did little to help her anxiety or mood. Most of the subsequent top links were similar to the first couple.

The results then started linking to various conspiracy theories and a couple were people claiming to have seen werewolves, none of which proved particularly helpful. It was rather discomfoting to see they all seemed to agree those unfortunate to be infected with lycanthropy became mindless beasts who lived for killing however. A range of linked articles went into the various psychological and medical disorders that may have given rise to the legends. *Was she going crazy? Maybe she had tracked all that fur in from somewhere else... or just imagined it?*

Feeling uncertain again, she remembered the pictures she had taken and found the camera where she had left it. Popping out the memory card, she inserted it into her laptop's SD slot and waited for it to load. After transferring the pictures to her laptop, she hesitated before opening the folder they were in. This was it, if they weren't there, she would be faced with the near certainty she was hallucinating and probably needed to be committed. Steeling herself, she summoned the courage to open the folder.

The pictures she had just downloaded popped up... and the first four were exactly the ones she remembered taking. Seeing her naked body with patches of fur again was jarring, despite it being what she remembered. However, it was the golden eyes in the first picture she had taken that really drew her attention. She couldn't help staring at them, they were... actually kind of beautiful. Glancing at her standing mirror, she felt a touch of melancholy as she saw her normal hazel eyes looking back at her. It wasn't just the eyes either, the teeth, the nails, the fur... she couldn't help missing all of it...

*Woah there*, she hastily minimized the folder. *I'm human and that's that. At least I know I'm not crazy...*

She pulled her browser back up and resumed looking for other people like her. Unfortunately, it was proving very tough and each page just deepened her sense of isolation. After combing through several fruitless pages of results, she was about to give up when she saw a link to a small forum that claimed to be for people with lycanthropy. With rekindled hope, she eagerly followed the link. The board only had a couple dozen threads and hadn't had any activity in over a week, but it looked like it might be what she was looking for. Entering the first post, she began reading through it.

Much to her disappointment, most of the posts on the board were either from conspiracy theorists, people claiming to have met werewolves or roleplayers. There were a couple from people claiming to be afflicted with lycanthropy, but none seemed analogous to her experience.

Sighing, she backed out and was about to try a different search when a loud, demanding tone nearly made her jump out of her chair.

Looking for what could have made the beep, she saw her social media tab had a notification on it. To her surprise, it was a message from a guy she recognized from one of her classes. Wondering why someone she never talked to on or offline would be messaging her now, she opened the message. One glance at it made her heart stop:

*You should come over to my house and be my pet wolf girl!*

To her horror, it was underneath an embedded video from the Halloween Party... of her acting like a wolf with the skin comically draped over her.

## Chapter 7

Sophia felt like her insides were twisting themselves in knots as she stared at the attached recording titled “Little Red Riding Hood Wolfs Out!”. Desperately pleading with herself to wake up from the nightmare, she fought the urge to vomit. Who at the party took a *video*? She didn’t remember anyone with a phone out, much less filming. Barely conscious of her hand moving, she placed the cursor over the video embed and clicked.

A page on a video sharing site opened in a new tab and the video began playing. It wasn’t great quality, but she could definitely recognize the wolf skin on top of the costume she had worn. The recording didn’t start when she had first put on the skin as she had expected, nor did it start when she had playfully eaten off her plate. In fact, she only vaguely remembered doing anything shown in the video; it was all just a blur. Even more disquieting was the recording was six minutes long.

Praying the video included the other girls’ romps with the skin, she skipped to the end. The hope it included more than just her died as soon as the video finished loading. The last few seconds were of her bending down to Lynn’s cup and Lynn saying her name. As soon as she started standing, the playback reached the end. Restarting the video from the beginning, she watched, barely daring to breathe.

Despite herself, she found herself utterly mesmerized. The recording phone appeared to have been set on someone’s leg and, judging by the angle of the camera and white dress in the foreground, it had to have been Patty. On the screen, she had risen onto the balls of her feet and was moving around on all fours confidently, if awkwardly. The other girls in the video laughed as she put her nose close to the floor and moved around, sniffing, until she came close to the person filming, which had definitely been Patty.

“That’s my food, girl!” Patty exclaimed as the playback jolted for a moment as she bent over and picked her plate up.

In the video, Sophia looked up, her eyes looking up at Patty, opened her mouth... and *snarled*. She actually *snarled*. It wasn’t just a playful snarl either, her teeth were fully bared and there was an angry look in her eyes. Despite that, several of the girls laughed, although Candice actually looked taken aback for a moment.

“Woah there,” Patty said, sounding amused. “Here, fetch!”

The phone jiggled again as Patty threw something. What looked to be a slice of sausage flew through the air and hit the floor close to the entryway, flipped over and stopped. Immediately, Sophia went after it in the video, to the delight of the others. Moving with surprising

fluidity, she covered the distance on all fours. Bending her head down, she sniffed it before picking it up in her mouth and eating it.

“Wow Sophia,” Alexa laughed in the video. “You really *are* a wolf girl.”

The recording stayed focused on Sophia and she turned back towards the group, looking at them intently. With almost unnatural ease, Sophia trotted back towards the group on all fours. She turned towards Candice and began curiously sniffing her leg.

“Look out!” Patty warned playfully. “She’s seeing if you’ll taste good!”

Candice shifted uneasily as Sophia continued sniffing down her thigh as it rested on the chair. Before backing off, Sophia rubbed the side of her cheek against Candice’s pants to more laughter. Backing off, Sophia went around to Candice’s other side, to where her plate was on the small table. This time, she planted her face over the sausages and actually ate several off the plate with her mouth. Lynn and Patty laughed nervously while Candice looked aghast. After another round of sausages, Sophia went for Lynn’s cup and the recording reached the end.

Sophia slumped against the back of her chair, her hands dangling. After viewing the recording, she could vaguely remember doing what the video showed. It had been like a trance, like something deep within her had taken control for those minutes. Had she been drugged? Did Patty slip something in her drink while she wasn’t looking? What had Sophia done to deserve this degree of embarrassment? Was losing her mother, having an uncaring father and being a failure at everything not enough?

*It’s not fair!* Anger surged through her, hot and violent. *I’ve done everything I’m supposed to and all I do is get hurt!*

Wanting to unleash her fury on something or someone, she examined the video. It had been posted the night before and the number of views was already several hundred. Everyone in school was going to see it before the end of the weekend! Nearly shaking, she closed the video and the picture of Candice with Patty and Rachel filled the screen, enraging her even more. Rachel was the one who told the legend, and Candice was the one who brought the wolf pelt in the first place. Did they all conspire together? If they didn’t, how could they not have noticed Patty filming? It didn’t seem possible it had been just a coincidence! It had to have been some prank dreamed up in band class. Why would Candice do this to her though? Was being friends with the “wolf girl” too embarrassing for Candice? Was that it? In her mind’s eye, she pictured Candice laughing as Patty filmed Sophia moving around on all fours.

*Well, they succeeded!* Sophia brought up the chat with Candice. *This ‘wolf girl’ is a real werewolf now and they’re going to ruin any remaining chance I have at a life!*

Her fingers furiously tapped:

Great job! Your prank on the wolf girl succeeded! I hope you're happy with your new friends now that you guys have made my life even more of a living hell! If I was such a drag to be around, you should have just told me you didn't want me instead of stringing me along.

Without a second thought, she hit 'send' and slammed her laptop closed. As she got up from her chair, her anger rapidly cooled, and she collapsed onto her bed, sobbing.

Several hours later, Sophia was curled up with a blanket in front of the living room television. It was rare for her to sit down in front of the television and nothing really interested her now, but at least it distracted her from the gaping emotional wound inside her. She had tried drawing or even doing homework, but her mind would inevitably drift to how alone she was, and she'd start crying all over again. Candice had tried to call twice, no doubt seeking to further mock Sophia's gullibility, but Sophia refused to answer and turned off the phone after the second attempt.

As the sun started to set, she found herself with a half-empty bag of puffs while watching a soap opera she didn't have any real interest in. Up to then, it had more or less succeeded in distracting her from the sad reality of her existence. However, as darkness descended outside, she found herself growing restless. Any claim the television still had on her attention waned as the sun disappeared below the mountains, and she found herself staring out the window at the fading daylight. Although half hoping she'd change again, she didn't feel at all like she had preceding her transformation the night before, but her mind and body felt increasingly confined in the house.

*Maybe some fresh air would do me some good,* she turned off the TV and stood, letting her bag of puffs and the blanket fall. *If I change again, well, at least I'll have something else to distract me.*

After putting on her shoes, coat, gloves and a hat, she was about to go out the front door when she decided she'd rather be away from the artificial light of the streets. Instead, she went out into the backyard via the kitchen's sliding backdoor. The sun had set, but the moon had yet to clear the mountains and the yard was covered in an eerie darkness. Stepping off the porch, she slowly walked along the hedges behind the house. Just moving outside in the cold night helped loosen the tension in her mind and body. Once she reached the edge of the house, she took a lazy turn and moved along the slight depression that marked the division between

properties. Stopping at her yard's edge, she closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, she held it a few seconds and then slowly exhaled, letting some of her stress go with it. She had intended to stop at the yard's edge, but, on a whim, she stepped into the field that separated the property line and kept going.

Despite the lack of a path or illumination, she found herself stepping confidently as she hiked in the direction of the northern foothills and mountains. After half an hour, she had crossed the undeveloped grassy plain that separated her neighborhood from the foothills and the terrain was increasingly hilly and dotted with trees. By then, the moon was peaking above the eastern mountains, and the trees and rocks cast long shadows over the rolling landscape. She had no idea where she was going, but felt driven to push on. In the back of her mind, she knew walking in the wilderness alone, particularly at night, was dangerous. Besides the risk she'd miss a step and break a leg with no one aware she was there, predators were at their most active in the evening. Not to mention, she lacked water or even proper footgear. Yet, whether through bravery or recklessness, she felt unconcerned for her safety as she jumped between two large boulders only partly lit by the moonlight.

When she was younger, she and her parents would occasionally take day hikes into the nearby foothills. They'd picnic on one of the hills with a clear view of their home and town. Like her, Sophia's mother had been at home in the wilderness and the two never missed an opportunity to explore, no matter how dangerous the terrain, much to her father's chagrin. When she got older, Sophia would sometimes drag Candice on ill-advised adventures in the same hills, often in the hopes of glimpsing a pack of wolves. Those excursions had always been during the day though and never alone.

She had also never ventured past the tree line without her parents. Nor had she been outside the townline since her mother died and her body was letting her know it. Breathing heavily, Sophia clambered quickly up a rockfall on the slope of a particularly steep hill, not even ensuring the next rock she reached for or stepped on was secure. Her muscles protested against the demands she was making of them, but she still pushed on.

By some miracle, she reached the upper edge of the rocks without slipping and paused a moment to catch her breath against a tree. She lingered only a moment though before resuming. Her destination was close, she could feel it. Despite the tangled branches that scraped her face and treacherous ground, she continued. Finally, she came upon a rocky outcropping free of any foliage near the hill's apex. Her instincts told her this was the place. For what, she had no idea.

The outcropping was about fifteen feet across and seven deep. The wind and rain had eroded the softer material away from this remnant of a past geological epoch and created a relatively flat surface. Tall pine trees surrounded the approaches to the ledge, but did not obscure the face of it, giving a largely unobstructed view of the valley. The lights of Woodbury were easily visible several miles away. The nearly full moon gave the entire valley an unearthly white glow.

Temporarily forgetting her personal problems or fatigue, Sophia settled on a rock protruding from the outcrop and looked out over the valley, awed. The night was clear and the moonlight glinted off the snow on the distant peaks of the Teton mountains. The spot reminded her of the hikes she used to take with her mother out to the hills. Mother and daughter spent many a weekend exploring the wilds around Woodbury and finding a secluded overlook with a spectacular view was always a highlight. Though, they had never attempted something so dangerous at night nor without preparation. As memories flashed through her mind's eye, tears began to well up.

*Mom, a tear left a wet trail on her cheek. I wish you could see this with me. I wish I could talk to you now; you would have known what to do.*

Rustling startled her and she turned towards it in a panic; the memories falling away. Whatever it was, it was big and getting closer. She sat there unmoving, barely even breathing, as the rustling grew closer. A large shape emerged from the darkness, making its way towards her. Eyes widening, she got ready to run. As the source of the noise stepped out of the shadows, its eyes caught the moonlight and briefly shone white. Then Sophia's eyes were able to make out other details and the image of a large wolf formed in her brain.

"It's you..." Sophia whispered in awe as she recognized the lupine form in front of her.

Rationally, it seemed silly to think this could have been the same wolf she had met almost a week before, but deep in her soul she knew. As before, she also somehow knew he would bring her no harm and she relaxed. The wolf stopped ten feet away, keen golden eyes regarding her. His nose twitched and ears swiveled as he stood with his head held high. Despite the unexpectedness of the situation on both sides, his body was relaxed and his tail swished lazily behind him.

"I didn't expect to see you again," Sophia broke the silence, feeling strangely giddy.  
"What brings you here?"

The wolf rotated his head curiously in response, tail rising briefly. For her part, Sophia was unable to take her eyes off him. He was as magnificent a creature as she had remembered from their first encounter.

"Are you alone?" she asked, realizing she had yet to see any other wolves with him.  
"Where's your pack?"

The wolf didn't respond of course, but did take a cautious step forward. Slowly, she raised her hand and the wolf tensed in response.

"It's okay!" she reassured him. "I'm not going to hurt you. I wish we had met last night; we could have made our own pack."

Seeing there was no danger, the wolf crept closer. He continued to stare at her, nose twitching as he sniffed the air, as if unsure of what to make of her.

*I wonder if I smell a bit like a wolf to him,* she slowly slid off her rock onto her hands and knees. *Having that wolf nose and instincts would be really useful right about now.*

The wolf stopped again, this time sitting on his haunches with his tail sweeping the ground. Hoping that meant he was accepting her, she cautiously moved forward. When the wolf didn't respond, she crawled towards him until the gap between them was only a few feet.

*I can't believe this is actually happening!* She got into a cross-legged sitting position, her heart thudding in her chest.

The two now sat facing each other. This close, she could see just how big he was and the idle thought he could easily snap her neck if he wanted floated through her mind. A point driven home when he opened his mouth to pant, displaying his massive, sharp fangs. Yet, Sophia didn't feel the least bit worried and actually felt comforted with him there. The moonlight shone on and through his fur and she had to admit he was even more, dare she say, handsome than he had been under the glow of the streetlights.

"I haven't been able to stop thinking about you after the other night," Sophia told the wolf. "I certainly didn't believe we'd meet again."

The wolf closed his mouth, lowered his ears and whined briefly, surprising her.

"I was sad too," she responded, smiling. "I've been very lonely lately. Have you been lonely too?"

As if in response, the wolf's ears went back to upright and his jaw relaxed. To her delight, the wolf got off his haunches and covered a third of the distance between them. He was almost close enough to touch. Mentally crossing her fingers, Sophia slid herself a similar distance, leaving just a foot of space between them. Tentatively, she raised a hand and slowly moved it towards her companion. The wolf leaned towards her hand, sniffing it.

Gently, Sophia curled her fingers inward until they brushed the bridge of the wolf's muzzle. As her fingers made contact, a wave of electricity starting in the tips of her fingers traveled through her hand, up her arm and from then through the rest of her body. Letting out a

sigh, she ran her fingers lightly over his muzzle, taking in every sensation. The wolf continued to sniff her hand and gave it a lick, causing her to giggle.

“Do I smell a bit like a wolf?” Sophia asked curiously. “Believe it or not, you’re not the strangest thing to happen to me this week. I guess you could say I’m a part-time wolf now.”

Thrilled at the opportunity to touch a real, wild wolf, she shifted closer until her face was almost touching the wolf’s. The wolf seemed just as eager to examine her and began intently sniffing her face while occasionally flicking his tail.

Remembering something she had once read from someone who had spent time with wolves, she drew her lips back, baring her teeth. This seemed to please her lupine friend and he gave her several rapid licks across her teeth. Sophia laughed, joy filling her. Placing her hand on the wolf’s neck, Sophia ran her hand through his fur there. Underneath the outer coat was a thick layer of soft fur similar to what had adorned Sophia’s front the prior night.

“It’s funny, I ran into you and became a werewolf a few days later,” Sophia murmured as she ran her hand over the wolf’s head. “Don’t worry, it wasn’t your fault. I’ve always dreamed of being a wolf, but now that I’ve become one, sort of, I’m worried about it messing up my life. Of course, there isn’t much left to mess up.”

The wolf whined and she paused her exploration of his mane. Was he responding to her words..? Oddly, it felt like she knew what he was feeling too and he felt...

“You’re lonely too...” she whispered as she understood. “What happened to the rest of your pack?”

The wolf’s head and tail drooped for a moment, but he then ran his muzzle against her face.

“I’m sorry,” Sophia sympathized as she nuzzled him back. “I’ve lost most of my pack too, and those who I thought were in my pack, well, I don’t know anymore.”

She gave his chin a friendly scratch and then moved her hand to the side of his leg. The fur was thinner there, and she marveled at the solid muscles that lay underneath. Unable to resist, she gave his muscles a squeeze. Despite the cold air, she was feeling rather warm underneath her coat and her heart was pumping rapidly.

*Am I..? she nervously played with her coat’s zipper with her left hand. No, don’t be silly; I’m just excited.*

Suddenly unsure, she glanced around and panicked when she saw how high the moon was in the sky.

“Crap!” she exclaimed, startling her companion who was sniffing her coat. “I need to get home!”

The wolf growled and then whined.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized. “I really want to stay, but I need to get back. This has been a dream come true for me, and I wish I could go with you.”

The wolf’s tail drooped. Somehow, she felt like the wolf was asking her something.

“I’ll come back next weekend,” she blurted out. “I promise.”

The wolf perked up and began panting and Sophia sensed he understood her intent. Leaning in, she gave her new friend a hug before nuzzling her face against his muzzle. The wolf gave her a friendly lick on the cheek, sending a thrill through her. Standing, she made her way towards where she had come up and looked back to see the wolf watching her with his tail up, wagging. Smiling broadly at her new friend, she began her journey home.

## Chapter 8

The next morning, Sophia woke groggily to the sound of her alarm and the feeling of a full bladder. Once she forced her aching legs to take her to the bathroom, she climbed back into bed and leaned against the headboard, staring at the far wall. Emotionally, she felt utterly spent, but somehow had to find the energy to get to work in two hours. Her elation over encountering the wild, but friendly, wolf warred with her feelings of betrayal and anger towards Candice along with her mixed feelings over her new 'condition'. The knowledge she likely couldn't share two major events in her life with the person she had shared everything with since they were first graders tore at her.

*I could have taken you to meet a wolf, Sophia hugged her legs close to her chest. How thrilled you would have been.*

Tears threatened to overwhelm her and she forced herself out of bed and set her mind to getting ready for her shift - the first shift after she had been forced to go home just before she had changed.

*What if I hadn't been sent home early? She shivered. I would have changed right in the store. I need to start keeping track of the full moon and request those days off.*

Sighing at the additional stressor in her life, she wrote a reminder to check when the next full moon was and left it on her desk. After a moment's thought, she added "look up wolves and food poisoning". She hadn't noticed any symptoms in the last day or so, but it still nagged at her. With that, she resumed her morning routine.

As usual, her dad was still sleeping by the time she had left the house. Despite her fatigue and lack of water the previous night, fear of the inevitable questions of what she was doing hiking the hills - by herself in the middle of the night - fueled her rush home. Thankfully, she had beaten him home by twenty minutes, staving off any awkward confrontations. After downing several glasses of water, she had quickly gotten ready for bed and had just turned out the light when her dad came in. She had been too excited to fall asleep immediately and had replayed the unexpected encounter through her mind repeatedly. Alas, her chronic lack of sleep, physical exhaustion and the unnatural stresses put on her body certainly took their toll on her way to work, and the commute took noticeably longer than it usually did.

Being Sunday morning, the streets of the town were fairly empty and she made it to the store without coming across anyone. Thus, it only dawned on her as she reached the store's parking lot that she was about to interact with people for the first time since her entire world had been turned upside down. Her breath quickened as sudden panic threatened to overwhelm her.

Someone would be able to see what she now was... They'd out her as a monster and she'd be killed. Or they'd keep quiet and the government would show up in the middle of the night to take her away. Or she'd be caged and turned into an exhibit on full moons.

Hands trembling, Sophia's chest felt like it was going to burst, and she stopped next to the display of firewood in front of the store. She couldn't do this; she needed to run. Someone would see her and know...

*Everything is okay, Sophia closed her eyes and leaned against the wood. I checked, no wolf left. If I go in and act normal, no one will notice.*

Opening her eyes, she willed herself into the building. There were only a couple of customers visible in the store and none of them so much as glanced at her as she entered. There was one other cashier, an older woman, already working one of the three lanes. The woman turned in reaction to the automatic door closing, dashing Sophia's hopes to make it past unnoticed. Unfortunately, there also weren't any customers in her coworker's lane to distract her. Sophia slowed and braced herself.

"Morning!" Janet, if Sophia remembered correctly, greeted her and then frowned. "You okay?"

Sophia froze and nearly lost her nerve, but managed to squeak out, "yeah, why?"

"You look very tense and a little pale," Janet replied, sounding concerned. "Linda mentioned yesterday that you had gone home sick Friday night. Still feeling a little under the weather?"

Sophia relaxed a little; it wasn't what she had feared.

"I guess, but I'll be okay," Sophia replied more assuredly. "Last night was a little rough, but not as bad as Friday."

"Just so long as you're not contagious," Janet eyed her suspiciously. "I can't afford to be sick with the holidays coming."

*Can I make someone else a werewolf..?* Sophia swallowed, realizing she had no idea.

"I... I shouldn't be contagious... now," Sophia stammered.

"I'm holding you to that now," Janet said sternly, but stopped looking disapproving.

Thankfully, a customer started unloading on Janet's belt, and she turned to attend to them. Sophia took the welcome opportunity to escape and went in search of the shift manager, hoping it was Linda. To her disappointment, the store manager, Jim, was taking inventory that morning. Bracing herself, she approached him as he counted boxes of cereal. He looked up as she hesitantly approached.

“Ah, Sophia! Feeling better?” he asked cheerfully. “I saw Linda’s note from Friday evening.”

“Yeah, just a touch of something I guess,” she replied with a nervous smile. “Uh, just out of curiosity, what did she say..?”

“Just that you looked feverish and she sent you home,” Carl replied, sounding a little surprised at the question. “No need to worry, it happens. Just so long as it doesn’t happen *too* often. Oh, and she mentioned you had borrowed a work uniform.”

“Oh, yes, I washed it and brought it with,” Sophia confirmed, hoping he wouldn’t notice her relief.

“Ah, good, just leave it in the break room and I’ll take care of it,” Carl replied, looking back at his clipboard, before snapping back to looking at her. “Oh, please keep a better eye on the till; you were seven dollars off last week.”

“It... won’t happen again,” Sophia answered contritely, and Jim nodded before going back to counting.

Despite the reprimand, Sophia let out a breath she didn’t know she had been holding as she hurried away. Everything was going surprisingly well so far. She flinched as a customer came into the aisle as she headed towards the breakroom, but he didn’t so much as slow down as he pushed his cart past. Still, she couldn’t help feeling conspicuous, but maybe everything would be okay. No alarms had been raised and no one had leveled any accusations. Feeling a bit more confident, she clocked in and started her shift.

Despite her earlier fears, the shift went by smoothly, and she was just a few cents off by the end of it. A couple people who had seen her Friday asked if she had been okay, but no one displayed the slightest awareness that the girl at the register had sported fangs and fur less than two days before. Even Janet seemed to forget Sophia’s flustered arrival and chatted a bit about the older woman’s grandson and how excited she was to see him at Thanksgiving. In fact, the shift went so well she’d have considered it one of her best ever any other just the week before. However, after everything she’d gone through in forty-eight hours, she was more than happy to just survive it.

After a shower and early dinner, she went to her room with the intention of doing homework and finding answers to the questions she had left that morning. There was also the task of agonizing over attending school in the morning, where the entire student body had no doubt watched the video. Then there was certainty of her confrontation with Candice, which

terrified her most of all. Her anger still burned when she thought about how Candice had betrayed her. She dearly hoped Candice had a damn good explanation.

However, before getting to all of those, the adrenaline that had held her exhaustion at bay for most of the day wore off.

*Just fifteen minutes, Sophia sank down into her bed. Then I'll be ready to tackle everything.*

The next thing Sophia knew her alarm clock was dutifully beeping to wake her for school. Thus, Monday started in a frantic rush to do what homework she could and then get out the door at the last possible minute. So consumed with trying to get to school on time, she entirely forgot she was supposed to be dreading the day until she was entering the building with the rest of the stragglers.

As she entered the building, she was relieved to see the halls were still full and students were still congregating and talking about the weekend. However, that relief quickly faded as she saw several students show recognition as she walked by. A number of individuals not so subtly smirked as they recognized her, and a guy mockingly howled as she passed to the guffaws of his friends. Cheeks burning, she quickened her pace, and the warning bell came as a relief even though she still had to put her things away. Students began heading to their classes, sparing her any more humiliation.

That was until she reached her locker which had been covered in wolf stickers. Fighting back tears, she did her best to ignore the stickers and opened her locker. A couple of pieces of paper fluttered out. One had "Dogs don't belong in school, bitch!" scrawled on it. Crumbling that one up, she grabbed the other and immediately recognized Candice's neat handwriting:

*I'm so sorry! Can we please talk later? -Candice*

Sophia stood there a good moment staring at it, hope surging. Candice was apologizing? Maybe this wasn't her fault after all and they'd go back to being best friends! She could bear the insults and bullying as long as she still had Candice. Wiping away a tear that had made it down her cheek, Sophia folded up the letter and finished hanging up her bag and coat. She hurriedly grabbed her materials for math and closed her locker just as the final bell rang.

"Class starts at 7:30, Ms. Jones," Mr. Pindlewood scolded Sophia as she slipped into her desk. "Not 7:31."

Several students snickered, but a glare from Mr. Pindlewood stifled them. Sophia barely heard the teacher or the kids though, her mind was still on the letter. In fact, she completely failed to register that Mr. Pindlewood had asked the class to pass up their weekend assignments. It took the boy behind her tapping her with his sheet of answers to get her to realize she was supposed to be doing anything. Hastily, she handed his paper forward before rummaging for her own homework.

Naturally, her assignment ended up on top when Mr. Pindlewood came to collect them. The teacher frowned as he looked at her obviously incomplete homework. With multiple assignments to do that morning, she had managed to do only a few of the problems. He glanced at her before placing the gathered assignments on his desk and starting his lecture. Her positive feelings faded into anxiety.

Unsurprisingly, Mr. Pindlewood requested she stay a bit longer after class finished. Why he had taken such an interest in her in particular, she wished she knew.

“You were late and didn’t complete the weekend’s assignment,” the teacher began, clasping his hands on his desk. “What happened?”

*Just how do I explain my weekend?* Sophia shifted her feet as she stood at his desk.

“I...” Sophia stammered. “I was sick again over the weekend.”

“But not too sick to work?” Mr. Pindlewood arched a bushy eyebrow. “And I heard about the Halloween party. Looked like you had fun, perhaps a little too much fun.”

*Oh no.* Panic gripped Sophia.

“Look, with as much as you’ve gone through, it must be hard not to be tempted to let go once in a while,” his tone was gentle, but with an undertone of disdain. “Especially with such means so readily available.”

*He thinks I’ve been drinking...* Sophia nearly dropped her books in astonishment.

Mr. Pindlewood paused and leaned back, “Sophia, I want to help you, but only you can choose to let me. If you ever feel ready for it, please know I’m here.”

Sophia’s arms and legs felt like jelly, and it was all she could do to carry her books out of the classroom. The world felt like it was crumbling around her. Not only were her peers mocking her, but the teachers now thought she was drinking or doing drugs! She wanted to be somewhere, anywhere other than school. Right then, the memory of being alone with her wolf companion flashed through her mind and she seized it desperately.

It had been so peaceful that night, and she had been so happy. The wolf wouldn’t judge her or make her feel like something was wrong with her. Being with him had been comforting,

and she dearly wished she was back there now. She held her books to her chest and lightly ran her fingers over her shirt as she thought about what his fur had felt like. In only a few more days, she'd be able to experience it again. The tightness in her chest dissipated and her breathing slowed.

"Hey, Wolf Girl!" a male voice roughly drew her out of her daydream.

She stopped and turned in the direction of the voice to see a muscular guy in a letter jacket looking at her.

"You do a damn good impression of a wolf," he grinned. "Could you do that howl again? That was so cool!"

Suddenly, Sophia found herself the center of attention as several nearby students turned to watch.

"That would be awesome!" another student seconded enthusiastically.

Sophia turned a deep crimson as the crowd gathered. Several were quickly readying phones expectantly.

"What..?" Sophia squeaked.

"Howl, like you did in that video," the boy repeated.

"I..." Sophia stammered. "I..."

The expectant audience pressed closer, and she suddenly felt like she was being suffocated. Turning suddenly, she pushed her way through the crowd of students.

"Aww, don't be like that," she heard the boy call, joined by boos from several in the would-be.

Trying to make herself invisible, she threaded her way through the mass of students. She was ready to dash out of the building, but knew that would just bring more scrutiny and trouble down on her. Instead, she made for the girl's restroom and ducked into one of the stalls, latching it. Her breath coming out in ragged gasps, she sat on one of the toilets and drew her legs up to her chest and clung to her books. Closing her eyes, she tried to quiet her breathing and get a hold of herself.

*I can't do this...* Despair welled up in her and a tear rolled down her cheek.

She put her hand against her mouth to stifle a sob. Another wracked her, and another. The warning bell came and still she sat trying to find the strength to get up. Even muffled, her crying would have been easily heard by anyone in the bathroom. Mercifully, no one came in, leaving her to cry in peace. The final bell rang and she was, once again, late for class. Another minute ticked by, and then another. Finally, five minutes after the last bell, she calmed down enough to leave her hiding place.

At the sink, she washed her face and examined herself. Her eyes were a little puffy, but she hoped it wasn't too obvious. Finally, she opened the bathroom door and cautiously checked the hall. Seeing no one, she quickly covered the last dozen yards to her locker, grabbed her text and tried to look inconspicuous walking to English class. It wasn't too far thankfully and no one stopped her.

Class was underway when she slipped in of course, and Ms. Linden stopped to look at her.

"Sorry, bathroom," Sophia managed, giving a nervous laugh.

"Well, see to it it doesn't happen again," the teacher admonished disapprovingly, but she resumed as Sophia found her seat.

Feeling the eyes of the class on her, Sophia focused all of her attention on opening her notes and then stared straight ahead for the rest of the class.

Thankfully, Ms. Linden didn't ask Sophia to remain behind and no one spoke about it. Still, she happily left the classroom as quickly as she could, avoiding eye contact with Logan as she did. This was definitely not a day she wanted to speak to him or even make eye contact. Her exit from the classroom went unhindered, and she was beginning to think she'd actually make it to her locker before the warning bell when she saw Jane and her toadies coming down the hall.

Sophia tried to duck to the side, but too late. Jane saw her and a predatory grin appeared on her face. Jane noticeably altered course towards Sophia. Sophia, in turn, picked up her pace to try and get past Jane as quickly as she could. Unfortunately, Jane deliberately took a wide step as Sophia was trying to slip past, catching the latter's left foot as it lifted. Sophia lost her balance and fell, her things spilling everywhere.

"Whoops," Jane mocked as she passed. "I didn't think the school allowed animals in it. They should really do something about it; I nearly tripped over one!"

Pain seared through Sophia's right knee and hands. Her anger flared too, but when she turned to look, Jane was already a ways down the hall, laughing. Sighing, she got back to her feet and checked herself over. Aside from some pain in her hands and knee, she wasn't hurt, just embarrassed and angry. Seeing there was nothing she could do about Jane, she set about gathering up her things.

The papers she had neatly organized in her English folder had fallen out and flown all over the hall. With the aid of a couple of sympathetic students, she was able to collect

everything she had lost. Unfortunately, she saw a few papers had been stepped on and were marred by shoeprints. Gritting her teeth, she continued on towards her locker.

*Wait until I find you on a full moon, Jane, her rage smoldered as she walked. Then I'll show you just how much of an animal I can be!*

Perhaps deterred by her obvious rage, no one else bothered her as she covered the remaining distance to her locker. Opening it, she angrily put her English material away, her book slamming loudly against the back. Snatching her materials for history, she was about to roughly close her locker when she heard Candice's voice.

"Sophia!" Candice exclaimed. "I've been looking all morning for you!"

Sophia whirled towards her in surprise, "Candice?"

"I left a note," Candice told her. "I guess you didn't see it..?"

"No, I saw it," Sophia replied sharply. "I've had a very rough morning, thanks to you."

Candice winced, "I'm so sorry! Pretending to be a wolf was supposed to be fun for you! I didn't mean for you to get hurt!"

Sophia felt herself go cold, but her voice rose, "you invited me to the party as a *prank*?"

"No! No!" Candice's eyes went wide. "That's not it at all! I was trying to help you make new friends! You've been so busy and depressed, and I was talking to Rachel and Patty a few weeks ago."

Candice continued, nearly tripping over her words, "And Patty was showing us a picture of a wolf she had seen over the summer... And I told them about the pelt. And... and... Rachel is really into Indian legends and told us about the local Indian legend... And I mentioned you really liked wolves and thought you'd really enjoy hearing it... And Patty said I should invite you to meet them and suggested Halloween. And I told them how depressed you were and Patty suggested I borrow the pelt..."

"So you thought getting me to wear a wolf skin, act like a wolf and putting a recording of it on the internet would make me happy?" Sophia broke in sharply, her eyes narrowing.

"No!" Candice protested. "I didn't know about the video until after you messaged me Saturday!"

"Well, your new friends have ruined my life," Sophia bit out.

"I got Patty to take it down right away!" Candice exclaimed. "You've just been so sad and alone. I just thought it would be great if you met my new friends and they could be yours too! Patty made a mistake! She's really sorry!"

The ache in Sophia's knee flared as she shifted her weight.

"Oh, she's sorry," Sophia replied sarcastically.

“She’s really not so bad once you get to know her!” Candice said defensively.

“How can you defend her?” Sophia’s voice rose. “How can you stay friends with her after what she did to me?”

“Because she made a mistake,” Candice replied, sounding hurt. “I know you’re angry, but I’m not going to just stop being friends with her!”

“Oh, right, you’re Candice and make friends with everyone,” Sophia shot out and immediately regretted it.

Candice gasped and then shot back, “maybe if you were interested in something besides wolves, you’d have more friends!”

Sophia’s heart sank, “oh, so being friends with the Wolf Girl *is* too embarrassing for you. Well, maybe I like being a Wolf Girl.”

“There’s more to life than wolves, Sophia!” Candice exclaimed in exasperation.

The image of her wolf friend flashed through Sophia’s mind, *they’re better friends than you at least!*

“You know what?” Sophia asked acidly and raised her voice. “I don’t care. Awoo! Come see the Wolf Girl!”

Several students looked towards the pair in surprise.

“Sophia, please!” Candice glanced around nervously.

“I guess you did teach me something about friendship,” Sophia told Candice, her voice heavy with bitter disappointment. “And that I can have more friends than just you.”

“Sophia…” Candice protested, her voice barely above a whisper.

Just then, the warning bell rang, and Sophia turned and stalked off.

## Chapter 9

For the first time ever, Sophia found herself an active participant in history class. It wasn't that she found any new found enjoyment in it, but it was the only way to temper the whirlwind of emotions raging through her. Her participation in the discussion over the consequences of World War I weren't particularly factual, but the teacher did seem pleased to see her involved at least. Granted, he did need to tell her to wait to be called on before interjecting a couple of times and not to be quite so aggressive when another student disagreed.

In Phy Ed, she took great pleasure in taking her frustrations out on the tennis ball. Even the teacher seemed caught off guard by his normally timid student sending serves every which way as hard as she could. Sophia admittedly enjoyed hitting him with one wildly 'errant' return while he was giving pointers to a student on the neighboring court. An innocent sounding apology kept her consequences limited to being directed to concentrate more on controlling the ball instead of hitting it as hard as possible. Her new found aggression didn't help her play any better, but she at least felt a little better as she went into the locker room.

"Hey Sophia, you certainly seemed pissed at the tennis balls today," a brown haired girl named Michelle said in the locker room after gym.

"It's been a rough day," Sophia admitted, taking off her sweaty exercise top.

"Maybe you'd feel better chewing on a ball instead," another girl, Lidia, taunted, prompting a glare from Sophia. "Seems like the sort of thing a dog or wolf would do."

"Think a wolf would play fetch?" a blonde haired girl asked playfully.

"I would think so, since dogs came from wolves," Lidia replied, pretending Sophia wasn't there. "We should go get a ball and see if she chases it."

"Better watch out, Wolfgirl will tear out your throat," another girl jeered.

Suppressing anger, Sophia mentally sighed and finished pulling on her shirt. *Fine, let's play.*

"I just might," Sophia threatened, baring her teeth. "Grrr, better watch out."

Surprised, the girls in the locker room paused putting their school clothes back on, but then laughed.

"That video was so extra!" Lidia exclaimed. "Do you, like, practice being a wolf or something?"

"It was a dare!" Sophia exclaimed defensively. "I didn't know I was going to be filmed!"

"Yeah, but I've never seen someone move on all fours like that," Lidia continued. "Seems like you've had a lot of practice. And eating other people's food off their plates is disgusting! Whyever did you do that?"

“Wait, she ate other people’s food off their *plates*?” a girl named Jill asked in shock.

“Eww!”

“She sure did!” Lidia confirmed loudly. “You didn’t hear about the video?”

“Nope!” Jill replied, intrigued. “Where can I see it?”

*If only I could force myself to change*, Sophia curled her hands into fists, her flimsy human nails digging into her skin. *I would definitely demonstrate the fangs.*

“That video was made without my permission,” Sophia protested indignantly.

“The video was taken down, but not before it was downloaded by multiple people,” Lidia continued as if Sophia hadn’t said anything. “Can’t delete things off the Internet! I can share it with you later!”

“Oooh!” Jill replied.

“Sophia, could you show us how you move on all fours so well?” Another girl in the locker room inquired. “I thought you were called *Wolfgirl* just because you loved wolves or something.”

“How about everyone leaves me alone?” Sophia shot back.

Before anyone could goad her further, the bell signaling the end of class rang and everyone filed out of the locker room. Sophia hung back and glared at Lidia’s neck, fantasizing what it would feel like to sink fangs into it.

At lunch, Candice was nowhere to be seen, which was fine with Sophia. It meant eating alone of course, but after the first half of the day, she was more than ready to be by herself. Instead, she made use of the time to do a passable job on the homework for her remaining classes. Although she noticed a number of students gawking at her, no one approached or talked to her. Assuming it was a temporary respite, she braced herself to run the gauntlet in the school hallways once again.

In fact, the morning’s commotion seemed to have largely died down by the afternoon. Aside from the occasional smirk or snide remark, people otherwise let her go about her business unimpeded. The relative peace finally gave Sophia time to relax a little and think. She felt a little bad with how she had handled the morning conversation with Candice, but the fact was she had broken Sophia’s trust. It was also clear her erstwhile best friend wasn’t going to handle the new and unexpected direction of Sophia’s life well, even if she was unwittingly responsible for it. If Candice was uncomfortable with what she had forced on Sophia, then fine, Sophia would deal with it without her.

*At least I have a new friend,* Sophia paused to look at her doodle of her wolf friend. *I can't wait to see you again.*

Idly, she wondered what her new lupine friend was up to as she listened to her Sociology teacher drone on. In a way she couldn't explain, she felt certain he was safe. Still, it worried her that he had been so close to town. The last thing she wanted was for him to get hit by a car or shot by a rancher.

*One day down,* Sophia returned to jotting down notes as the teacher looked her way. *Four to go. The weekend can't get here soon enough.*

The rest of Monday went by without incident. The end of the school day was always a time she could count on students being more preoccupied with leaving than tormenting their fellow students. Her shift at work felt like it had dragged on forever, but at least it had been quiet. Rob, the evening manager, was his usual unpleasant self, but didn't say anything about her leaving early Friday. During her nightly trek home, she was sure she caught a glimpse of her wolf watching her from the same field she had been passing when she had first encountered him. However, when she looked again, whatever she had seen was gone. Still, she felt he was there, watching her, and that lifted her spirits.

Tuesday and Wednesday proceeded in much the same way as Monday. The teasing and mockery weren't as bad as Monday morning, but several kids made a point of cracking jokes at her expense and there were, of course, the hushed voices and stares. Wednesday morning, she found someone had stuffed dog kibble through the locker door vents. It had all landed on the floor of the locker, making it easy to clean up at least. During math, she had to suffer under Mr. Pindlewood's accusatory gaze, doing her best to show no outward sign it was getting to her.

The most painful part of Sophia's new normal remained Candice's continued absence at lunch. Several times, they passed each other in the hall, but both refrained from acknowledging the other. Each time, Sophia distracted herself by thinking about the coming weekend and her promise to her new friend. By the time school got out Wednesday, she had drawn him in one way or another in every notebook she owned.

She was particularly anxious to get home Wednesday as it was her one night off before the weekend. Taking her shoes off, she hurried into the kitchen and began rushing through her homework. Within an hour of getting home, she had both eaten and finished her homework, though she knew it was probably full of errors. Quickly cleaning up, she hurried to her bedroom and shut the door. Dropping her backpack, she headed over to her laptop and signed in.

Over the last couple of nights she had started reading about werewolves and wolves. She had, of course, spent a lot of time reading about her favorite animal in the past, but with her new 'condition' and friend, she now had a strong incentive to know as much as she could. However, due to her work shifts, she had had little time or energy to focus on it. With the night off, she wanted to devote as much time as she could to the effort.

First on her list had been figuring out when the next full moon was. Next to her desk lay her calendar where she had circled December 2nd with a red pen. The week before, she had penciled in a note to ask off for the night. She still had no idea if she'd actually change again with the next full moon, but she hoped so. Meeting up with her furry friend with fur of her own would be a lot of fun. In her mind, she envisioned exploring the woods with her friend, hunting, playing, curling up with him...

*Woah, back up,* her cheeks warmed and she shifted uneasily. *Too far.*

The browser popped up with her reading from the prior night on whether wolves were susceptible to food poisoning. She had no idea if she had had a wolf's digestive system when she had eaten the raw chicken, but was somewhat relieved to see their digestive physiology made food poisoning unlikely. In any event, she had noticed no ill effects in the last few days. Still, if she did change again, it would be best not to risk eating raw meat again.

Closing the tab in her browser, she typed in a search for wolf body language and communication. The fear she would accidentally anger or scare off her new friend had been on her mind. Much of what she read she already had some idea of from her lifelong fascination with wolves, but there were many details she didn't know. Even aside from her personal interest, it was absolutely fascinating.

After reading about how wolves often greeted each other by licking each other's teeth, she clicked on an attached video depicting a wolf researcher demonstrating it. As the video played, she couldn't help imagining herself in the place of the woman. Instead of the woman baring her teeth, it was her and, instead of the wolf in the video licking them, it was her friend. As she pictured it, she unconsciously parted her lips and they tingled as she imagined his tongue touching them. Her eyes became unfocused and her breathing increased as the image of her licking his teeth in return played through her mind. Then she'd rub her head against his...

The video ended, drawing her attention back to her screen. Her cheeks reddened as she realized the mental images had left her feeling excited. She was aware of her clothing against her skin, the pressure of her butt against the chair and her feet crossed on the floor. An inhale lightly rubbed her breasts against her bra and she became aware her nipples had stiffened.

Most startling of all, she could feel faint contractions down below and a slight dampness in her panties.

*I shouldn't be feeling this way about... that,* she lightly brushed her hand against her breast, sending a surge of pleasure through her. *I need to stop and do something else. This isn't right.*

A suggested video caught her eye, the preview showing two wolves - a male and a female. The title was plain, "Wolf Mating Behavior", but it was enough to pique her curiosity. Despite reservations that what she was feeling and doing was somehow wrong, she clicked the video and it began.

The video was in the form of a documentary and narrated, but her attention was fully on the wolves in the video. The narrator explained female wolves generally entered estrous once a year and would only seek to mate then. In a pack, there was only a single breeding pair, called the Alphas. Typically, a pack was actually made up of the breeding pair and their pups. As he spoke, two wolves jumped playfully at each other and opened their mouths as though to gnaw on each other. After a moment, one of the wolves ran away from the other, who gave chase. The chase didn't last long and the other wolf caught up quickly and jumped on the other's back. As he did so, Sophia felt blood rushing into her vulva and she squeezed her thighs, which sent another wave of euphoria through her.

The male wolf began thrusting and Sophia couldn't help placing a hand between her legs and gently rubbing herself through her jeans. Each thrust by the male into his mate intensified a feeling of emptiness in her own vagina and a yearning for it to be her being filled. She felt shame for feeling turned on by the two animals mating, but at the same time nothing seemed more natural to her. The thought of her friend on top of her, his fur mingling with her's flashed through her mind and she rubbed herself even harder, feeling her panties get even wetter. She had masturbated occasionally, but it had never felt as pleasurable as it did now.

In the video, several other wolves excitedly approached the pair and the male wolf snapped and growled at them, defending his claim. A silly grin appeared on Sophia's face as she thought of her wolf fending off other would-be suitors from his 'claim'. With her other hand, she intentionally brushed her breasts again and imagined having additional nipples down her belly. Wistfully, she rubbed her belly imagining the feeling of six additional teats. The male in the video stopped thrusting and climbed off before trying to move away from his mate. Instead, the female was forced back as the male's knot remained firmly in her. With each yank, Sophia felt as though her own vagina was being tugged.

At this point, her feelings of shame had been reduced to less than a whisper under the crescendo of her arousal. All inhibition crumbling, Sophia reached behind her and undid her bra before tossing it to the side, next she undid the buttons on her pants, exposing her now soaked panties. With her jeans out of the way, she thrust her right hand into her underwear and ran a finger through her now exposed labia and over swollen clit, shuddering as she did. Now without reservation, she imagined it wasn't her finger, but her friend's lupine tongue lapping against her.

The video ended and she reached over with her left hand and started a new mating video, though she hardly paid attention to it. Her middle finger glided over her slick clit, as she rubbed and squeezed her nipples and breasts with her left hand. Mentally, it wasn't the male wolf of the video, but her friend and *she* was the female wolf.

*As her mate climbed on her back, she moved her tail out of the way. Her mate began thrusting against her rear with his penis and found her lupine opening. Panting, she stared ahead blissfully as her mate filled her and then began pounding. Other male wolves, excited by the scents and sounds of mating, came near the alpha pair and her mate snapped and snarled, forcing them to back off. Suddenly her mate jerked and she felt her vagina being filled as his seed streamed into her and his knot inflated.*

At that moment, Sophia tensed and let out a whimper as her efforts pushed her over the top. She stopped rubbing as intense heat and pleasure coursed through her. Her vagina began contracting around the imaginary lupine penis embedded deep within. Too soon, the masturbatory high wore off and she squeezed her thighs around her hand as she cupped herself tightly. After a moment, she stood and tossed off her shirt before discarding her now wet jeans. Happy, but not yet sated, she abandoned her research and lay on her bed in preparation for another round.

## Chapter 10

*She could smell the rabbit in the wind. It wasn't far away, just a few dozen yards, in the tall grass. It wouldn't fill her like a deer would, but it would satisfy her hunger nonetheless. Dropping her nose to the ground she crept forward, the rabbit's scent growing stronger. Swiveling her ears forward, she listened for any sign the rabbit had detected her. Just a little further...*

*There, only a couple yards away, she saw it. In the tall grass, a gray rabbit was nibbling on some greens it had found. As it came into view, it finally noticed her and bolted, but it was far too late for the rodent. Her paws dug into the ground as she shot after it. After a few paces, her hind paws launched her into the air and she opened her jaw wide as she started to fall...*

Sophia woke up from her dreams feeling sore. Not in her lady bits, although they certainly felt well used, but in her joints. The aches were dull, like what one had during a bout of the flu. They faded as she sat up and stretched, priming her muscles for the day, but didn't disappear entirely. As she sat there, she realized she had fallen asleep naked and then the night before came rushing back, causing her to blush despite being alone.

*Wow, I was horny,* she absently brushed her finger along her folds; they were still sticky from her previous night's activities. Her body jerked slightly when her finger brushed her clit. *Still am.*

The image of the wolves humping played through her mind again and felt her heart beat faster. She shook herself. *I can't believe that turned me on; what is wrong with me?*

Forcing herself to ignore her feelings of arousal, she got out of bed. Her legs and feet felt a bit sore as she stood, but those feelings quickly faded as she walked around her room. At her dresser, she selected a pair of jeans, panties and a bra. However, she hesitated when she looked over her shirts; the one on top was a purple long sleeve shirt with a howling wolf on it. Seeing it brought uncomfortably tantalizing images to her mind and her face warmed. Instead, she decided to go with the red blouse next to it. She swiftly shut the dresser drawer while averting her eyes from the sweatshirt.

After finishing with her morning routine, she went into the kitchen. To Sophia's surprise, her father was sitting at the table. He was sitting in his usual spot with a bowl of cereal and a glass of orange juice. He looked up as Sophia came in, his eyes were red and heavy from yet another late night spent at a bar.

“Morning Sophia,” he greeted her, his voice a bit hoarse.

“Morning dad,” she replied, heading to grab a cereal bowl for herself. “Up early?”

“John asked me to come out today so we could get his fences fixed ahead of the big snowstorm,” he explained, before taking another bite.

“Snowstorm?” Sophia repeated in surprise, fingers tightening on her bowl.

“Oh, you didn’t hear?” Sophia’s dad asked, setting down his spoon. “Radio said to expect our first big snow this weekend. Rain turning to heavy snow; at least ten inches.”

This news hit Sophia like a ton of bricks. If a big snowstorm hit, there was no way she would be able to get out to see her wolf.

“When will it be over?” she asked, hoping it wouldn’t last longer than Saturday morning.

“It’s supposed to start tomorrow evening and stop sometime early Sunday morning,” her dad replied, crushing her hopes. “You work tomorrow or Saturday?”

“Both,” she replied weakly.

“Don’t worry about it,” her dad misinterpreted her distress. “I’ll be able to pick you up and drop you off in the truck.”

“Oh, okay, that would be great,” Sophia answered, trying to inject some enthusiasm into her voice.

Satisfied, her father went back to eating, leaving Sophia to grapple with her disappointment. On the face of it, the storm was keeping her from doing something ridiculous. There was no way the wolf could possibly have understood her when she said she’d come back this weekend. As far as the wolf was concerned, human speech was just a series of meaningless noises. Nor would it have any concept of time beyond day or night.

*Well, at least it will spare me from my own foolishness,* Sophia sourly poured cereal and milk into her bowl.

Yet, she couldn’t shake the feeling the wolf had understood on some level. Perhaps not *when* precisely, but her intent to return. If so, hopefully he would understand if she wasn’t able to come this weekend.

*Next weekend then,* Sophia sat down across from her father and ate in silence.

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To Sophia’s surprise, her dad made good on his promise to pick her up after work Friday night. He had come into the store just before the end of her shift, purchased a few things and then told her he’d be out front. As he had said, he was parked outside in his black pickup truck as she exited the store. After a long day at school and work, she was admittedly thankful to clamber out of the swirling cold and snow into the heated interior.

“Evening,” her dad greeted her. “How was work?”

“It was work,” Sophia replied, placing her backpack between her feet on the floor. “Lots of people shopping ahead of the storm. Thanks for picking me up.”

“I wouldn’t let you freeze in this,” he grinned.

*Except the times you have*, Sophia forced a weak smile, but said nothing.

It had begun raining not long after she had arrived for her shift and had transitioned to snow not long before the end. Now, it was coming down thick and heavy. Although the parking lot and roads didn’t have any accumulation yet, the vegetation was accented in white and it was thickening rapidly. Her dad pulled away from the store and drove carefully towards home. Letting her dad focus on driving, Sophia watched the falling snow out the front window.

By the time they pulled into their driveway, the roads had become a wintery mess and the driveway looked like it had been covered by a thin white blanket. Sophia’s dad entered their garage, parked and turned the ignition off.

Her dad whistled softly, “quite the night”.

“Yeah, glad I’m not out in it,” Sophia replied gratefully while opening her door. “Thanks again.”

“No big deal,” her dad responded and smiled in the way Sophia had once found reassuring.

She grabbed a bag of groceries from behind her seat, shut the truck’s door and then opened the door to their house. Her dad shut the door behind them before setting his bags on the table.

“I’m going to go change,” Sophia told him after helping put groceries away.

“Alright,” he acknowledged. “I’ll fix us something to eat.”

Sophia went back to her room and changed into a set of warm pajamas. When she came back to the home’s common area, her dad had turned the TV on to a college football game and was sitting in the living room with a can of beer. The microwave was running in the kitchen.

“I’m making a couple of frozen burritos if you want one,” he told her before turning his attention back to the TV.

“Uh, sure, thanks,” Sophia forced a weak smile. “I guess I’ll be in my bedroom.”

“Okay,” her dad replied without looking away from the TV. “Love you.”

“Love you too,” Sophia said automatically, but without much feeling.

Briefly, she felt a strong desire to head outside and try to find the wolf, the weather be damned. However, the sound of a strong gust of wind rattling the windows killed that idea in its

crib and she sighed miserably before heading to her room. Turning on the light in her room, she went to stand by her window and looked out at the blowing snow. It was coming down thick and fast now, and it had accumulated to the point she could no longer see any grass.

*I hope you found somewhere warm,* she pictured the wolf curled up under a tree.

Stepping away from the window, she grabbed her sketchpad and lay on her bed. On the open page was a partially completed sketch of the wolf and her looking out over the valley. Considering for a moment, she grabbed her pencil and made a few strategic erasures before resuming work on the drawing. A bit of shading here, a couple of lines there...

After a bit, she stopped and examined her work. As she had originally set out to draw the night before, it was her and the wolf, but she had modified herself to have the wolfish features she had had the week before. Looking at her reflection in the mirror, she felt a surge of melancholy. It had been terrifying, but she had also felt at peace with herself for the first time she could remember.

*To feel that way again,* she moved a strand of hair from her all too human ear. *Is that too much to ask?*

Not knowing what else to do, she closed the sketchpad and got ready for bed.

As her dad had said it would, it continued to snow through the night and into the next day. By the time she had woken up, almost half a foot covered the driveway. In Woodbury, a mere six inches was no reason to close a store and she still had to get ready for her morning shift. She woke her dad and the two of them spent an hour clearing the driveway. Traffic was light, and the truck didn't have too much trouble with the snow covered roads, but she still arrived a few minutes late.

Thankfully, most of the townspeople were spending the first snowstorm at home, and no one gave her flak for not being late. Truthfully, it wound up being a very dull shift, and Linda sent her home two hours early when the afternoon cashier came in. By that time of the day, the snowfall had lightened considerably, but the wind was blowing the snow in thick white clouds. Under these conditions it took almost half an hour for her dad to arrive from the time she called him.

"Sorry, I had to shovel a bit to get the truck out," her dad apologized as she clambered into the truck. "No customers?"

"It's been pretty dead," Sophia confirmed, shutting her door. "I think I checked out maybe ten people the whole six hours."

"I don't blame people," he replied. "Roads are lousy. Too bad about losing the money though."

"It sucks," Sophia agreed. "I'll see if I can pick up some time later in the month."

Once again, they drove the ten minutes home in silence. Although she had only driven with him occasionally in the last year, she noticed her dad was still driving far more cautiously than he had before her mother's death. Before that, her mom was constantly telling him he was driving too fast for conditions. Indeed, he had gotten into a few fender benders after hitting slippery patches in the winter. Every time that happened, he would get chewed out by her mother, especially if Sophia had been in the car. Yet, it was ultimately her mother who had died in a car accident while driving in inclement weather.

*One of life's cruel ironies I guess,* Sophia closed her eyes as she felt tears welling up.

"Home again," her father broke the silence as they pulled into their driveway.

Sophia saw he had cleared a strip in front of the garage, although the wind was hard at work creating a new snowdrift to block them in. Thankfully, they didn't need to go out again for the rest of the day. As if sharing her thoughts, her dad visibly relaxed as he parked the truck in their garage.

"Thanks for picking me up," Sophia said earnestly.

"Nah, don't mention it," he smiled.

Like the night before, Sophia went to get changed. After slipping on a sweatshirt, she sat on the edge of her bed and flipped to the drawing she had completed the previous night. Frustration and disappointment gripped her as she looked at the sketch and then outside. Even with the storm, she'd have much rather been out there with her furry friend than in here. Unfortunately, there was nothing she could do at this point.

*I'm sorry, friend,* she thought, touching the sketch of the wolf. *Next time.*

She put the sketchpad down and went back to the living room where her father was once again sitting in front of the television. This time, he held a glass of a darker colored drink; whiskey, Sophia guessed. No matter how tight money was, her father always seemed to be able to afford alcohol.

*He did manage to stay sober long enough to get me,* Sophia studied him. *I wonder how he managed that. Suppose I should just head to my room for the rest of the evening.*

Instead, she took a seat on the far side of the couch. On the television was another football game, though she doubted he even cared who was playing. For a few minutes, she just sat, watching the game, though she had little interest in football. For his part, her dad just continued watching the game and drinking from his glass.

Finally, Sophia could take it no longer, “hey dad, you want to play a game?”

Her dad actually jumped at her voice, causing a twinge of satisfaction for her.

“A game?” he repeated in surprise, looking at her.

“Yeah, like a board game or something,” she confirmed. “It’s just the two of us tonight, and we haven’t done it in a long time.”

“Uh, yeah, sure,” her dad answered, sounding quite unsure.

After a moment’s hesitation, he set his drink down and turned off the television. Not knowing what she had just committed herself to, Sophia got up and walked to the hall closet where their few board and card games were kept. The family’s collection of games hadn’t been touched in well over a year, but they were still there, stacked awkwardly. Just seeing them brought a number of now bittersweet memories to the surface.

She looked them over, several were from her childhood - a bit young for her now - and one she had never played, but there were a couple she remembered fondly that they could still play. Selecting a dice game, she carefully slid it out of its spot in the stack, tucked it under her arm and closed the closet door. Finally, clutching it with both hands as though it were a precious heirloom she couldn’t bear to lose, she brought it to the kitchen. Her dad was already at the table, looking somewhat awkward. He had taken the time to refill his glass with another round of whiskey she noticed.

“It’s certainly been a long time since we played that one,” he observed.

“Yeah,” Sophia agreed and brought it to the table. “But I still remember how.”

Opening it, she gave her dad a blank scorecard and then grabbed a couple of pencils from the drawer with office supplies. Sitting, she grabbed the cup, put the dice in and shook them onto the table.

“Not bad,” her dad said, looking over the dice.

Sophia selected a few dice to reroll and shook them onto the table again. Eyeing the new rolls with some disappointment, she selected a couple more and rerolled once again. After entering the number in an appropriate place, she passed the cup to her father.

“We used to play almost every weekend,” she commented as her father took his turn.

“Your mom enjoyed games,” he replied simply and then chuckled. “I have a hard time sitting through them.”

“I miss game nights,” Sophia continued.

“Yeah, life has been tough, and there hasn’t been as much time as there used to be,” he responded as he entered his score.

*You certainly have time to drink and be with your friends at bars*, Sophia threw the dice in the cup a little harder than she intended.

“How’d fixing fences go?” she changed the subject as she rolled.

“Hmm? Oh, it went fine,” her dad replied while she looked at her roll. “No big deal.”

“What are you doing next week?” she asked, rolling again.

“Oh, I have some jobs lined up,” her dad said, glancing away and anxiously scratching the back of his neck. “I’ll be doing some plowing tomorrow.”

*He’s hiding something*, Sophia paused a moment to study him before writing down her score.

“That’s good to hear,” she said neutrally.

“Yep,” her dad said, seeming to hesitate before he scooped up the dice and putting them in the cup. “How’s school going? Still hanging with Candice?”

*Huh, when was the last time he asked about my life?* She took a moment to answer.

“School has been alright, nothing notable,” she replied, crossing her fingers under the table. “Candice has been very busy with the student council and her other clubs, so we haven’t had much time to see each other.”

“That girl always did seem to want to be involved in everything,” her dad laughed as he handed back the cup. “I wonder how she finds time to sleep. How about you, join any clubs?”

Sophia held the cup in surprise, “no, I’ve been too busy with work and school.”

“I figured you’d be in a hiking club or something,” her dad said thoughtfully. “You’re like your mother - far happier when you’re surrounded by nature. That’s one of the reasons we moved here...”

An awkward silence fell at the mention of their missing loved one. Her father idly swirled his drink. Sophia finally broke it with the sound of dice falling on the table.

“Three of a kind,” she said flatly, examining them.

“Huh,” her dad replied distantly and then drained his drink.

He stared into the empty glass for a few moments before standing and grabbing the whisky bottle from the counter to refill his glass. Sophia pressed her lips together, but held her tongue.

“I had wanted to get outside this weekend,” she tried picking up where they had left off. “Can’t do that now.”

“Well, you can help me shovel,” he said, coming back to the table.

“I meant, hike through the hills or something,” she clarified.

“Ah,” he replied. “Well, the driveway still needs shoveling. Anyway, we should hurry it up, the Idaho State game starts in fifteen minutes.”

Whatever connection to her father Sophia was starting to feel faded away and she was left feeling empty once again. She stiffly passed the cup over to him and he picked it up before dumping it out on the table. He grunted in displeasure as he looked over the roll before stiffly gathering up four of the dice. Then he rolled before taking another drink.

A sudden fury seized Sophia and she stood before biting out, “this wasn’t what I wanted to be doing this weekend either you know. I thought it would be nice doing something together for once, but I guess not. Enjoy your game and booze.”

“Sophia...” her dad said, sounding surprised, but she ignored him and stalked off to her room.

Sophia roughly shut her door, lay on her bed and stared at the ceiling. Part of her hoped her dad would come and try to make things right, but she was entirely unsurprised to hear the sound of the television after a few minutes.

Grabbing her sketchbook, she looked at the picture of her with the wolf longingly.

“You’re lucky you’re not human,” she said aloud to the picture as a tear fell down her cheek.

## Chapter 11

Sophia spent the rest of the evening in her room, only coming out to grab something to eat from the fridge. Her dad was watching TV in the living room, but neither acknowledged the other. Too depressed to do much else, she tried to distract herself with funny online videos. It was of mixed success in cheering her up, but at least it passed the time. When she became too tired to continue staring at her screen, she did the bare minimum to get ready for bed. She fell asleep, crying quietly.

The next day, Sophia and her dad barely exchanged so much as pleasantries over breakfast, before bundling up to shovel their driveway. Snow had piled up in front of their garage to form a nearly two foot tall drift while burying the rest of their driveway in six to eight inches. It took the two of them all morning to clear it. Temperatures were hovering around freezing and Sophia removed her hat and wound up alternating between zipping and unzipping her coat. During lunch, the snow plow came through and piled up snow at the end of the driveway, forcing them to go out once more to clear it.

After the driveway was finally clear again, Sophia took the opportunity to escape the house. She told her dad she was going for a walk and was out the front door before he had a chance to respond. At the end of her driveway, she took the sidewalk north. There were only a few more houses on her block in that direction, and she quickly made her way past them.

She waved and smiled innocently at the occupant of the last house on her block who was out shoveling his driveway. He returned the smile and went back to shoveling. Sophia continued on to the corner, but rather than turning to follow the joining street, she continued on. Both roads ended in short spurs left for potential future development which dead-ended in the field that wrapped around behind her house. As there was nothing beyond them, every winter snow plows piled up mountains of snow which served as excellent sledding hills for the neighborhood kids. Since it was only the first snow of the season, they were only a few feet high and no kids were present as Sophia clambered over them.

Once she was past the freshly created artificial hills, Sophia trekked through the now snow-covered field towards the mountains. Her boots sank deep into the freshly fallen snow, making her hike considerably slower than it had been the week before. She also found her muscles weren't used to the adjustments needed for walking in snow and found herself breathing hard after a scant ten minutes. Still, she pressed on.

It took half an hour to reach the tree line, and her muscles were burning. Coming across a fallen tree, she cleared as much snow as she could and collapsed onto it. The snow was cold

through her jeans, but sitting was a badly needed respite for her legs. After a few minutes, her heart rate and breathing slowed, and she was able to turn her attention outward.

Looking around, she took in the snow covered expanse. The snow was draped over the pine trees surrounding her, making for the beautiful sight of green branches under a white blanket. In front of her, the rolling peaks of the nearby foothills were covered in snow and the upper elevations of the mountains beyond seemed to fade and merge with the clouds. Even under the overcast sky, the crisp air and sights all around her lifted Sophia's spirits. Taking a glove off, she ran her hand through the snow, enjoying the contrast of its icy touch on her warm fingers.

The sound of twigs snapping drew her attention upwards to see branches swaying from a strong gust of wind. Snow falling from the branches was caught by the breeze and enveloped her in a thick mist, forcing her to close her eyes and turn away until it passed. When she looked up again, she gasped.

On top of one of the foothills was the silhouette of a wolf.

*My wolf.* Sophia forgot the cold snow stinging her face and hand for a moment as she looked. *I hope he can see me too.*

As if in reply, the wolf adjusted his stance until he was pointed in her direction.

*He looks like a shadow against the snow,* Sophia stood and took a step forward, staring. *That seems like an appropriate comparison, he's like my shadow - always following me.*

"Shadow," she said aloud to herself. "That's what I will call you."

For a long moment, she contemplated the name, staring at him. Shadow seemed to react to something as he suddenly lifted his head. Just then, another gust of wind blew more snow into her face and she again had to cover her eyes. When she opened them, Shadow had disappeared off the ridge.

Sophia's heart fell and she took a few steps towards where he had stood. She badly wanted to go to her furry friend, but a quick survey of the terrain ahead stopped her. Daylight was fading, and the sound of freezing branches snapping signaled the temperature was dropping. It had been treacherous without the snow cover, but now it would have been foolhardy to attempt walking through the mountains in the dark. Sighing, she slipped her glove back on her numb hand and pulled her hood tight. With a last regretful look at where Shadow had stood, Sophia turned and headed home.

The wait for the next weekend was agony. Someone had gone through the trouble of duct taping a plastic bag with a couple cans of dog food to her locker over the weekend and that

kicked off a fresh week of teasing the 'Wolfgirl'. An announcement that bullying would not be tolerated just made it worse. Although she pulled out a 'C' on her math test, she struggled in her other classes and realized she had forgotten an English essay was due that Tuesday.

In gym class, they started a volleyball unit and she managed to embarrass herself by misjudging a return, tripping and landing hard on her right wrist, drawing laughter and mock howling from the other students. After calming the class, the teacher directed her to the school nurse. There, Sophia was diagnosed with a sprained wrist, had it wrapped and given ice. Much to her relief, she was excused from participating in volleyball for the remainder of the week.

Unfortunately, she still had to work with an injured hand. Every time she overextended it, grabbing an item off the conveyor belt, she winced as fresh stabs of pain radiated through it. Needless to say, it slowed her down quite a bit, to the frequent irritation of her customers. Lacking proper medical insurance, she was unable to have it properly looked at or get a doctor's note excusing her from work. Her dad managed to be even more absent after their disastrous game night and she was left to suffer alone.

The one thing that kept her going through the week was her workplace had not scheduled her for Friday evening or Saturday morning. All week she mentally planned out an excursion back to where she had met Shadow and gathered any supplies she thought she needed. As Friday rolled around, her excitement built and she spent the day daydreaming about her evening plans. Intellectually, she knew there was no reason for Shadow to come back, but irrationally or not, she believed he would.

School let out, and she practically ran home. Besides her anticipation, there was a practical reason to be in a hurry - wolves were the most active around sunset and there wasn't a lot of daylight left. Not wasting a moment, she changed out of her school clothes into hiking pants (which she had grown out of a couple years before) and threw a sweatshirt over an exercise top and bra. Next, she retrieved the water bottle and food she had prepared the previous night. Bringing everything into her bedroom - while being gentle with her wrist - she emptied her backpack on her bed. To her surprise, the two cans of dog food tumbled out of her backpack's front pocket. She had thrown it in there when she found it Monday morning and completely forgotten about it.

She hesitated before picking it up and throwing it in her bag along with the other gear she had gathered over the course of the week in her room. *Maybe Shadow would like it.*

Packed, she laced up her boots, threw on her coat, hat and gloves before heading out the backdoor. The weather had warmed up after the weekend, and the snow had melted considerably. After ten minutes of walking, she removed her hat and tucked it in her bag. The

remaining snow was a slushy, muddy mess that caked her boots and made her walk across the field a slog. Several times, she stepped in puddles hidden under dead grass, splashing water onto herself. By the time she reached the foothills, the legs of her pants were soaked and streaked with mud.

Breathing hard after crossing the mire that was now the field, she allowed herself a moment to catch her breath before continuing on. The sun was just above the western horizon and the trees cast long shadows across what was left of the snow. After taking a drink of water, she adjusted her back and began making her way through the trees.

A few times, she stumbled over branches that had been knocked off the trees during the snowstorm or melting snow. Each time, she instinctively reached out to grab a tree limb to maintain her balance and was punished with a sharp, stabbing pain in her injured right wrist. Part of her lower legs weren't covered by the too-small hiking pants and had long since gone numb from the water and cold. She yelped as a low lying branch she had missed in the fading light scraped her left cheek. It stung and her hand came away from the wound wet with blood. Still, she was determined to reach her destination.

After what felt like an eternity, she recognized the rockfall that marked the ascent to the secluded ledge. To her good fortune, most of the snow had melted off the south facing terrain over the past week and her ascent wasn't nearly as perilous as it could have been. Even with her injured wrist, she managed to clamber up the debris without too much difficulty and made it to the place that now held a special place in her heart just as the sun disappeared behind the western horizon.

For a moment, she stood reveling in her triumph and enjoying the magnificent view. Shadow wasn't there to her disappointment, but the night was young and she was prepared to wait. Pulling out a blanket she had stowed in her backpack, she found a dry rock to sit on and wrapped the blanket around her lower half.

*I definitely need to get some outdoor pants that fit.* She rubbed the exposed skin on her legs, trying to get some feeling back. *Probably some bigger hiking boots too.*

The remaining daylight was fading fast and she fumbled around inside her bag for the headlamp she had found in her family's neglected camping equipment. After finding it, she strapped it to her head and grabbed the turkey sandwich she had put together. Thus prepared, she settled in to wait.

*Silly, foolish Sophia, even if he wasn't a wolf, he'd have no way of knowing you were coming tonight,* Sophia wrapped her arms around herself, trying to keep her teeth from chattering. *What was I thinking? I don't belong out here.*

After half an hour of sitting, the remaining daylight had disappeared and she was really starting to feel the falling temperatures. Despite her best efforts, the damp pants continued to sap heat from her legs and the skin was starting to sting. Standing, she stretched, trying to get her blood moving. Sighing, she sat back down and began preparing the hike back. Reaching up, she turned on the headlamp and noticed immediately that a small puddle of nearby meltwater had frozen over. Even with the light, it would be a hazardous climb back down.

*If I slip and fall, how long would it take for someone to find my body?* She miserably folded up her blanket and stuffed it in her bag. *How long before anyone even missed me?*

She had just finished stuffing the blanket in when a tapping sound made her jump. Looking up, her heart skipped a beat when her light illuminated a large, grey wolf walking towards her. Luckily, it only took a moment for her to recognize Shadow though. The familiar wolf immediately stopped, squinted and looked away as Sophia's light fell on him. The backpack fell from her hands as elation and relief flooded through her.

"You came!" Sophia exclaimed in excitement, words tumbling. "I was hoping, I mean I believed you would..."

Shadow took a step back and continued to shy away from her.

"What's wrong?" Sophia asked, suddenly concerned. "Oh, the light!"

Reaching up, she turned off the headlamp and the ledge was immediately plunged into darkness. At first, she couldn't see anything and was afraid she had scared Shadow off. However, after a few moments, her eyes adjusted and she was able to make out the vague outline of her lupine friend still standing there. After a few more moments, she heard the wolf's claws clicking on the rock as he resumed moving towards her. Squatting, she reached out as his form approached and he sniffed it before moving past it. To her delight, the wolf sniffed and then licked her face.

"I missed you too," Sophia told him as she let him lick her teeth and gave him a big hug. "It's been a hard last couple of weeks without you."

Immediately, the wolf sniffed her bandaged right hand and made a concerned whine.

"Oh, I injured myself falling," she explained. "I'm okay."

He whined again and licked the bandages. Sitting on her feet, she raked her hands through his fur, which he seemed to enjoy immensely.

"I came up with a name for you," Sophia said softly and the wolf's ears perked up. "How does 'Shadow' sound?"

In response, the wolf nuzzled his head with hers, nearly knocking her over. Sophia shot out her left hand to keep her from falling over, and laughed. She couldn't see him very well and he couldn't talk of course, but she felt as though he approved.

"I guess you like it?" she said happily as she scratched behind his ears.

For several minutes, Sophia just stroked and scratched her furry friend. Shadow responded by pressing his body in hers and nuzzling her face. Finally, she sat cross-legged on the ground and Shadow rested upper his body in her lap. At last, her numb legs began to warm.

"I have something for you," she said, remembering the cans of dog food.

Shadow picked up his head and made a questioning sound. Feeling around inside her backpack, she found the bag with the dog food and took one out. The smell of the food definitely wasn't appealing to her, but Shadow immediately stood excitedly and made an expectant 'yip'.

"I thought you might like it," Sophia said and dumped it out.

Shadow had noisily gobbled it up almost as soon as it hit the ground. He immediately began sniffing and licking the hand that she had used to open the can.

"Oh, I guess that wasn't much!" Sophia exclaimed and the other can.

The sound of Shadow's noisy eating briefly filled the silence.

"I'm sorry, that's all I had," Sophia told him when he started sniffing her for more. "I'm glad you liked it though."

The wolf stopped sniffing, lay on his side and put his head back in her lap.

"I'm really sorry I couldn't come last weekend," Sophia apologized. "I hope you understand."

Shadow whined and nuzzled against her stomach and she responded by scratching his neck.

"Thank you," she said sincerely. "I'm so glad to have you as a friend. You're the only good part of my life right now."

Then she fell silent, and just enjoyed his company.

Sophia wasn't sure how long they had been up there - a couple hours she guessed. During that time, she told him a bit about her recent life and he listened patiently. Through it all, she had the strange feeling that he somehow understood what she was saying, even if the words themselves were meaningless. He whined sadly when she told him her mother had died the year before and growled when she told him how the students had treated her. For her, it was

like a weight had been lifted - she had not realized how badly she needed to be able to just talk to someone and have them listen.

"I guess I never really minded being called 'Wolfgirl' since I've always loved wolves," she reflected. "But it's taken on a very different meaning in the last couple of weeks."

She paused and looked down at the dark form of Shadow. Her eyes had fully adjusted and she could make out the outline of his head, but the lack of moonlight meant that was all she could see.

"Now that I really am a 'wolf girl', I've had a much harder time with it," she went on. "Everything has become so confusing. Well, more so than it already was. Now I find out magic exists and my only real friend is a wolf!"

Sighing, she exclaimed in frustration, "I don't even know what I am anymore!"

Shadow picked his head up in response and let out what sounded like a cross between a growl and bark. Deep down, Sophia knew what he wanted to say.

"You see me as a wolf?" Sophia replied in surprise and stopped stroking his neck.

After a moment, the feeling faded and she let out a nervous laugh. "No, it's late and I'm imagining things."

Shadow let out a 'herf' and lay his head back down.

"Still, the next full moon is in two weeks and I hope I change again," she admitted. "I'd love to spend the night as a werewolf with you. It would be so much fun!"

Shadow shifted a bit and Sophia went on.

"I don't know if I will, but if I do, I'll definitely come out here!" she enthused. "Promise you'll stick around until then?"

Shadow lifted his head and made a quiet barking noise.

"Great!" She took it as an agreement. "Anyway, it's getting late and I should get back. Next week is Thanksgiving and I have Friday off. I'll try coming out early in the day, okay?"

Shadow got to his feet before Sophia even grabbed her backpack. He waited patiently as she packed up everything, including the empty cans. Underneath his warm body, her pants had dried out and feeling had returned to her legs. She started towards the rock slide, but Shadow moved in her path and growled softly.

"I have to go," she told him. "I really enjoyed being with you though."

Shadow growled softly again, turned and slowly walked to the edge of the small clearing before turning and waiting.

"Oh! You want me to follow!" Sophia exclaimed in understanding.

Putting her trust in him, she followed him into the trees.

It turned out there was a natural path off the foothill that didn't require any climbing. She still received her fair share of scratches from the foliage in the dark, but at least she didn't have to risk slipping and falling twenty feet. After a few minutes, they were at the bottom of the hill and, to Sophia's delight, she saw they were only a few yards from the rockslide.

Kneeling, she surprised Shadow with a hug, "thank you so much!"

The wolf immediately pulled out of the hug, but gave her a friendly lick before darting into the night. Though alone, Sophia practically floated home.

## Chapter 12

*A rustling sound prompted Sophia to look up towards the opening to her den, ready to fight. Thankfully, a familiar scent reached her nose before the cause of the disturbance appeared and she relaxed, her tail wagging gently. Her stomach growled as she smelled the fresh game her mate was bringing and she whined softly. A sharp jab from inside her belly prompted her to shift her position. The little ones growing inside her took all her energy now and she hadn't been able to hunt in weeks.*

*Soon, though, they'd be placing their demands on her from the outside. Very soon...*

The contentment of the dream faded to be replaced by physical discomfort. Sophia woke to find she was very cold despite the quilt, her lower back was aching and her skin felt like a thousand needles were poking her all over. Feeling very thirsty, she managed to squirm out from under the covers and immediately started shaking as chills washed through her body. She made it to the door and, with violently trembling hands, managed to get her robe on. Her shivering diminished, but didn't disappear entirely.

Opening her door, she walked the short distance to the bathroom, closed the door behind her and turned on the light. There, she shut the door and stumbled to the sink, leaning against it with her hands. Taking a shaky breath, she turned on the faucet and grabbed the bathroom cup before filling it and sucking it down.

After taking care of her thirst, she splashed some water on her face before looking at the mirror. Shaking her head, she tried to clear her blurred vision and focus on her reflection. She looked awful; her eyes were sunken and she was deathly pale where her face wasn't flushed. Fishing through their medicine drawer, she found a thermometer. To her complete lack of surprise, she had a fever.

*Must have caught something*, she shrugged and put the thermometer back after disinfecting it. *I was out in the cold for a while last night too.*

That's when her chill suddenly reversed itself and she started sweating profusely. Before her eyes, her face cleared up and went back to its regular complexion. Fumbling for the thermometer again, she saw her temperature had dropped back down to normal. Whatever had hit her had passed as fast as it came.

"What's happening to me?" she whispered to her reflection, before staggering back to her bed.

There, she subconsciously rubbed her stomach even as she tried to remember what the dream had been about. *At least it was a good dream, I think.*

Thankfully, the mysterious illness did not return the next morning or the days that followed. In fact, the strange new world she had found herself in was forced to the back of her mind by the mundane one as the holiday week brought new demands from school and work. Many teachers had decided to schedule tests or project due dates during the shortened week. For the grocery store, Thanksgiving meant it was the busiest it would be all year and she was scheduled to work every night and Thanksgiving morning. Between her job and school, she scarcely had a moment to think about Shadow or the approaching full moon. On the bright side, the other students were too engrossed in their own coursework to torment her.

On the morning of Thanksgiving, Sophia was rushing to get ready for another chaotic shift after getting scarcely eleven hours off since the last one. Several other employees were out of town and the front end manager had scheduled her for ten hours. On the one hand, that meant extra holiday pay, on the other she was completely worn out. Grabbing a comb from her desk, she happened to notice she had written a reminder on her calendar that she had circled and starred.

“ASK OFF FOR SATURDAY, DECEMBER 2!!!” it read, and had a little picture of a wolf head next to it.

*Wow, I can't believe I had almost forgotten about that,* she grabbed a post-it note. *That would have been a complete disaster.*

Quickly scrawling a reminder, she fixed it to her cell phone and threw both in the shoulder-bag she used when she didn't need to change. For a moment, she gazed at her reflection, yearning for it to have lupine features again rather than that of boring old Sophia.

*What if I don't change?* She touched her right ear, wincing slightly as her wrist reminded her it wasn't quite healed. *What if I do..?*

Sighing, she slung her bag over her shoulder and headed out of her bedroom.

“You doing anything for Thanksgiving?” Sandy, the other high school age cashier unlucky enough to be around on Thanksgiving, asked after their grueling shift was over.

“My dad will probably make a turkey loaf and mashed potatoes,” Sophia shrugged as she fastened and picked up her bag, glancing at the note she had put in it. “You?”

“My mom usually makes a big meal,” Sandy replied and then laughed. “I'm sure she's frantically cooking right now. Last year she overcooked the turkey almost to the point it was crunchy.”

“My mother used to make a big dinner or we’d go to my grandparents,” Sophia said sadly. “We couldn’t afford to travel this year.”

“That’s rough,” Sandy answered sympathetically. “Well, I hope you have an okay rest of the day then. Happy Thanksgiving!”

“Happy Thanksgiving,” Sophia murmured.

With that, Sandy hurried from the break room.

*Well, that was nice,* Sophia walked over to the request-off-book. *Now to do my other task.*

Asking off was hardly unusual or something that would elicit comment, but she was self-conscious about why she was asking off. By putting it in writing, it felt like she was sealing her fate. Time seemed to slow. Conscious of her own heartbeat and breathing, she picked up the pen and took a breath. Then she slowly and deliberately penned in ‘Sophia Jones’ under December second and third.

The moment passed, and time moved normally again. Dropping the pen, she left the break room as fast as she could.

Thanksgiving dinner at the Jones’s was about as low effort as it could get. After a meal of prepackaged turkey loaf, instant mashed potatoes, poorly mixed gravy, packaged dinner rolls and canned corn, Sophia’s father dished up a premade pumpkin pie. For the sake of tradition, they then spent the evening watching the traditional holiday movies that were aired. If Sophia tried, she could almost make herself believe everything was as it should be - almost.

Neither of them talked more than necessary, and the television couldn’t dissipate the icy tension in the room or fill the emptiness in Sophia’s heart. It also couldn’t cover the smell of alcohol that permeated the room or keep her from noticing her dad’s increasingly erratic gait or glassy stare as the afternoon and evening progressed. After what seemed like ages, her dad fell into a drunken stupor and any need to maintain the illusion of normalcy dissipated. After turning off the TV and putting away any food that had been left out, she escaped to her bedroom for the rest of the night.

The sound of a wolf howling pierced Sophia’s dreams and she snapped awake. At first, she thought it had been part of a dream and was preparing to go back to sleep when she heard it again. It was somewhat distant, but unmistakable.

*It’s Shadow!* She thought giddily. *I’m sure of it!*

Wide awake now, she jumped out of her bed and quickly threw some warm clothes over her pajamas. Quietly walking into the living room, she checked the chair where her dad had been. To her surprise, it was empty. After verifying he had managed to drag himself to his bed some time during the night, she hastily went about throwing some leftovers into a container. Breakfast could wait, she decided. It would be another hour before the sun rose and she dared not waste any more time than necessary.

Once satisfied she had everything she would need, she slipped out the back of the house and headed towards the foothills. It wasn't easy crossing the field at night; fresh snow had fallen two days before and her boots sank in the soft powder. Still, she persevered and reached the foothills as the first glimmers of daylight appeared in the eastern sky. There was a steady wind and her cheeks were getting numb.

Leaning against a tree, she caught her breath and considered where to go next. She hadn't heard any more wolf howls since she had awoken and was unsure of which direction to go. In the dark and under fresh snow, the terrain looked unfamiliar and she was unsure of how to get to their prior rendezvous spot. Shadow would be hunting this time in the morning and could be miles from where she was.

*If only I could howl!* Sophia took a sip of warm water. *We'd be able to find each other in no time!*

Continuing her trek, she started moving into the foothills. The darkness was lifting and she was able to see further as dawn approached. Spying a path through the trees to the summit of one of the taller hills, she made her way up. As she pulled herself up a particularly steep part of the hill, her right foot slipped and she felt a sharp pain in her forehead as it scraped against a nearby branch. Reflexively, she grabbed hold of a nearby rock with her right hand and let out a shriek of pain as her already injured wrist twisted. She held on, however, and kept herself from falling back down the escarpment.

Gritting her teeth, she ignored the pain in her face and hand long enough to get her left hand on the rock and pull herself up. After scrambling to a more secure location, she let herself fall against a downed tree. Something wet fell into her left eye as her head throbbed. Reaching up, her forehead stung as she touched the painful spot and her glove came away with blood.

"Crap," she said aloud, frustrated.

Grabbing some snow with her left hand, she pressed it against her forehead. The sudden cold hurt at first, but soon the pain receded as the skin numbed. After she stopped bleeding, she gingerly placed her aching right hand on her lap. From the severity of the pain in it, she guessed she had reinjured it. She tried rotating it and nearly screamed.

“Great going Sophia,” she scolded herself. “Now what are you going to do?”

Hungry, alone and not knowing what else to do, she used her left hand to ease her backpack off as best she could, wincing every time she had to move her hand. Seeing her phone, she grabbed it and was unsurprised to see she had no reception where she was. Throwing it back into her backpack, she grabbed the food container and managed to get the lid off. The contents were a jumbled mess now - and cold - but they were edible.

She had just finished the container when a canine-like whine startled her. Snapping her head towards the noise, she saw Shadow standing there looking at her, concerned. His ears were down and his body was tense, as though he was ready to spring into action.

“Shadow!” She exclaimed, her prior misery forgotten.

The wolf came over to her and gently nudged her right arm, which she was holding against her stomach, and let out another whine.

“I’m okay,” she reassured him. “I don’t think it’s broken.”

Affectionately, she scratched his head, marveling at how magnificent he was. His winter coat was thick and almost seemed to shine in the early morning light. Despite her injuries, she felt happy and safe. The sting of the wolf’s tongue licking her forehead shook her from her reverie.

“Hey, that hurts!” She exclaimed recoiling and feebly trying to hold him back.

However, he persisted and she relented. To her surprise, the pain quickly lessened as he cleaned it. After a minute of licking, Shadow backed up, satisfied. He looked at her and whined quietly while swiveling his ears.

“You want me to come with you?” Sophia asked him. “Well, I guess I can’t stay here. Give me a minute.”

With her left hand, she stowed her empty food container and zipped up her backpack. Careful not to jostle her right hand, she slowly got to her feet. Shadow’s ears perked up as he saw her get to her feet and strap her backpack on; his tail wagging excitedly.

“Alright, I’m up,” she told him. “Where do you want to go? I’m not going to be able to climb anywhere - up or down.”

Shadow turned and took a few steps before turning the opposite direction. He sniffed the air before giving a little yip and looked at Sophia expectantly.

“That way?” she asked, and couldn’t help smiling. “Okay, but I’m trusting you!”

Shadow started moving and Sophia followed, being careful to keep her injured wrist steady. The wolf guided her through the trees over the crest of the hill. He was careful not to move too fast and would frequently check behind him to make sure she was keeping up. Even

more impressively, he avoided brush that he could have readily passed through, but would have stymied her. She had to admit, she couldn't have asked for a better or more caring guide.

After what felt like ages, they arrived in a small, gently sloping gully that separated the lower foothills. To her surprise, a small stream of meltwater flowed freely down the middle of the gully. Shadow quickly walked over to the stream and lapped up some of the flowing water. Taking the cue, Sophia worked her backpack off and retrieved her water bottle. With her handicap, Shadow finished well before she did and patiently watched as she satiated her own thirst. Once she was finished and had managed to get her backpack back on, he yipped to get her attention and started winding his way up the gully.

Despite knowing she should probably head home and tend to her injuries, curiosity and the desire to spend more time with her furry friend got the better of her and she followed. The footing was treacherous and she had to carefully feel what was under the snow before she put her full weight down. Still, they steadily made their way up the streambed. A couple of times, Shadow stopped to carefully sniff the tracks of other animals that visited the stream, showing particular interest in some of the smaller tracks. However, he invariably would turn his nose away and continue on.

A few hundred feet up, they reached the next level of foothills and the surrounding land plateaued, forming a valley. There, the stream slowed enough to be covered with a thin layer of ice and the companions crossed at a particularly narrow point. The trees in the valley grew in stands where soil had built up.

*Damn, my phone is in my backpack,* Sophia slowed, taking it all in.

Her attention was diverted, however, when Shadow suddenly stopped a few dozen yards from the stream and crouched. Slowly, she inched forward to see why he had stopped and then saw tiny imprints in the snow. There were two sets of paws - two long ones interspaced with two smaller prints. She immediately recognized them as those of a rabbit. Recognizing Shadow was hunting, Sophia stopped approaching the trail and watched

After sniffing them for a few moments, Shadow started following them with his nose to the ground and his tail out. After a dozen paces, the wolf raised his nose and crept forward. As he approached a clump of boulders and rocks. Suddenly, he darted forward and a light brown furred rabbit darted out of the stacked rocks in a blur. Unfortunately for the rabbit, his hiding spot didn't provide many escape routes and the wolf caught a hindleg as it tried to get past. Panicked, the rabbit started squeaking loudly, but Shadow refused to let go.

The wolf dragged the rabbit over to the rocks before briefly letting go. Free for an instant, the rabbit tried to escape, but Shadow had it trapped between the rock and his body. The wolf's

head bent down and Sophia saw his muzzle snap tight on the rabbit's neck. Shadow raised his head and partially turned towards her, giving her a clearer view of his prize. Horrified, yet fascinated, she watched the rabbit struggle in vain as the wolf crushed its neck. The bunny immediately went limp.

Shadow dropped the now dead rabbit and then picked it up by its back. He turned and proudly trotted back towards Sophia with his prize. When the wolf came up to her and dropped the rabbit at her feet, all she could do was stare in shock. When she didn't move, Shadow nudged the rabbit towards her with his muzzle, his tail wagging.

"You want me to... have it?" Sophia asked him in shock. "Thanks, I guess."

The wolf raised his head and his ears perked up.

"You can have it though," she told him, feeling slightly queasy. "I'm... not hungry. Thank you though."

Shadow dropped his tail, but after a moment he crouched down and started biting at the rabbit's fur. Sophia walked a few feet away and stood, watching. It wasn't long before the wolf had removed the skin and began tearing at the meat underneath. Despite feeling a little sick to her stomach, Sophia couldn't help watching as the wolf quickly consumed his prize. Before long, there wasn't much but blood, skin and bones.

*Maybe... maybe I can do without the hunting,* Sophia watched Shadow start to lick the blood off his coat.

"I... have to pee," she told the wolf. "Be back in a moment."

In truth, she really did have to pee, but also needed a moment to collect herself. She also felt a bit weird about the idea of going to the bathroom in front of the wolf. It was a strange feeling, the need to be modest around a wolf, but there it was. Stepping behind a tree, she lowered her pants and squatted before relieving herself.

*It's just nature,* she told herself. *Eat or be eaten.*

After finishing up, she stepped back around to where Shadow was waiting. He had finished cleaning himself and was patiently watching the tree where she had gone behind.

"Was it good?" she asked him.

Shadow stood and wagged his tail contentedly. She walked over and crouched in front of him, scratching behind his ears with her left hand.

"Glad to hear it," she smiled. "I need to get home to take care of myself. Besides, I don't have any more food for myself. The full moon is next week though and we'll have all night together!"

Shadow gave a friendly whine, turned and started leading her down the mountainside.

“What happened to you?” Sophia’s dad asked the next morning after they had both gotten up.

“I... uh, hit my head on the counter after standing up to get a pot yesterday,” she lied, self-consciously touching the bandage she had put on the gash in her forehead with her left hand.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, it was no big deal,” she told him. “I bled a bit and that was all.”

“Forehead wounds can certainly be nasty,” he commented and then went back to eating his breakfast.

The next several days went by slowly. The intensity of school and work returned to normal levels and Sophia found herself staring at the clock more often than not. Her right hand ached and, while she was able to get out of volleyball again, her writing and drawing suffered. The school nurse told her to get off work, and take it easy - and to be more careful when standing up. Alas, not working was not an option and all she could do was hang onto what the weekend promised as she suffered through her shifts. The grocery store required a doctor’s note and a school nurse didn’t count.

Still, it helped pass the time. With drawing an exercise in frustration, she found herself pacing her room when she was at home. Each night, she could feel it, the pull of the moon getting stronger. By Wednesday night, she could feel her skin tingling as she trudged home from work under the moonlight. By Thursday afternoon, all doubts of what was happening were dispelled as the intense cravings returned, stronger than ever.

## Chapter 13

*Can the clock go any slower?* Sophia fretted impatiently at her desk in Environmental Science, her stomach starting to hurt. *If Shadow showed up with a rabbit right now, I wouldn't say no.*

The uncomfortable sensation of an empty stomach had set in an hour after lunch, while she was in drawing class. Despite having eaten a full meal, she increasingly felt as though she hadn't eaten anything all day. Alas, between her still injured hand and stomach, her attempt at the blind contour drawing exercise resulted in a complete mess. After making it through art class, she made a beeline for her locker where she had stored the box of granola bars she had purchased earlier in the week in anticipation of any pre-full moon need for munchies.

Once the box of bars was in hand, she smuggled it into the girl's bathroom. She had intended to only eat one at a time so she could get through the day, but found herself still hungry after just one and opened another bar. Before she knew it, she was holding a box full of empty wrappers. After discretely disposing of the packaging, she headed off to class, smug that she'd anticipated and headed off the pre-full moon hunger.

*Damn it, how much food do I need to eat to get through the day?* Sophia started chewing on the end of her pencil, before catching herself.

Instead, she tried to force herself to immerse herself in her teacher's lecture.

"A food web is a way to illustrate how energy flows between organisms in an ecosystem," Ms. Honeycutt stated, pointing to a screen with arrows leading to and from various plants and animals.

*Oh no,* Sophia nearly groaned.

Oblivious to Sophia's discomfort, the teacher continued, "organisms are grouped in categories called 'trophic levels' depending on how many steps they're removed from the ecosystem's primary producers."

Sophia started gnawing on her pencil apprehensively.

"Primary producers, or autotrophs, are organisms that don't rely on other organisms to produce their energy." Ms. Honeycutt paused to look around the room before continuing. "In the montane ecosystem, or those ecosystems found on mountain slopes, the sun provides energy to organisms, such as plants, that don't rely on other organisms for energy."

No matter how hard she tried, Sophia couldn't keep her eyes drifting to the rabbit on the slide. The memory of Shadow tearing into the rabbit flashed through her mind, making her stomach ache more. It disturbed her that she found it so enticing, but she was getting desperate.

“The second level is typically made up of herbivores, such as the rabbit, deer or other plant eaters,” Ms. Honeycutt used her pointer stick to indicate the level above the plants.

Sophia continued to chew on the soft wood of her pencil and drool was starting to form at the corners of her mouth.

“The level above herbivores constitutes predators - organisms that prey directly on other organisms,” Ms. Honeycutt declared, pointing directly at the wolf on her slide. “Frogs prey on insects and wolves will eat rabbits and d...”

*SNAP*

The teacher broke off mid-sentence as Sophia’s pencil loudly snapped in her mouth. Everyone turned to stare at her. Mortified, she felt blood rushing to her face as she removed the broken end of the pencil from her mouth. Several kids laughed while Ms. Honeycutt cocked an eyebrow.

“Sorry,” she mumbled as she hastily hid both ends of the pencil in her pencil bag and replaced it with a pen.

“Pencils are typically not found on the food web,” the teacher resumed her lecture in a lighthearted tone. “However, as they’re mostly made of wood, their consumers would be herbivores.”

The classroom chuckled and Sophia forced a smile, trying to brush it off. In truth, she wanted nothing more than the floor to open up and swallow her. Worse, she was starting to shake from how hungry she was. As the teacher resumed her lecture, Sophia gripped the cold metal frame of the desk and squeezed, trying to channel all of her stress into it.

One minute ticked by, then two... Just ten minutes left of class...

“Yes, Sophia?” Ms. Honeycutt acknowledged Sophia’s upraised hand.

“Could I please use the bathroom?” Sophia asked politely, trying to keep her voice from shaking.

“There are only ten minutes left of class,” the teacher replied, glancing at the clock. “Is it an emergency?”

Sophia hesitated before nodding.

“Alright, be quick though.”

Standing up unsteadily, Sophia ignored the stares from the other students as she swiftly fled the classroom. Instead of going to the bathroom, however, she went in the direction of the cafeteria. Despite being in the middle of class, no one stopped her. Once in the cafeteria, she walked over to the vending machines and fumbled for the cash she kept in the tight pocket of her jeans.

It took some effort to get the cash in the machine with how badly her hands were shaking, but she managed it. Punching in the code for the cookie package, she had her hand in the machine before it even finished falling. Tearing open the bag, she stuffed two small cookies in her mouth. As soon as the sweetness of the cookies hit her tongue, her shaking subsided as her body anticipated the calories.

Knowing the cookies wouldn't be even close to enough, she used up every bill she had and carried her small haul of chips, candy and cookies to her locker as she finished her first cookies. It didn't satisfy her hunger much, but at least it would get her through the last few minutes of the period. After quietly closing her locker, she rushed back to class. Ms. Honeycutt arched an eyebrow as Sophia entered and took her seat.

"Sorry, really had to go," Sophia apologized meekly.

"As I was just saying, you need to do the food web activity at the end of chapter 5 for Monday," Ms. Honeycutt said, sounding somewhat annoyed.

The bell rang as Sophia finished writing down the assignment. Looking up, she saw Ms. Honeycutt had returned to her desk and was looking at her notes for the next class. Relieved, Sophia quietly joined the rest of the class filing out of the classroom and immediately headed back to her locker. There, she immediately unwrapped a candy bar and ate it, chewing it just enough to swallow. Then she grabbed the chips and scarfed that down before wiping out the remaining bag of cookies.

She self-consciously brushed the crumbs off her face when she noticed the student who had the locker on her left staring at her.

"Didn't have much for lunch," she mumbled after swallowing the cookie she had been working on.

The kid shrugged but said nothing before walking away. Too hungry to care, she grabbed the last two cookies in the package and quickly scarfed them down. Hoping it would be enough to get her through the last class, she grabbed her Sociology material and set out in search of a water fountain.

The snacks turned out to be enough, barely. By the time Sophia arrived at the grocery store, she was starving again. Taking advantage of the twenty minutes until her shift started, she bought a family sized portion of fried chicken and a bottle of water to wash it down. To avoid any awkward interactions, she took it to the rear of the building where the dumpsters were. That area was partially fenced in, affording her some privacy as she filled her stomach with juicy

poultry. By the time her shift started, she had wiped out the entire container and discretely disposed of it.

*I've never been so glad to work at a grocery store,* Sophia thought wryly as she scrubbed the grease off her hands and face in the women's restroom. *I only hope it's enough to make it through the night.*

After drying her hands, she left the restroom, clocked in and headed toward her register.

"That was a lot of chicken," Janet commented as Sophia opened up her register.

"Oh, uh, some of my friends asked if I could get some for them with my store discount," Sophia thought up a quick story, feeling a little guilty for the fib.

"Ah," Janet replied as she closed her register. "Hope they enjoyed it. Have a good night now."

"You too," Sophia replied automatically, avoiding the older woman's eyes.

A customer started unloading as Janet walked toward the back of the store. Sophia forced her guilt down and began ringing the new woman up. After the woman paid, Sophia grabbed the receipt and handed it out.

"Your hand is burning up!" the woman jerked her hand away in surprise as her hand brushed Sophia's. "Are you feeling okay, dear?"

*Crap, no wonder I've felt so cold today.* Sophia anxiously moved a strand of hair behind her ear. *I wonder if I'm running a fever; I don't feel sick.*

"I'm fine," Sophia reassured the woman and forced a smile. "I'm just a little warm, I guess."

"I didn't mean to raise a fuss, I was just surprised," the woman replied, recovering her composure.

"No big deal," Sophia reassured the customer, trying to sound nonchalant.

The woman left and Sophia made a mental note to avoid making skin contact with anyone else.

Thankfully, it was a slow night and the chicken had more staying power than the junk food from earlier in the day. Her stomach was just starting to have the first pangs of hunger by the time her break rolled around, and she bought a small order of chicken and potato wedges from the deli. Normally, she would have had leftovers from such a meal, but she had no trouble gobbling it up.

*I'm still a little hungry, she meticulously pored over the remains of her meal, looking for any remnants of meat or potato. It should get me through the last hour of my shift at least. How am I going to make it two more days though?*

By the time her shift ended, she was back to feeling famished. Once she punched out, she grabbed a cart and began filling it with as much as she thought she'd be able to carry home. In went the store's last two rotisserie chickens, a large box of leftover fried chicken, sausages, a couple bags of jerky and several packages of hot dogs. She tried balancing the meat out with vegetables, fruit or even cereal but kept finding herself drawn back to the meat section of the store. As it turned out, the only non-meat product she managed was a box of cookies. Rolling her cart to the register for Rob to ring her up, she braced herself for the manager's usual sarcasm.

"Your dad having the guys over?" he asked instead, his eyes nearly popping.

"Nah, it's for me," she replied, smiling innocently.

She took no small amount of satisfaction from the uncertainty that passed over his face nor how he paused to stare at her. After a moment, he shrugged and continued checking her out. Once she had paid the far less satisfying bill, she took her cart outside and began moving whatever she could to her backpack. By the time she set off for home, she had three plastic bags and a very heavy backpack.

Five minutes into her trek home, she could no longer withstand the assault on her nose by the scent of warm meat. Roughly dropping her bags on the sidewalk, she tore off the lid of one of the rotisseries and began messily peeling long strips of chicken off. By the time she regained control of herself, she had consumed most of the breast and had a terrible case of the hick-ups. Embarrassed at her sudden bout of gluttony, she looked around and was relieved to see no one was watching. After snapping the lid back on, she resumed lugging her groceries home, trying to stifle her hick-ups the whole way.

Despite her father finding and swiping several pieces of chicken from the fridge, the food managed to get Sophia to Friday night. Between classes, she'd grab as much as she could sneak into the girl's restroom and she wiped out two servings of lunch. Unfortunately, her voracious appetite was rapidly depleting her available cash and she found herself with very little left by the time her shift ended that night. All she could manage for the trip home was a couple of sausage sticks.

*This is going to be a problem, her empty pocketbook depressingly light in her hand. A few days just cost me most of an entire week's worth of work. I don't know how I'll afford anything else if this is a monthly occurrence.*

As she stepped into the night, her skin began tingling. Surprised by the sensation, her step faltered and she gazed up at the moon. Taking a deep, contented breath, she stood a little straighter and resumed walking home.

*One more day, she told herself as she unwrapped a sausage stick. If only I could head off to the mountains now. I feel like I'm going to explode, and not just from anticipation.*

The waistband of her pants dug into her stomach uncomfortably as she walked. Like her first transformation, all the extra food had added several pounds to her body. She had not had a bowel movement since Wednesday and she was starting to feel rather bloated. Her bladder was another matter though.

*It's like having another period, Sophia mused as she felt the urge to pee, despite having gone before she left the store. This'll be worth it though.*

Finally, she arrived home and again stopped to stare up at the moon, longingly. Despite the desire to stay out longer, her bladder and stomach conspired to send her inside. As she stepped through her door, the tingling sensation on her skin faded, but didn't disappear entirely.

Between the frequent bathroom emergencies, midnight snacking and just her overall excitement, the night was a sleepless one. Her appetite had started to wane sometime after midnight, but her digestive system made up for it by noisily gurgling away as her body raced to store as many calories as it could in preparation for the evening. By the time the first early morning light started streaming through her window, Sophia found herself wide awake, staring at the ceiling. Deciding sleep was a lost cause, she set about finding ways to make the time pass until evening.

Shivering, she donned her robe and then grabbed the thermometer she had taken from the bathroom, she waited as it took her temperature. She had been running what would be considered a slight fever in a normal person the last couple of days and she had taken to tracking it. The air in her bedroom was humid and the window had completely fogged up. Although she had not been sweating, her breathing had been enough to nearly saturate the air.

*Wow, it went up, she read the thermometer after it had beeped. 102, I should be in bed unable to move right now, yet I feel fine.*

Not knowing what else to do she tried searching for werewolves and temperature, but unsurprisingly found nothing. Her search for others like her had so far proven unfruitful.

*I wish I had someone to guide me through this,* Sophia felt a twinge of loneliness as she pulled up the pictures from last time.

The rest of the day went by slowly. Sophia kept to her room for most of it, either watching movies or shows under several blankets. When she wasn't trying to absorb herself in her laptop screen, she paced around her bedroom, looking at the clock every few seconds and sighing. She had tried drawing, but her hand was in a fair bit of pain and her fine motor control still wasn't back to normal. Even without that handicap, she found it nigh impossible to focus on a page or screen for long. It felt like every nerve in her body was wound tight, waiting to spring.

Still, however slowly, the day progressed. Morning became afternoon and afternoon gave way to the yellows and oranges of twilight. As night approached, Sophia's restlessness only grew. It felt as though some otherworldly energy was coursing over her skin and the burning need to get away from the trappings of humanity took root deep within her. In her chest, the tempo of her pulse rose and sweat began to form on her skin as the sun dipped below the western mountains.

*Crap, I haven't prepared for the night at all,* she frantically began pulling clothes out of her dresser. *I've had all day and didn't even unload my backpack! Concentrate Sophia, there isn't much time.*

Quickly, she changed into a sports bra, t-shirt and sweatshirt before pulling on sweatpants. Then, she pulled out a pair of socks and hesitated as she remembered her prior experience with them.

*I can't afford to ruin another pair of socks,* Sophia reluctantly put the socks back. *How will my feet handle boots with claws? What about gloves?*

Sighing, she dumped her backpack on her bed, threw her camera in and hurried to the kitchen. It was nearly dark outside and the need to get away from the artificial world was becoming overwhelming. Every nerve in her body felt like it was firing and she was starting to sweat profusely. Her skin felt like it was freezing and burning all at the same time.

*Keep it together for a few more minutes...* she shook her head as her vision started to swim. *I don't remember it being this intense or this early.*

Grabbing a water bottle, she held it under the faucet with a shaking hand and threw it in her bag. Opening the fridge, she grabbed what little was left of the sausage she had purchased. Her joints were starting to ache and she grabbed what little she had thrown together and rushed for her boots and coat. Unable to concentrate enough to lace up her boots, she forced her feet in them and awkwardly rushed towards the backdoor with her coat in hand.

Fumbling with the lock and ignoring the pain in her right wrist, she managed to get the door open and staggered out the door. The cold air of the night hit her and she started shivering hard. She had just enough presence of mind to close the door behind her before lumbering through the snow across the yard.

As she reached the edge of the yard, the moon appeared from behind the eastern mountains, illuminating her. Exhilaration flowed through her and her anxiety dissipated. The icy cold of the night faded from her mind and she managed to get her backpack on with her coat draped through the straps. Her gait quickened, and she began sprinting across the field despite her loose footwear.

*I need to find my pack!* Unfamiliar instincts began to make their demands as she tore across the field.

Her left foot unexpectedly came loose from her boot and she fell into the cold, wet snow as pain seized her. One foot bare, she desperately crawled into a depression in the ground as her gums, nose, eyes and ears started to ache. Somehow, she managed to wriggle out of her backpack before collapsing onto the ground. She curled into a ball, clutching her stomach in agony as she felt her insides squirm. Sealing her burning eyes tightly, tears streamed out as it felt like her ears were being roughly pulled out of her head. It was everything she could do to keep from screaming.

After what felt like an eternity, the intense pain in her stomach subsided and she was able to open her eyes again. The respite was all too brief as a stabbing pain flared in the tips of her fingers and toes.

*Oh shit, my claws are going to tear up my boot!* she struggled against the pain sweeping through her body to yank her last boot off.

She got them off in time to watch in awe as her nails transformed into black claws and then lengthened. Breathing heavily, she lay on her side as the pain in her body subsided. The smells of the night flooded into her consciousness and she inhaled deeply.

*So many smells!* She closed her eyes, trying to isolate and identify each one. *I'm going to enjoy...*

Pain flooded through her once more. This time it was concentrated in her hands, feet and lower back. Her clothes felt tight and chafed uncomfortably against her skin. On her stomach and chest, it felt like someone was poking her with a hot iron.

*It's not stopping!* She pulled on her sweatshirt in a panic. *I need to get my clothes off before they strangle me!*

After a brief struggle, she managed to get her sweatshirt over her head and pulled her arms out. Removing her sweatshirt revealed a fine layer of fur now covering her arms and chest. Rolling onto her front, she grasped the band of the exercise bra and pulled it over her head. It fell away from her torso as she rolled onto her back in the snow, freeing her breasts. Faintly, her brain registered that her upper back didn't feel nearly as cold or wet as she would have expected. In fact, it felt quite insulated, especially compared to her lower back, butt and legs.

She lay on her back for a moment, breathing heavily. Then the pain in her lower back surged and the weight of cloth against her changing body was too much to bear. Forcing down the impulse to tear off the remaining clothes, she blocked out the pain as best she could and brought her hands to either side of her pants. Arching her butt off the ground, she pulled her pants and underwear down in one swift motion. With the aid of her feet, she finished removing the last garments from her body.

Now fully nude, she flipped onto her front as it felt like someone was roughly pulling her spine. Reaching behind her, she placed her hand above her butt. Despite the sensation in her fingers feeling strangely muted, she could feel a thin covering of stiff hairs on her lower back. For a moment, she lost herself in the strange feeling of her own fur. Then her hand found a bulge at the very top of her butt and froze.

## Chapter 14

Sophia was too stunned to move. Then, very slowly, she began moving her hand around the strange bump, disturbing the light cover of stiff hairs that now covered her lower back. The bump felt bony and maybe protruded half an inch from her rear. Faintly, she could feel muscles just above her butt reflexively trying to move the bump.

*Is that a... tail?* A thrill of excitement went through her as she immersed herself in the strange new feelings coming from her behind. *It's a short tail, but it's a tail!*

She probed at it for a moment longer before realizing she had been using the back of her hand in her exploration. Flipping it over, she brushed her back with her fingertips and jolted in surprise from the unexpected feeling of something pointy and hard rubbing her skin. While she could feel her fingers on her back, there was no sensation from her fingertips.

*They can't be that cold already..?* Bringing her hand to where she could see it, she gasped.

Her fingertips each had what looked like slightly darkened calluses covering them and, rather than the short claws of her first transformation, thick, sharply pointed claws protruded from the ends of her fingers. Following the contour of the upper part of her palm, just below where her fingers attached, was the same hard material found on her fingers. The pad formed a rough triangle on her hand. Further down, in the middle of the underside of her wrist, was a small, ovular pad.

*Aside from the pads and claws, my hands look human,* she experimentally closed her hand, finding the claws prevented her from making a full fist.

It was then she realized she wasn't on her knees, but balancing on the balls of her feet. Her legs were still proportioned and shaped for bipedal movement, which meant her knees were folded awkwardly under her, barely clearing the snow. Looking back, she saw her feet had a fine covering of short, white fur. Similar to her hands, large, dark claws now grew from the ends of her toes. Despite sinking into the snow, she felt no discomfort where her feet contacted the ground.

Her hands were a different matter entirely. Unlike her feet, they were still furless and couldn't bend in such a way that the pads made most of the contact with the snow. Taking a deep breath, she pushed off the ground and went into a crouch. The thin layer of fur on her legs tickled the bare parts of her palms and fingers as she placed them on top of her upper legs in an attempt to warm them. Her ankles wobbled unsteadily as she adjusted to the new position and her new lupine instincts were telling her to get back on all fours, like a proper wolf.

As she crouched in the small depression she had transformed in, she regarded her surroundings. How she perceived the world felt different, like it had a new dimension to it... The night was far brighter than it had been with human eyes, but vision seemed so much less important somehow. Closing her eyes, she raised her head and took in a long intake of breath through her nose and gasped in astonishment. A sort of picture of the world around her formed in her mind, made not of light, but the chemicals carried by the air itself.

*I never knew..!* She inhaled through her nose again, reveling in the experience.

Immediately, her brain took note of her own scents, both the lupine musks she emitted now and the human scent with a hint of wolf she had carried just an hour before. Particularly strong emanations drew her to her hands. Curiously, she sniffed her hands and found there were concentrations of her scent between each of her fingers. As she lowered her hand, she became aware of even stronger smells originating from her body. It didn't take long to figure out where they were coming from.

*I can't believe I have scent glands in my ass now,* she giggled and sniffed the air again. *And wow, my snatch!*

Despite the human Sophia's fascination, Sophia the wolf was losing interest in her own scent and quickly directed her to focus on the other information now flooding her brain. To her amazement, each scent was made up of a tapestry of different chemical threads, each strand carrying unique information about the source. It was thrilling to untangle and examine each thread, but the meaning of each eluded the new and inexperienced wolf.

*I could spend all night learning what everything means!* Forgetting her earlier discomfort, Sophia went back to all fours and began sniffing her belongings.

"Chuff!" she instinctively exhaled sharply onto her backpack through her nose and then inhaled the odors her breath dislodged.

Her brain immediately seized upon one combination of scents above all others and directed her straight to the backpack's main compartment. All else faded into irrelevance as she became fixated on getting what was in the pack. Luckily, she had not fully zipped it in her hasty departure from her home and it had opened fully when she had flung it off. Simply grabbing what she could smell with her hands never crossed her mind as she stuck her entire head into the bag, nose first. Her olfactory organ led her to a plastic ziplock at the bottom of the compartment and she latched onto it with her front-most premolars, which had lengthened into sharp pointed canines.

Pulling the bag out with her teeth, she let go of it in the snow. Inside were the sausages she had thrown in, and the scent that was driving her into a frenzy was from the residue on her

fingers when she had sealed it. Without stopping to think, she placed a clawed hand onto the bag before biting down on the bulge of the sausages. Her sharp teeth easily penetrated the bag, and she pulled while holding the bag down, tearing the plastic. No longer held at bay by the plastic, the meat's full scent flooded her nose.

*Mine!* She thought as she chomped down on the meat and pulled it out of the bag.

Tearing into the sausage, she messily chewed it with her other premolars which had also become sharper, although they retained their human size. Throwing her head back, she swallowed the meat before lowering her head and tearing off another large chunk. Within seconds all that was left was the shredded bag.

*I wish I had brought more food,* she sniffed around the bag, licking up any remaining juice with her tongue. *That wasn't nearly enough.*

With no other food immediately available, she returned to exploring the other smells on her backpack. The dyes and materials each had their own unique tapestry she found, and she caught faint traces of what her brain somehow automatically identified as other humans on her backpack. She spent some time exploring these and a few she found oddly familiar, though she couldn't identify their owners. Mixed in with the human scents were an overwhelming array of aromas her backpack had picked up from the environment she couldn't even begin to classify.

Excitedly, she moved onto her clothes and was immediately repelled by several utterly repugnant odors. Her recently laundered sweatshirt especially reeked with them.

"Is that laundry detergent?" she said aloud, her brain tying the various threads into something she was familiar with. "It's awful!"

Momentarily jolted from her investigations, she realized her hands hurt... a lot. Looking down, she saw her hands were buried in the snow again. A light breeze carried freezing air across her exposed skin and she realized she was shivering violently. Aside from her upper back and shoulders, what fur she now had wasn't nearly enough to keep out the chill of the night air. Another breeze blew across her feminine folds and breasts, reminding her she was completely naked, and not within the privacy of her room.

*I'm a wolf, why should being without clothes embarrass me?*

Briefly, the image of Shadow coming across her flashed through her imagination. The vivid image of the big, strong wolf sent her heart racing and she felt a thrill of excitement run through her spine. Then her cheeks warmed and she was pushing the thoughts away as fast as she could.

*I need to keep better control of the wolf instincts.* Distantly, with the way the cold air now felt against her nether region and how much her smell had intensified, she knew she must have become wet down there. *I'm definitely not interested in... that.*

Forcing her mind back on the task of getting dressed, she bent over to grab her pants. Clamping her mouth gently around the waistband, she pushed herself back to a crouch.

*Uh, how do I put this on again?* Sweats dangling from her mouth, Sophia stared at her hands in confusion. *I think I'm supposed to use my... paws?*

The idea of using her paws to pull the clothes on seemed strange, but they weren't quite paws, were they? Concentrating, she recalled how to use her hands to hold and manipulate objects and then awkwardly grabbed the pants from her mouth. Immediately, she discovered she had grasped it a little too tightly.

"Damn it," she swore, examining the four punctures in the leg of her sweatpants.

Sighing, she carefully clamped onto her panties with her teeth and separated them from the sweats. Again, she had to remember how to use her hands before carefully threading a leg through, followed by the other. She paused pulling them up when she noticed her pubic hair had been replaced by a thick coat of soft, white fur which covered her lower pelvis, the insides of her legs and formed a rough triangle connected to her navel by a line of fur. Above her belly button, the line of fur continued up her stomach, between her breasts and then merged with a thick pelt of short, white fur on her upper chest. The rest of her stomach, breasts and chest were covered by a sparse covering of short fur. Then her eyes widened and breath caught as she noticed something else.

Running from below her breasts to her crotch, parallel with the line of fur, were two lines of three discolored bumps. Each was the size and shape of one of her human nipples and felt similarly sensitive to the cold air. Tentatively, she brushed one and reflexively inhaled as a jolt went through her.

*Teats? For... pups?* She self-consciously cupped her hand over several bumps. *What else is different?*

The video of the wolves mating popped into her mind and she quickly blocked it. Now apprehensive, she spread her legs and angled it towards the moonlight. She let out a sigh of relief when she examined her sex. Aside from the fur, her womanhood remained human; at least it still *looked* human. Hastily, she finished pulling up her panties, which noticeably bulged from the fur. The rear band of the panties slipped over the top of her tail nub, prompting the strange sensation of muscles flexing.

Her nostrils flared as it detected the faint scent of what she instinctively knew to be an animal and her wolf instincts asserted themselves. Reflexively, she turned towards it, and it took considerable force of will to keep herself from following it. With a burst of determination, her human side took back control and she was able to don her sweatpants without difficulty.

The sensation of her ears *moving* in response to a faint scritch sound startled her. Despite desiring to investigate the noise, the sheer alienness of the experience kept her focused on her ears. Reaching her right hand up, she was surprised to discover her ears were no longer rounded projections of skin and cartilage that lay close to her head, nor were they the softly pointed versions of her first transformation. Instead, her ears were large, rounded triangles that flared from the sides of her head. Any trace of her earlobes had disappeared, and fur covered the backs and outer edges.

*Oh man, I have wolf ears! I wish I had thought to bring a mirror!*

To her delight, she found the lupine protrusions came with fully functional lupine musculature and she could flex them at will. She could even swivel them some, although their positions on the sides of her head prevented her from rotating them. For a minute, she lost herself in the strange, but wonderful experience of moving her own ears. Figuring out how to flick them was especially fun.

*I have to be the first wolf to be entertained by her own body,* she mused as the novelty started to wear off and she remembered how cold she still was. *I had better get going if I'm going to find Shadow and not freeze.*

Redirecting her attention back to getting dressed, she was able to keep herself focused long enough to slip her exercise bra over her head. Try as she might, she could not adjust it to be comfortable. The rear and bottom bands pressed against the fur on her back and the front's bottom elastic band lay directly on the top row of teats.

*I guess I don't need it for tonight,* she conceded and pulled it back off.

Her stomach rumbled and she again had to keep herself from running towards the scent of an animal. Every fiber in her body yearned to explore, to hunt and find her pack.

*I can't yet, almost done,* she told herself firmly and grabbed her shirt with her teeth, doing her best to ignore the stench of the laundry detergent. *I have to act like a human for a little longer.*

After separating the shirt from the sweatshirt, she flattened her ears and carefully worked it over them. It felt strange to have her breasts loose under the shirt and it felt like her stomach twitched every time the fabric brushed one of her new teats, but blocking the wind from touching her exposed skin easily made up for it. Wrinkling her nose, she threw the sweatshirt on her

backpack and put on her coat. The zipper was a struggle, but she managed to pinch it in between two fingers and pull it up. Her head was plenty warm and she decided against the hat, not that it would have fit with her changed ears.

For a moment she stood there, trying to get used to the weight of the coat against her fur. No matter how she adjusted it, she just couldn't get comfortable. Every time she moved, the coat compressed the fur on her back, shoulders or arms, tickling her. Worse, it acted as a double insulator with her fur.

*Gah, this isn't going to work,* Sophia frantically unzipped and removed her coat.

Relief flooded through her as her skin was able to breathe again, but it was short-lived. Too much of her body had light or no fur covering. Dropping her coat, she stripped her shirt off again and grabbed her sweatshirt. Wrinkling her nose at the sharp scent of the detergent, she tried not to gag as she slipped it over her head.

*Well, it beats overheating at least,* she forced herself to ignore the repellent scent. *And it's not as annoying against my fur... or teats.*

Despite the relative paucity of clothing given the cold, her selection seemed sufficient.

*It's a good thing I don't need my boots,* she eyed her boots and the long claws on her feet. *I do wish I had something for the underside of my feet and ankles though. Maybe I should have brought a pair of socks after all. For that matter, gloves aren't going to work either.*

Letting out a soft whine, she looked longingly towards the mountains and rotated her shoulders in an attempt to get her shirt and coat to stop chafing against the fur on her back. The clothes interacted uncomfortably with her changed body and she felt confined, but the warmth they provided was enough to make up for it. Looking back down, towards her remaining belongings, she wondered what to do with them before dropping onto all fours with them directly behind her.

*This should keep my stuff hidden until morning at least.* She awkwardly used her hands to dig up snow and toss it behind her, burying her backpack, coat and boots. *Now I need to do something so I can find it again.*

The wolf side knew what to do, and she backed up until her rear was over the mound of snow. She raised her leg, but something in the back of her mind stopped her.

*Oh, right, that would suck.* She reached behind her and pulled her sweats and underwear down her legs. *There we go.*

Again, she raised her leg, at least as far as the panties and sweats allowed. This time, she flexed the muscles around her bladder and a spray of urine soaked the snow. Immediately,

the strong scent that identified this spot as hers wafted into her nose, pleasing her. Finished, she crawled forward.

*I should have found that disgusting, she mused as she pulled her pants back up. Why though? How else would I identify this as my territory?*

Shrugging, she dismissed the strange thought from her mind and stood, rising on the balls of her feet.

*Well, it's not quite what I envisioned, she thought as she took off running towards the mountains. But at least I'm the best-dressed wolf out here.*

## Chapter 15

After only a few hundred yards, Sophia's muscles and lungs began to burn. While the thick, leathery pads on her feet provided excellent shock absorption and insulation, they could not make up for the fact that the rest of her feet were still anatomically human. Every time the ball of a foot struck, the ankle and arch wanted to flatten out to dissipate the downward force being exerted. To keep the uninsulated part of her feet from striking the ground, she had to keep her legs stiff. At the same time, she had to push off the ground with enough upward force that the top of each foot would be able to clear the snow. The result was an unnaturally stiff and bouncy run that required muscles that weren't typically used for such movement.

Gasping for breath, Sophia slowed to a walk before stopping entirely and dropping into a crouch. A gentle breeze chilled the backs of her bare feet. She pulled her pants down slightly to cover them, partially exposing the top of her sparsely furred butt and tail nub to the cold. Looking around, she surveyed her surroundings and sniffed the air. To her disappointment, there was no hint of another wolf in the air, and she still had a ways to go to reach the mountains.

"Whine."

The high pitched sound surprised her, and it took her a moment to realize it had come from her. Her human mind, unnerved by the strange sound, became acutely aware of just how unfamiliar the body it now inhabited was. Although she had steadily been getting used to it, her clothes still chafed her fur uncomfortably. New muscles on her backside twitched and spasmed in response to her movements or seemingly at random. Every time she heard something, she felt her ears automatically try to orient themselves towards the source.

Feeling something cold and wet under her nose, Sophia curled her tongue up and over her lip to lick it off. To her consternation, her tongue couldn't quite reach her nose. She tried again before realizing what she was doing and that the length of her tongue had not been something that had changed this round.

Sighing, she reached up with her hand to wipe her nose, pausing briefly when her hand revealed the end of her nose was flatter and rounder than the angular protrusion she was accustomed to. The skin of her nose felt rough, yet surprisingly sensitive. Even more sensitive were the two groups of stiff hairs that were now embedded in between her upper lip and nose. The hairs were short, only a couple of centimeters, but just brushing them was enough to make her face twitch.

*I wish I had a mirror, Sophia ran the backs of her fingers over her otherwise furless face. I probably look really silly.*

All ruminations of what her face looked like disappeared as a slight breeze carried a faint, but enticing scent into her nostrils. Her body went rigid and her ears perked up as her brain analyzed the scent. She didn't recognize it of course, but this particular combination piqued her wolf side's interest all the same.

*Something nearby*, Sophia silently turned her head in the direction the scent had come from. *A small animal, above the snow. Young and healthy.*

All of her attention on the scent, she placed her hands into the snow, oblivious to the biting cold. Now on all fours, she quietly oriented her body towards her quarry and tilted her ears forward as best she could. Lowering her head, she slowly moved one hand forward before matching its motion with the opposite foot. Step by step, she silently stalked forward. The scent steadily grew stronger as she got closer and the animal still hadn't noticed her.

After a couple dozen yards, she spotted her prey - a gray rabbit, nibbling on some twigs. Sophia's mouth watered as she closed in on the unsuspecting animal. Her hands were freezing, but the promise of filling her empty stomach kept her going. She automatically froze as the rabbit's head turned to the side. Luckily, it didn't see her and it soon went back to nibbling on the branch. Carefully, Sophia resumed approaching the hapless bunny. Instinctively, she slowed her breathing to almost nothing and time seemed to slow.

*A little further...* The thought of sinking her teeth into lean muscle sent a thrill through her. *This is awesome! My first hunt!*

A few feet away, she stopped. Leaning back, she put her weight on her rear "paws". With a burst of energy she shot forward with her mouth open. To her delight, the rabbit was caught completely off guard. The animal's eyes went wide and started to move its legs to get away. It was too late though, and Sophia's sharp front teeth clamped down hard as she pressed her face into the rabbit's furry back. Her flat human mouth didn't allow her to bite with much more than her premolars, but their grip was solid.

*I caught it!* A thrilling feeling of accomplishment surged through her.

The rabbit began thrashing violently and squeaking. Caught by complete surprise, Sophia's eyes went wide and she reflexively relaxed her mouth muscles. Immediately, the rabbit slipped free and bolted into the darkness. Too stunned to give chase, she watched it disappear into the hills. A mouthful of fur was all that remained. Crushing disappointment flooded through her, and her knees bent to the ground.

*It's not fair!* Then, her mind finally processed what she had done and a wave of revulsion briefly displaced the disappointment. *Oh my God, I nearly killed a rabbit and I was enjoying it! What am I doing?*

She suddenly became all too aware that her hands were deep in the snow and had gone numb. Stinging snow flew into her face, briefly blinding her and to make everything worse, her stomach growled pitifully. Leaning back on her knees, she put her hands under her armpits in an attempt to warm them. Her claws catching on the fibers of her coat was a pointed reminder that she wasn't quite human at present.

*Wolves eat meat*, Sophia shivered and tried to spit out some of the fur, thinking longingly about her warm bed. *Wolves kill, but I'm not a wolf. I'm just a foolish girl and I want to go home!*

Something wet fell onto her tongue and she licked her elongated teeth. The faint taste and smell of blood from the rabbit entered her awareness... and she found herself craving more. That she liked the taste of rabbit blood horrified her, but it also excited something at the very core of her being - something that fervently told her this was her home.

*But I'm a... wolf tonight, right?* She reasoned, trying to assuage any human misgivings. *Maybe it's okay for me to kill to eat... right?*

Cold and wet knees reminded her she was kneeling in snow. Standing, she rose to the balls of her feet and sniffed the night air. The scent of the rabbit had disappeared, but a new scent was on the wind. It seemed... familiar. It was faint and she couldn't describe how or why, but it was something she recognized. Turning towards the hills and mountains, she began trudging towards it.

Walking uphill, in the snow, in a way her feet were neither designed nor accustomed to was arduously slow. Several times, she had to pause to catch her breath and give her sore muscles a break. The scent was growing stronger, and she never stopped for long. Although she still didn't know how she recognized it, she found it comforting. The moon was directly overhead by the time she made it to the trees.

As she crested a hill, she paused once again to catch her breath. The wind picked up then and she turned her head away from it and out over the hilly landscape.

*Everything is so bright, but why does it seem blurry?* Blinking her eyes, she tried to clear them.

She had been so focused on the vastly expanded power of her nose that she hadn't paid much attention to her sight. Looking around, she realized her perception of the world had changed beyond her nose and ears. A strange glow suffused everything and she could make out what was under the shadow of a nearby tree almost perfectly. Yet, objects further away almost looked like they had been smudged. Squinting, they became slightly sharper, but still blurred.

She shrugged. *Strange, maybe because of a wolf's better night vision?*

Turning her back towards the mountains, she closed her eyes, tilted her head and took a long, deep inhale with her nose. So many scents surrounded her and she wanted to investigate them all. The fragrance of pine needles and sap hung heavily in the air - she certainly had no trouble recognizing that one. However, the scents of myriad dead stems, stalks and leaves were there too. Despite the cover of snow, she could smell the faint off-gassing of the soil. From the direction of the town, the wind carried the scents of human habitation - which made her distinctly uneasy.

Nearby, some kind of animal had been through earlier in the day, its scent still clung to its tracks and the tree it had brushed against. Curiously, Sophia walked over to the tracks and got onto her hands before lowering her head to sniff them more closely. She didn't recognize the animal of course, but her brain committed every last chemical marker to memory so she'd recognize it if she came across it. For that matter, she could make out the scents her brain now associated with rabbits, but they were too diffuse to have been recent.

Cold fingers reminded her to get back onto her feet, but not before she took the time to mark the tree and ground with her urine. Turning towards the steaming liquid, she sniffed it contentedly for a time. It was a strange mix of human and wolf, but otherwise it was healthy and distinctive. Most importantly, it was unquestionably her's.

*My territory*, she grinned as she pulled up her pants, not concerned in the slightest that she had gotten some pee on them or that her claws had torn the fabric.

A strong waft of the smell that had been luring her further into the mountains drew her attention back towards her quest. The scent smelled similar to hers... In fact...

Her eyes widened, "a wolf!"

Excitement and trepidation flooded through her. Another wolf was nearby; was it part of a pack? Was it trespassing on her territory? If it was part of a pack, she'd have to avoid it. The Alpha female might not be happy to have a potential challenger. On the other hand, if it was a lone male wolf, maybe he'd be willing to form a new pack.

All of her senses were on high alert and her ears were constantly trying to shift which way they were pointing to check for sounds. Craning her neck, she sniffed the air, trying to get as much information as possible. It was faint, and coming from... there!

Without a second thought, she began sprinting as fast as she could in the direction the smell was coming from. It didn't take long for her legs and lungs to start burning, but she pushed herself on. Climbing a particularly steep incline, she found herself using her hands in conjunction with her feet, curling her fingers so her claws dug into the ground.

It was awkward moving on all fours at first, but the increased traction her changed hands brought was welcome. Unlike human nails, her claws were closer to extensions of her digits and the sensation of them pulling on the bones in her fingers as they struck the ground took some getting used to. As she climbed, her brain quickly learned how to coordinate her movements and it began to feel like she had always moved this way.

*This feels right; my paws belong on the ground.*

At the top, Sophia reluctantly resumed a two legged pose to warm up her hands. Leaning against a tree, she thrust them under her armpits. Despite her hands feeling like ice, the rest of her felt like it was on fire. Instinctively, she let her mouth fall open and partially stuck out her tongue. Steam looked like it was pouring out of her mouth as she panted.

*Oh yeah, wolves don't sweat, despite feeling extremely hot, no sweat had formed on her skin. I guess I can't either now.*

With her clothes and fur combining to trap body heat, her tongue couldn't seem to evacuate heat fast enough. If she didn't do something, she felt like her own metabolism would roast her.

*There's no one around; I guess I could take off my clothes for a moment.*

Summoning up what energy she could, she grabbed the base of her sweatshirt - taking care to avoid tearing it - and pulled it over her head. The chilly night air immediately found the sparsely furred skin on her stomach, arms and sides and she shivered. Immediately, her skin felt like it was being pulled in a thousand places and her fur puffed out.

*Oh, so that's what goosebumps are for!* She stretched her shoulders back, thrusting out her chest; the sudden shock of the cold against the parts of skin that were still relatively unprotected made her feel absolutely alive. *If only I had a full coat of fur...*

Along her front, it felt like someone was gently pulling at her skin. Looking down, she saw her human nipples had grown stiff in the cold, as had her new pairs of lupine teats below them. Giggling, she brushed them, enjoying the sensations. Unexpectedly, she felt the similar tugging sensation at her waist, and she pulled her sweats down to her ankles. To her surprise, there were two additional nipples that she had missed.

*Ten nipples in total, she counted and felt her face heat up as blood rushed into it. Just how many pups does a wolf have?*

For a brief moment, she envisioned suckling wolf pups and her right hand cupped one of the teats near her belly button. Subconsciously, she shifted her hips wider and shifted her weight forward. Down below, she felt heat rising.

*No!* She pushed back against the unsettling desires of the wolf that had taken up residence in her mind and the image vanished.

Now that her sweatshirt and pants were no longer trapping heat, her body cooled off rapidly and her panting stopped. Having her entire body exposed to the air felt strange. Areas where her fur was thickest, her skin felt quite warm, but everywhere else rapidly chilled in the night air. Her upper back felt like it had a thick blanket that covered her shoulder blades and neck, but rapidly tapered off along her spine.

*Wait, that smell I've been following suddenly got a lot stronger,* her nose finally got her attention. *I recognize that smell...*

Her ears swiveled, followed by her head and then body. She completed the turn and her pure joy filled her.

“Shadow!” She exclaimed to the wolf that was now somehow only a few yards away, watching her.

Then her joy turned to embarrassment.

“Oh..!” Sophia exclaimed and crouched down, covering herself.

“Uh, hi!” she squeaked shyly and grinned sheepishly. “I’m a werewolf tonight!”

## Chapter 16

*'I'm a werewolf tonight', really Sophia? That's the first thing you say?* Sophia felt her ears flattening themselves against her head, as though they were trying to hide. *Okay, keep it together, he's a wolf, not a human.*

The shock of seeing him started to wear off and her brain started to work again. Overriding the strong desire to run over and greet him, she angled her knees as she grabbed her pants and hastily pulled them up. For his part, Shadow just stood there watching, his eyes and ears alert and tail gently wagging.

*Why can't I think straight?* It felt like every part of her was focused on Shadow at that moment, especially his scent.

Like her own scent, his scent was akin to a fingerprint that was uniquely his. Where hers was a strange mix of human and wolf, his was entirely wolf. His scent contained other information, like he was male, young, vital, confident, strong - she just wanted to lose herself forever in it...

*Where is my sweatshirt?* Sophia tried to distract herself while she felt around for it, although her eyes didn't leave the wolf.

Shadow's scent became suffused with what she immediately recognized to be uncertainty and concern. Sophia faltered in her search for her sweatshirt as her instincts screamed at her to go greet him. She wanted to nuzzle him, entangle her fur with hers, snuggle into his big, strong body...

*There it is!* Sophia's claws snagged on the fabric of her sweatshirt and she triumphantly grabbed it, before slipping it over her head.

Reacting to the unexpected movement, Shadow whined and yipped anxiously, 'you okay?'

Sophia fell over in surprise as she slipped her arms through the sleeves. It hadn't been words, but somehow her brain had combined the wolf's sounds, scent and body language to produce meaning similar to human language. There was more there she could tell, but the rest was frustratingly out of reach.

Shadow's scent became even more concerned as she fell, and she heard him trot over to her and whine, 'hurt?'

"I'm okay!" Sophia exclaimed reassuringly as she struggled to prop herself back up.

'Not wolf speak?' Shadow made a series of sounds, Sophia's mind again automatically combining the sounds with subtle changes in his scent to convey meaning.

Despite the wolf's obvious confusion, his body relaxed and his ears and tail rose. His worry ebbing, she couldn't help noticing his scent held a certain amount of... interest. With nothing else to distract her, Sophia could stand it no longer. Using her hands and feet, she propelled herself the last couple of feet separating them. Her little jump actually carried her past Shadow with her side brushing his muzzle. As soon as her feet and hands hit the ground, she pushed off again while twisting in midair to face him. Shadow responded by jumping and pivoting in place, his tail wagging.

Shadow made several noises, many too high pitched for a human ear, 'strange two legged wolf more wolf.'

Sophia wasn't sure how to respond to that, but moved towards Shadow and started sniffing his face. Shadow sniffed her face in return before giving her a lick across her cheek. Sophia giggled, and playfully returned the lick.

Shadow gave a short huff and series of high pitched sounds, 'friend'.

Pure joy flooded through Sophia, and she reacted by nuzzling his muzzle. A slight shiver ran across her skin as Shadow's fur tickled her face. Muscles attached to her tail nub twitched and her ears perked straight out.

"Friend," she confirmed quietly; as badly as she wanted to communicate the same way as her companion, she didn't think her human anatomy could reproduce the sound.

Their greetings complete, they continued to sniff the length of each other's bodies. For Sophia, it was like getting to know Shadow for the first time. Where sight only gave surface impressions, her sense of smell seemed to convey his very essence. What astounded her even more was how his scent changed subtly in response to his emotions.

Shadow suddenly stepped around her rear. Without even thinking, she adjusted her legs to give him access to her scent gland.

'Strange fur?' he whined, sounding perplexed. 'Block scent?'

"Oh!" Sophia exclaimed in embarrassment as she realized her pants were covering up her musk. "Sorry."

Reaching back with one hand, she lowered her pants partway down her butt and readjusted her stance. The muscles in her lower back reflexively contracted in an unnecessary attempt to move her tail nub out of the way. She felt Shadow's warm breath against her rear as he leaned in to sniff her scent. The two stood like that for a long moment. Finally, Sophia felt a strong burst of air and then nothing as Shadow's nose turned away from her behind, his scent satisfied.

*My turn!* Sophia pulled her sweats back up and then turned before moving closer to Shadow.

She reached his backside, and without thinking, stuck her nose beneath his tail. If she thought the scent on the rest of his body was a hefty book, the gland below his anus was like a library. It told her what he had last eaten, where he had traveled recently, his physical health...

*What am I doing?* She inhaled his strong musk slowly, a wave of euphoria running through her. *Strong, healthy, he'd make a fine mate.*

She recoiled at the unexpected thought, jerking her head away from his rear in horror and dismay. *No! That's the wolf instinct's talking not me!*

Sensing her sudden shift in mood, Shadow lowered his tail and turned his head to look at her. His scent took on a tinge of embarrassment and fear.

He made a whining sound, 'I sick?'

"No!" Sophia responded sharply as she shifted into a squatting position.

Shadow's ears flattened as he flinched at the sudden loud noise.

"You smell amazing... I mean strong... uh, healthy!" she fumbled her words as her cheeks warmed. "Smelling butts is just really gross. Not that wolves are gross!"

Shadow huffed, his scent confused. 'Friend wolf and not wolf. Not understand.'

Sophia closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Her mind swirled with unfamiliar sensations, emotion and desires, unsure exactly where she ended and where the wolf began. It had been fun before, but Shadow's presence was exciting the wolf side and threatening to overwhelm the human side of her.

*Alright, I'm a wolf girl, not a wolf,* Sophia exhaled, trying to center herself.

"I'm just worried about losing myself", she admitted at last. "I like being a werewolf, really like you... as a friend and want to explore the woods with you, but this is all new to me."

Shadow suddenly raised his head, cocked his ears and looked at her, 'friend hungry!'

Sophia laughed, "yes, that too. Very hungry."

The wolf turned and started to run before he turned to look at her expectantly, his scent eager.

"Alright, I'm coming," Sophia assured him and started trudging towards him.

Shadow turned and started trotting at a pace that forced Sophia into a jog. The wolf led her deeper into the mountains, stopping whenever he got too far ahead. Frozen branches scraped her exposed face and tore at her clothes. Her legs burned and she gasped for air as they made their way up and down the rolling terrain. A few times, Shadow stopped to sniff

something of interest, but would invariably start moving again before Sophia could examine it herself or even catch her breath.

After what seemed like an eternity, Shadow stopped in a small valley, looked at her and made a rumbling noise, 'wait'.

Sophia stopped immediately, her claws audibly scraping rocks buried in the snow as her toes curled down. The foliage was thinner in the valley and the moon glinted brightly off the snow, forcing her to squint. Her ears picked up the muffled sound of moving water, indicating a stream was somewhere nearby. In between ragged breaths, she intently sniffed the air and listened for what Shadow had sensed. There was a whiff of an animal in the air, but Sophia couldn't identify it or figure out what direction it was coming from.

Shadow, a far more experienced hunter, paced a bit while sniffing the ground before his ears and tail went straight up. His scent became excited, yet focused, and Sophia found herself tensing in response. In a burst of motion, he took off at a speed Sophia couldn't hope to match down the valley. She watched him run until he disappeared from view before sighing.

*Nothing to do but wait I guess*, her stomach growled and her mouth felt parched. *I didn't bring anything to drink.*

Looking around the valley, all she could see was snow and the occasional large rock protruding through the wintery blanket. Yet, the sound of moving water echoed loudly in her ears.

*Where is that coming from?* She carefully stepped forward, ears straining.

It was then that it dawned on her that not only could she hear it, but that she could smell it. Her nose could pick up the elevated concentration of water molecules in the air along with the dissolved minerals the stream carried. Crouching, she sniffed around and found the direction where the scent seemed to be strongest. Getting up, she took a few steps forward and crouched down again. The sound of moving water was even louder now, and the smell heavily permeated the air.

*It should be around here somewhere*, Sophia intently examined the snow covered ground. *Ah ha!*

A couple feet away, around the base of a large rock, a hole in the snow had formed. Peering closer, she saw the surface layer of the stream had frozen as a thin layer of ice while the water underneath continued to flow. On the side opposite the stream's flow, ice had not been able to form. Despite the hole being in the rock's shadow, her eyes could still make out the movement of the water.

Eagerly, she dropped onto her hands to crawl the last couple of steps to the water. Bending her arm, she lowered her head towards the hole and sniffed at the water. It smelled strongly of various minerals and metals, but nothing that her wolf instincts considered potentially dangerous. Unable to wait any longer, she extended her tongue. An icy shock stabbed her tongue as it contacted the water, but she was too thirsty to care. She lapped at the water, greedily trying to draw the life sustaining liquid into her mouth.

*Why can't I..?* Sophia withdrew to stare at the icy current in consternation. *My tongue isn't working right.*

For all her effort, she had been unable to do much more than wet the inside of her mouth. The end of her tongue simply couldn't bend to form a cup like a proper wolf's.

*Of all the things that didn't change...* Sophia stared at the stream, frustrated. *How am I supposed to..?*

A distant memory tugged at her and she looked down at her paws in the snow.

*No, not paws,* leaning back, she took the weight off her paw-hands and lifted one. *I think I do this?*

Concentrating, she formed a cup with her hand before dipping it in the shallow stream. The water was icy cold and her hand went numb as soon as she put it in, but clear water pooled into it. She lifted her hand out and stared at the water, unsure of what to do next.

*Why is this so difficult?* She tentatively stuck her tongue into her cupped hand. *I should know how to use my paw... hand.*

Again, she failed to get any water up.

*My hand... I'm letting my wolf control me again,* she shook her head, trying to clear it. *So thirsty...*

At last, an image of her sucking up the water from her hand broke through the haze. Quickly, she brought her hand to her mouth and slurped noisily. At long last, cool, refreshing liquid poured down her throat. Shifting her weight onto her knees, she formed a bowl with both hands and shoved it underneath the water. Finally able to quench her thirst, she greedily drank until she was sated.

*I really forgot how to use my hands,* Sophia stared uneasily at the claws and pads on her hands. *It would have been fun to lap up the water with my tongue though. Using my hands just doesn't feel right.*

Looking up at the sky, she saw the Moon was just above the western mountains. The air was still and there were no signs of nearby life. Only the sound of the stream filled her ears. Her

stomach rumbled as she knelt there. Now that her thirst had been taken care of, ravenous hunger washed over her. She'd need to eat before she changed again.

*Where is Shadow?* She sniffed the air, searching for a hint of her friend. *I hope he comes back soon.*

As if on cue, a howl echoed through the hills lining the stream. Her ears perked up and her heart leapt. Looking in the direction Shadow had disappeared, Sophia sniffed the air while her eyes scanned the valley. Unfortunately, the still air in the valley meant no scent reached her and everything more than a few dozen yards away strangely became too blurry for her to make anything out.

Another howl broke the silence, and this time she understood he was telling her to come to him. Without hesitating, she leapt to her feet and started running down the creekbed. It was difficult running on the rocky, snow covered terrain, but her pads and claws gave her a surprising amount of traction. While still awkward, she was starting to get the hang of running on the soles of her feet.

After a few minutes of running, her nose flared as she picked up a scent she now readily recognized as Shadow's. Now, however, another scent was mixed with his, and her brain immediately recognized it from earlier in the night - blood. Briefly panicking, she quickly confirmed it wasn't Shadow's - or any other wolf's for that matter. Both scents led her away from the stream and up onto a forested saddle nestled between two hills. Her gait slowed as she was forced to pick her way through brush and trees as the land sloped upward.

'Two legged wolf very noisy,' Shadow chuffed disapprovingly from out of nowhere, causing Sophia to jump.

"Oh, sorry," Sophia quietly apologized, abashed.

Pausing, she took in her surroundings, trying to find her friend. The wolf's scent and sound came from a stand of young pines a few yards ahead of her. Leading up to the trees was the strong scent of blood which intensified as she got closer. Leading under the tree, a deep furrow had been dug into the snow. A few dark spots discolored the otherwise pure white powder. Mindful of the wolf's admonishment, Sophia slowed her gait and did her best to avoid disturbing the stiff, low-lying branches.

*Do I make this much noise all the time?* Even being careful, every movement she made or breath she took resulted in a cacophony in her sensitive ears. *It's a wonder I ever see any animals.*

Reaching the stand of young evergreens, she saw the deer laying on its side first, its neck at an unnatural angle. It had been a young buck judging by the small set of antlers

protruding from its head. Laying in the snow next to it was Shadow, his scent and body language pleased.

'Eat!' Shadow chuffed excitedly as Sophia dropped onto her knees.

*He wants me to... eat the deer?* Sophia blinked in surprise.

Despite her ravenous hunger, a feeling of horror and disgust flashed through her as she stared at the brown furred animal laying at her knees. It had been a living creature not more than a few minutes before and she couldn't help feeling regret at its fate. At the same time, excitement and anticipation were present too. She could smell the deer's blood and its promise of fresh, nutritious meat. The memory of the taste of the rabbit's blood bubbled up and her mouth watered.

*Maybe, just a taste?* Sophia felt herself leaning forward. *It smells so good, and it would be rude not to.*

'Bad?' Shadow whined, his scent uncertain.

"No," Sophia reassured him and bent towards the carcass.

Finding where Shadow's teeth had punctured the buck's neck, she hesitantly stuck out her tongue towards the dark liquid still oozing from the fatal wound and ran her tongue over it. As soon as she drew her tongue into her mouth, pure pleasure coursed through her. Just the taste whispered of more delicacies to come. Her repulsion and disgust, conditioned residuals from her human physiology, faded away. Blood wasn't enough however, her transformed body needed meat.

*The softest tissue is in the rear,* Sophia shifted to the flank of the animal. *How do I know that?*

Bending over, she pressed her nose into the animal's hindquarters and hooked her sharp teeth into its skin before pulling. To her surprise, her sharp teeth easily tore the skin, revealing the underlying muscle. Adjusting her bite, she chomped down on a flap of skin and widened the opening. Once more, she let go of the skin and leaned in for another bite. This time, her teeth bit into sinewy muscle and fat. She tore a small piece, leaned back and swallowed it. All higher thought dissolved and she eagerly leaned in for more.

Sophia found herself staring at the half eaten remains of the deer. The stomach had been completely torn open and its innards were gone; the flank was largely just bones now and one of the hindlegs was missing. Shadow was on her left, busily cleaning off the muscle of one of the forelegs, occasionally withdrawing to look for potential threats. The pain of hunger had disappeared from her own belly and she felt almost uncomfortably full. Her palms were

completely numb, as were her knees, and the snow around the carcass was trampled and stained dark.

*I... ate a deer, a strange mixture of elation and horror at that elation surged through her. And I enjoyed it.*

Crawling backwards, her paw-hand hit the detached rear leg of the unfortunate buck. Vaguely, she remembered dragging the leg away from the kill with her teeth so she could tear at the muscle on the shank. The skin was stripped, and she was well aware she had eaten it, fur and all.

*What happens to it all when I change back? She licked at some blood that clung to the back of her hand before placing it in her armpit. I hope it doesn't make me sick. Oh, oops, my sweatshirt is covered in gore.*

The sweatshirt's fabric felt wet and slimy against the back of her hand. Looking down, she could see white fur clinging to her sweatshirt and her shirt was pungent with the smell of the deer's blood and other juices.

*There's no way I'll be able to get it clean, I guess I'll need a new sweatshirt.*

Shadow's scent shifted and he turned his head to look at her, his own muzzle and the underside of his neck spattered with blood and gore. Despite the state of his fur, she couldn't help admiring his strong neck and handsome mane.

'Eat?' he chuffed questioningly.

"I'm really full," Sophia told him. "Thank you."

Shadow's scent remained puzzled, but he seemed to at least understand she was finished. He turned back to the deer and resumed eating. As he turned, Sophia backed out from under the pines before rising up on the pads of her feet. The movement jostled her bladder and she nearly lost control of it then and there.

"I'll be back," she told Shadow before stiffly padding through the snow behind some brush.

The skin surrounding her finger pads and on her palms was starting to feel hot and painful. Fumbling with the waistband of the sweatpants, she heard and felt her claws tear the fabric. After lowering her pants and getting to all fours, she relieved herself. The scent of her urine reached her nose, and she noted a distinct new smell laced with her own scent. Curious, she rotated her body to investigate the still steaming waste.

*Huh, it smells like the deer, she bent in closely, sniffing. The scent of the deer's blood is strongest, but I can make out other scents too. Cool.*

Standing, she pulled her pants back up and froze as she glanced at the night sky and felt herself go cold.

*Oh no, how long has it been since the moon sank behind the mountains? She tried to remember when she had last seen the bright orb. How much time do I have left? I need to go home before I change back.*

'Danger?' Shadow whined, his scent worried.

"I have to go home," Sophia told him regretfully as she arrived back at the tree. "I think I'm going to change soon."

Shadow emerged from under the tree, his scent alert ears raised and fur standing on end. When he saw there weren't any threats, his muscles and fur relaxed.

'Leave?' His scent was confused and... was that rejection?

Despite her anxiety, Sophia hesitated. She wanted nothing more than to spend more time with Shadow and the very thought of parting with him hurt. They had spent so little of the night together, and she had no idea how long she actually had before reverting. Being fully human felt like a distant memory now. There was only the wilderness and the longing for the company of other wolves. A longing for the company of the male wolf right in front of her.

*But I'm only temporarily a wolf, aren't I? She looked at her not quite paws, the exposed skin on her hands itched like crazy now. I'm not a full wolf now and that's not enough to live out here.*

"I want to stay with you," she admitted sorrowfully. "It's too dangerous though."

On a whim, she got onto her still aching paw-hands and padded up to her friend. Leaning in, she nuzzled Shadow's muzzle with her cheek before giving him a lick across his lips. After a moment's hesitation, Shadow gave her several licks in return. His scent was sad, but accepting.

"Thank you, Shadow."

Before she could change her mind, she quickly got to her feet and stiffly walked away from her friend. It felt as though a hole formed and widened in her chest as she left, and every step felt heavy. His scent was still thick in the air and it took all her will to not turn around. As his scent waned, continuing forward became easier, but the emotional hole inside her did not grow smaller.

As she exited the trees and descended into the valley containing the creekbed, her skin began to tingle. Sniffing the air, she retraced Shadow and her steps as quickly as she could. It wasn't long before her lungs burned and legs ached. As she passed the place where she had

drunk from the stream, her left foot slipped into a hole hidden by the snow. Stride interrupted, her body fell forward and she felt her right leg scrape against a rock.

“Ahh!” she exclaimed in pain as the strong scent of blood entered her nose - her blood.

*No, no, no*, panic gripped her as she saw the large gash through the tear in her sweatpants. *I have to keep moving.*

Struggling to her feet, a lupine sounding whine escaped her as a sharp pain flashed through her leg as she took a step. The cold wind stung as it blew against her exposed flesh. Limping, she forced herself forward despite her wolf’s counsel to find somewhere secluded so she could rest and tend to her wound.

To her dismay, the scent of her blood was making it difficult to follow her earlier path which further slowed her. Finding the spot where she and Shadow had entered the valley, she stopped to sniff a tree she had brushed against earlier. After confirming the direction she needed to go, Sophia continued on.

*I’m not going to make it in time*, despair started to grip her as she realized the path she and Shadow had blazed was anything but straight.

After following a couple more twists and turns in their path, all hope faded. Her legs buckled beneath her and she fell onto her knees, panting. Pain emanated from her injury as it contacted the ground, but she was too tired to care. The tingling sensation had intensified and she wrapped her arms around herself as a chill went through her. Even her ears drooped and the muscles in her lower back had given up on trying to control her tail nub. The scratches and cuts on her face stung in the icy wind.

*Wait, what is that?* Her nose twitched. *It doesn’t seem... natural?*

The scents had been present all night, but had been faint and her wolf had told her they were something to be avoided. Now, though, the olfactory section of her brain latched onto them. They were strange, unnatural even. It was like they stood apart from the welcoming scents of animals and plants of the mountains. Yet, there was something about them that grabbed her interest now.

Leaning her head back, she took in long inhales through her nose. They were faint, but seemed strongest in one particular direction...

Sophia’s eyes widened, “cars!”

It was her human brain that had finally recognized what her wolf nose was detecting. The distinctive smells of oil and gas alongside other distinctly artificial scents were being carried by the wind into the mountains. There was just enough that made it into the valley for her to identify it.

*If I follow that scent, maybe I can find my way out of here,* hope filled Sophia as she stood.

The tingling sensation was growing stronger and she was starting to feel perspiration on her palms despite the cold air. Ignoring the sharp pain in her leg, she began moving with renewed vigor. Her nose led her along a winding path through the hills. Occasionally, the hills channeled air currents from other directions, but they always lacked the distinctive mix of chemicals that could only be from human activity.

After half an hour, she at last glimpsed the lights of the town through the trees. By this time, her body felt like it was vibrating, her heart strained to keep blood circulating fast enough and steam poured from her mouth. Not even pausing to catch her breath and revel in her relief at seeing the town, she half ran, half tumbled down the last slope between her and home. By the time she reached the bottom, she had accumulated a large number of additional scrapes and bruises. Mercifully, her nose had brought her within sight of the line of buildings her home belonged to.

*Just have to cross the field...* The distance seemed impossibly far and she felt as though she would collapse from exhaustion. *No time to find my boots and backpack.*

The wolf inside her begged her not to approach; the odor of human habitation made her nose wrinkle and turned her stomach. Too close to her goal to be deterred now, her adrenaline surged. Drawing on her last reserves of energy, she dashed across the field, gasping for air.

*Please, just another minute,* she begged the forces she felt welling up inside her as she half crawled across her yard. *Almost home.*

Tears streaming down her face, hand-paw shaking, her pads and claws audibly scraped against the glass as she slid her rear door open. Somehow, she had the presence of mind to push it closed before stumbling down the hall and into her bedroom. Expending the last of her strength, she shut her bedroom door before clearing the distance to her bed in two strides. There, she collapsed onto her mattress and pressed her face into her pillow to muffle her screams.

## Chapter 17

On the line between dreaming and consciousness, Sophia was unsure which feelings or thoughts belonged to which. Images faded in and out, and sounds she thought might be real became suddenly silent as she drifted out of sleep. Yet, there was one sensation she was certain belonged to the conscious realm - her stomach hurt, a lot.

This pernicious fact dragged her sleep-addled mind decisively towards consciousness. To reinforce her morning misery came the awareness she was cold. She could feel patches of bare skin exposed to the air of the room and the absence of the comforting weight of her blanket. Where her skin wasn't exposed, she could feel fabric, but it provided little warmth. In fact, she felt as though every fiber clinging to her had been soaked in cold water. Even her bed sheets seemed intent on sucking the heat out of her.

"Ohhh..." Sophia moaned pitifully, the sound dragging her the rest of the way to full awareness against her will.

Awake now, her nerves insisted on updating her brain on the status of every part of her body all at once. She was laying on her side, curled up into a ball with her legs drawn into her stomach. Pain flared in her abdomen as she twisted onto her back. Opening her eyes, she stared up at the white plaster of her ceiling.

"Urgh," she moaned again, placing one hand on her stomach and using the other to brush hair off her face.

To her surprise, her fingers brushed something both crusty and sticky on her cheek. She rubbed at the strange substance in an attempt to remove it and discovered it wasn't just a small spot. Sensing that some of whatever it was had stuck to her fingers, she brought her fingers where she could see them.

*Blood?* Sophia felt a surge of panic as she saw the crusty, dark red substance on her fingertips. *Oh, no.*

Images of the deer flashed through her mind, and she nearly threw up then and there. Lifting her head, she looked down at her chest and wished she hadn't. Her sweatshirt was covered in blood, gore and other dirt. The garment itself was practically in tatters, with rips all across her front exposing pale skin.

"I didn't," panicking, she tried to deny the horror in front of her. "I couldn't have."

Ignoring the protests of her stomach and sore muscles, she propped herself up on her arms to assess the state of the rest of her body. Although not covered in gore, her sweatpants weren't in much better shape than her sweatshirt. A large tear exposed the side of her knee,

which was stained with dry blood. Her light blue bed sheets were mottled with dark patches of dirt and blood.

*I can't let dad see this,* Sophia glanced at the door and was relieved to see it was shut. *Well, it looks like I'm down more clothes.*

The initial shock was wearing off, and her horror and disgust at consuming a deer - skin, fur, guts and all - was fading. Sure, it was gross, and she'd rather not think about some of what she'd eaten, but at least she didn't feel like she was going to vomit.

*I was a wolf, sort of, and it tasted pretty good,* a sharp pain in her abdomen registered its disapproval of the meal. *I don't think I want to do it again though. Oh, I need to pee, bad.*

Looking down at her filthy and tattered clothes, she considered her predicament. She had no desire to try explaining her current condition if her dad happened to see her. While she could remove the clothes, there was nothing she could do about her face without getting to the bathroom.

*Nothing to do but try to be quick,* stiff and sore muscles protested as she coaxed her body toward the edge of the bed.

Clutching her stomach and hunching over, she managed to get into a sitting position on the edge of the bed. Her vision swam for a moment before her heart and blood flow adjusted. The feeling of air against the bare skin on her knee reminded her she had badly scraped it the night before. Tilting her knee, she angled it to better see the hole in her sweatpants. To her surprise, despite being caked in blood and dirt, her skin appeared uninjured. In fact, aside from the soreness and stiffness in her joints and muscles, she felt no pain anywhere on her arms or legs.

Moving her leg irritated her bladder, reminding her she didn't have time to linger. Gripping the sides of her sweatshirt, she pulled it over her head and tossed it to the other side of the bed. Quickly, she eased off her ruined sweatpants before tossing them as well. Rushing to the door, she grabbed her robe, tossed it around herself and cracked open her door. Relieved to see her dad's door was closed, she darted through her door, pulling it shut as she hurried down the hall.

Arriving at the relative safety of the bathroom, she turned on the lights and closed the door. Dropping the robe, she plopped down on the toilet and sighed in relief as she emptied herself. Her stomach still hurt, but at least her bladder didn't feel like it was going to burst. As she grabbed a piece of toilet paper to wipe away the last bit of urine, she frowned.

*Something isn't right,* her brow furrowed as she tried to pinpoint what was bothering her. *I don't remember the bathroom being so... smelly.*

Flaring her nostrils, she inhaled. There was the smell of urine of course, but also several floral scents and the barest hint of bleach. None of those were surprising in and of themselves, but she didn't remember smelling *all* of them at the same time before nor as strongly. She glanced at the counter; it didn't look like there were any splashes of floral-scented hand soap on the counter, but she could definitely smell it. While turning back, she caught a faint whiff of mint that had to be from the toothpaste. However, the strongest smells were coming from...

Turning her head down, she sniffed. *Woah, I really need a bath... and my pee! There is something really strange about it though...*

Before she realized what she was doing, she got off the toilet and knelt in front of it. Craning her neck while holding her hair, she inhaled sharply through her nose. She was mildly surprised to find the scents didn't repel her like they usually did. In fact, she felt like exploring them was a perfectly natural thing to do. Sniffing again, she concentrated on the makeup of the air entering her nose.

*That smell, it's oddly familiar.* There was something about the pungent aroma of her urine that was tickling an unfamiliar corner of her mind. *It smells sort of like...*

Her eyes widened as she placed it, a chill traveling through her. It wasn't the incredible library she had experienced just a few hours before, but her brain recognized it all the same.

"Wolf!" she blurted.

She didn't know how she recognized it or why she was so certain. If she tried thinking about it, it just smelled like normal pee. Yet, the lupine nature of the scent felt unmistakable.

*How, though?* Her mind reeled at the unexpected discovery. *I changed back, didn't I?*

Leaning back on her ankles, she looked at her hands. The claws that had adorned them had been replaced by her normal fingernails. Soft flesh covered the space where tough, leathery pads had been. They were very dirty of course, but as far as she could tell, her hands were as human as the day she was born. Looking down at her chest confirmed she was back to the human number of two nipples. To her admitted disappointment, there were no extra teats to be found below her breasts, nor fur on her stomach.

*Then why am I smelling so much more?* Sophia confirmed her nose was physically as she expected. *Huh, that's interesting...*

The scent of urine drew her attention again. To her conscious mind, there was just urine. Yet, her subconscious was insisting there were, in fact, two urine smells. Hers, which had the lupine scent, but also one without it. Her brain was insisting the one without the telltale odor was from a different individual, even though she couldn't explain how.

Seeing a yellow streak near the base of the bowl, she backed up and leaned down to investigate. Her brain processed the new set of chemical information and told her the dried urine wasn't hers. Also present was some cleaner residue she quickly discovered. There was just enough ammonia still present to cause her nose to burn.

Gah, *that's awful*, Sophia coughed and jerked away so fast her already distended stomach complained sharply. *I was just sniffing a toilet, yuck.*

At least, she knew she should be disgusted, but had to admit that wasn't something she was feeling. Even now, she felt an urge to go back to investigating the smells in the toilet bowl. Instead, she forced herself to stand up and push the toilet lever down. The smell of her urine immediately dissipated as it disappeared into the sewer pipes, but didn't disappear from the air entirely.

Stepping over to the sink, she turned on the water and stared into the mirror. She was a mess, her hair was a mass of tangles and some of it looked like it was glued together. Dry blood and other cervid remains were smeared across her face, upper chest and lower arms. Random smudges of dirt blemished her skin across her body. Her legs looked like they had never encountered a razor, and her right leg had a long streak of dry blood where she had scraped it.

Yet, aside from the grime and gore, there were no outward signs she had a very unusual night. The teenage girl in the mirror staring back at her was the one she was intimately familiar with. A shower, and she'd be able to walk around with no one the wiser.

*I look like I'm completely back to normal; why do I feel so sad about it?*

Sighing, she stepped over to the bathtub and started the water running. Immediately, a wave of sulfur hit her nose and she reflexively covered it with her hand. The house's water had always faintly smelled of the substance, but she'd long gotten used to it - or at least she had been used to it. Thankfully, after a few moments, she was able to stand it again. Once the water was at a decent temperature, she started the shower and stepped in.

As soon as she felt warm water against her cold skin, she felt herself relax. Soon, a stream of brown and red water was circling the drain as the remnants of her wolfish adventure were washed away. A few determined bits of fur, both wolf and deer, stuck to the walls of the tub. That evidence was readily taken care of with some adroit maneuvering of the shower head. A minute after starting the shower, the water falling off her body was crystal clear.

*I don't see so much as a scratch*, she reexamined her leg in wonder now that it was free of blood. *That's incredible!*

Curious, she flexed her right hand and was pleased to confirm all of the pain had disappeared. It was as though she had never injured it.

*This werewolf healing is really cool!*

Grabbing her shampoo, she squirted a sizable amount into her hand, filling the air with its sweet aroma. Rubbing it into her hair, she took her time scrubbing every inch and working out any tangles. Grabbing her razor, she placed her foot on the side of the tub and began removing the hair that had irritatingly sprung up.

“Sophia, almost done?” her hand jerked in surprise at her dad’s voice, nicking the very place she had scraped it.

Burning pain radiated from the shallow laceration and she couldn’t help responding with irritation in her voice, “yeah dad, just hold on.”

Faintly, she heard floorboards creak as he walked away. That dealt with, she examined the place where she had just cut herself. Fresh blood had started trickling down her leg and the drain as she placed it back under the shower. Annoyed, she lifted her other leg and quickly shaved it as well. Her leg still oozing blood, she turned off the shower and grabbed a towel and brought it to her face.

*What is that?*

She immediately yanked the towel away as an incredibly unpleasant sour odor assaulted her. It took her a moment to recognize the smell as that of the lemon fresh fragranced laundry detergent her family used.

*Did the detergent go bad? She sniffed her towel again and gave a little cough. Can detergent go bad? This is horrible!*

Breathing through her mouth, she dried off as quickly as she could. Grabbing a washcloth, she dabbed at her cut with one hand while using the other to grab a large band-aid. After applying the bandage, she tidied up from her shower and then threw on her robe. Tying it around her a bit haphazardly, she retreated from the bathroom. Hearing her dad in the kitchen, she hurried to her bedroom door, thankful her dad respected her privacy.

“Alright dad, I’m out,” she announced before turning the knob and slipping through without listening for a response.

As soon as she stepped inside her room, her nose went wild. A combination of what she could only describe as decay, body odor and musk pervaded the air in the room. For a long moment, she stood there, trying to make sense of it. She was only shaken out of it as she heard a chair slide across the linoleum in the kitchen. Quickly, she shut the door before her dad could walk by.

Then, she took a few paces toward her bed and just stood there. The stench was awful, or at least she knew it should have been. In truth, she didn't feel any sense of disgust or repulsion. If anything, she was intrigued by them.

*These smells are gross; why am I not disgusted? Is that... wolf?*

Again, that strange corner of her mind latched onto what she knew to be her scent. It wasn't that of a pure wolf though, but she couldn't determine any more than that. It felt like she was staring at an indistinct smudge that she thought she recognized, but couldn't place. After 'seeing' the richly detailed tapestry that the world of scent could be, her inability to dissect it was incredibly frustrating. Attempting to distract herself, she moved to the other side of her bed.

*I need to clean up in here before my dad notices.* She looked wistfully at her ruined clothes on the floor. *Being a werewolf is expensive. Crap, I need a garbage bag from the kitchen.*

Fighting the desire to thoroughly examine the stain on her bed, she instead turned towards her dresser. Opening a drawer, she took a step back and pinched her nose as the same fragrance that had been on her towel struck her.

*My clothes too?* She eyed the neatly folded clothes warily. *Why does the detergent smell so bad today?*

Holding her breath, she carried a pile of clothes to her chair. Bracing herself, she picked her favorite shirt up and sniffed it. She immediately dropped it, making a face. Then forced herself to repeat the process for the pile and then the rest of the drawer.

At last, she found a long t-shirt that she only wore when she was running out of clean laundry. Thankfully, it had been in her drawer long enough that any residue had dissipated. She repeated the process with her pants drawer, finding a pair of baggy black sweats. Unfortunately, she didn't have any underwear that lacked the smell but figured her sweats should contain it. Deciding to forgo a bra for the morning, she finished sorting out which clothes she needed to rewash. Finished, she laid her cobbled-together outfit on the end of her bed and took a step back.

"Jane would love this," she muttered sardonically, and then looked at the pile of clothes on the floor. "Looks like I have some washing to do today."

The pile of clothes on her floor contained almost everything she owned that wasn't hanging up in the closet. Over the last year, her wardrobe had become depressingly small to her eyes, and the last couple of months hadn't helped. Careful not to jostle her still-tender stomach, she got dressed before grabbing a brush and doing what she could with her hair, which she had mistakenly allowed to dry.

*I'm a mess*, she gazed at her reflection in the mirror and sighed morosely. *At least I'm not covered in blood.*

Briefly, her mind flashed back to her night in the mountains and how at ease she had been. She had felt so alive, so free, so... *right.*

*I really miss Shadow*, she imagined what she had looked like, superimposing pointed ears and fur onto her reflection. *Well, time to dispose of this mess before work.*

Tearing herself from the mirror, she left her bedroom. Less preoccupied than her mad rush to and from the bathroom, she immediately noticed an undertone of alcohol in the air. Before that morning, she had only ever noticed the unpleasant smell when her dad had been drinking heavily. Now, it was as though it suffused every inch of the house.

*I hate it, I hate it, I hate*, anger flashed through her, bright and hot.

She had always disliked the smell of alcohol, even more after it consumed her father. Now, she found its odor utterly repugnant. She squeezed her hands into fists as her rage crested.

*Yelling won't fix anything*, taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and let her anger out in a long breath. *It's not too strong, I can tolerate it.*

The bathroom door was shut and she could hear the shower running. Moving briskly, she headed to the kitchen. She paused for a moment, not used to the number of different scents in the air, some pleasant and others not. The smell of chicken coming from the trashcan was particularly difficult to ignore, and she couldn't help having her gaze drawn in that direction. Refocusing, she shoved it all to the back of her mind as she concentrated on opening up the sink cabinet.

The noxious onrush of various cleaning chemicals caused her to cough and gasp. Closing the doors, she waited for her nose to stop burning before inhaling sharply. Holding her breath, she grabbed a garbage bag and shut the doors. After a few seconds, she exhaled, happy to find the miasma had dissipated quickly.

Faintly, she heard the squeaking of the shower handle being turned. Willing herself to move, she headed for her bedroom. To her relief, the oppressive stench of alcohol was replaced by the oddly pleasant smells of blood and decay. Taking a deep breath through her nose, she let the air in her room wash away the unpleasantness from the rest of the house.

*One thing is for sure; if this nose is permanent, it's going to take a lot of getting used to.*

## Chapter 18

Cleaning up didn't take as long as Sophia feared. The majority of the smell dissipated as soon as she had thrown her ruined clothes in the garbage bag and tied it tightly. Stripping her bedding and rolling it up took care of nearly all of the rest. She carefully folded the soiled sheets where they couldn't be seen from the door.

*That should do until I have a chance to wash it,* she eyed the piles of clothes she had pulled from her dresser. *I need to get my work clothes done.*

Steeling herself, she breathed through her mouth as best she could as she sorted out the clothes she'd need for work and the evening. After assembling an assortment she thought she could wash and dry in a reasonable amount of time, she picked up the small pile and grabbed her phone. Carefully working her way out into the hall, she continued to breathe through her mouth. It didn't completely suppress the stench of alcohol, but it got her to the washing machine.

The scents in the small laundry alcove were a different matter entirely. Chlorine, artificial scents and myriad other cleaning chemicals burned her nose with every breath she took. Coughing, she dropped her clothes into the open washing machine and pinched her nose with her free hand. It took all of her willpower to suppress the strong urge to turn around and get as far from the laundry room as possible.

*Gah, why does everything have to smell so awful?* Setting her phone down on the corner of the washer, Sophia looked at the cleaning supplies on top of the washer and her heart dropped. *I'll have to pick up some fragrance-free detergent today if I can afford it.*

Deftly using one hand, she spread her clothes, closed the lid and started the machine. Flipping open her phone, she set a timer.

*Hopefully, that gets rid of the smell,* as the washer began its cycle, a new sensation of emptiness in her stomach joined the ache in her abdomen.

Sophia had been so focused on taking care of any evidence of her wild night, she hadn't noticed just how empty her stomach was. In fact, she was starting to tremble a bit from low blood sugar.

*Was a deer seriously not enough?* Scowling slightly, she shuffled towards the kitchen.

As soon as she was clear of the laundry area, she gladly released her nose. She inhaled sharply and immediately regretted it. The stench of alcohol streamed through her nostrils, and she stumbled as her gait faltered. Reflexively, she cupped her hand back over her nose before shifting back to breathing through her mouth. Unfortunately, the odious smell just got stronger as she entered the kitchen.

It wasn't long before her eyes found the source of the smell. A partially drunk glass sat on the kitchen table next to an empty bottle of whiskey. Already irritable from hunger and the smell, rage surged through her, red hot. Grabbing the bottle and glass, she stomped over to the back door and viciously slid it open before throwing both the bottle and glass out of the house. The glass managed to clear the deck stairs and disappeared into the snow in the yard, while the bottle hit the railing with a satisfying *clank* before flipping over it into the snow below. Sophia was about to close the door when something caught her eye.

On the deck were two pairs of footprints. One was from a set of boots that led away from the house... and the other looked like someone running on their bare forefeet to the door. Where the prints from the latter overlapped with the former, she could make out the impressions of lupine pads and claws. Panicking, she started kicking the snow with her bare feet, attempting to cover the tracks.

"Sophia? What are you doing?" her father's voice came behind her.

Sophia jumped, her blood running cold. Looking behind her, she saw her dad standing at the entrance of the hallway, a puzzled look on his face.

"Uh," Sophia stammered as she stepped back into the house and slid the door shut, her face flushing with embarrassment. "I was just feeling a little warm inside."

As warm air displaced the remaining cold, she couldn't help flaring her nostrils and sniffing. After the crisp outside air, the scents inside the house were especially strong. Her lip twitched a bit at the distinctive aroma of her dad's shampoo and aftershave - which couldn't cover up the whiskey on his breath. A discoloration on the floor under the table caught her eye and she saw her father had managed to spill a fair bit of his drink the previous night. Seizing the anger the sight and smell provoked, she straightened her stance and met her father's glassy-eyed gaze, daring him to call her on it.

"Are you feeling okay?" her father asked, concerned. "You look awful."

*Well, let's see, last night was a full moon, I ate a deer, didn't change back completely and now my foot is wet. Meanwhile, you can't stay sober for five minutes.*

"I'm fine," she lied. "I just didn't sleep well last night."

"Oh," her father shrugged and then switched topics, his speech slightly slurred. "Was that you outside last night? I thought I heard you out here."

Sophia felt her stomach tighten, "uh, yeah, I thought going outside would help me fall asleep."

"Are you sure, you're..." her dad started.

In no mood to talk further, Sophia cut him off sharply, “Really dad, there’s nothing to worry about and I have to work at 11.”

Before her dad could respond, Sophia stalked away from the door, to the sink. There, she swung open the top cupboard and grabbed a box of frosted cornflakes, doing her best to ignore the myriad scents that greeted her. Box in hand, she hurried past her dumbstruck father towards the relative safety of her room.

As soon as she was back in her room, she eased the door closed and let out a long exhale. She took in long breaths through her nose, trying to clear it. Walking over to her desk, she set the cereal box down.

*Crap, I didn’t grab a bowl*, she glanced around for something to eat it in, seeing nothing. *Well, I guess I’ll eat dry cereal from the box.*

Opening the box and bag, she reflexively sniffed at the now-exposed cereal. The strong aroma of corn and sugar greeted her nose. Mouth watering, she dipped in a hand, Sophia grabbed a few of the frosted flakes. Opening her mouth, she tossed them in. Her brow immediately furrowed as the flakes hit her tongue.

*Strange, they taste different somehow*, she slowly chewed them, trying to pinpoint why they seemed off. *Maybe it’s going stale? At least it’s food.*

Giving in to her hunger, she grabbed a bigger handful and messily ate it. Several pieces fell out of her hand and onto the floor, but she paid them no mind. The first handful was followed by another... and another.

*Thirsty*, eating dry cereal had managed to strip all moisture from her mouth. *Ow, my stomach is really hurting again, and I have nothing to drink here.*

Getting up somewhat painfully, she quietly slipped out of her room. Pausing to listen, she could hear the television in the living room and her father setting a glass down on an end table. Satisfied she wouldn’t be bothered, she continued towards the bathroom. Entering, she shut the door and let out the breath she had been holding. She immediately made a face at the scent of her dad’s shampoo now coming from the shower and the much higher concentration of urine in the air. Glancing at the toilet, she spied a new glistening pool of pee on the floor.

*At least try to hit the toilet*, Sophia grimaced.

Thirst overcoming her disgust, she grabbed the cup next to the sink and filled it. Draining it in a few gulps, she repeated the process a couple of times. Finally satisfied, she stared at herself in the mirror. Crumbs covered her mouth and wet rivulets ran down her chin. The front of her t-shirt was wet from where water had fallen on it. Reflexively, she wiped her mouth with her hand before clutching her stomach as pain flared.

Within moments, she found herself sitting on the toilet as she expelled the waste she had built up over the last few days. At long last, the nausea in her abdomen was finally receding. After wiping, she stood and was reaching to flush when she noticed something odd in the toilet.

Floating on the water were several small clumps of white fur. Looking even closer, she noticed some of her stool had what looked like small pieces of bone. The whole mess smelled vaguely lupine. Curious, she started to bend towards her waste to better investigate the composition.

*Eww!* Sophia snapped upright and violently flushed the toilet. *What is wrong with me?*

Quickly washing her hands, she hastily returned to her bedroom. Crawling onto her still-stripped bed, she sat against the headboard cross-legged. For a moment, she just tried to breathe.

*The smells... the urges... they aren't going away,* she anxiously stared at her human feet. *Why aren't they going away?*

She checked herself over again, reassuring herself that everything else was back to the way it should have been. However, her nose was a constant reminder she was... different. Even after stripping the bed, there was a vaguely wolfish smell in the room she couldn't help noticing.

Sophia sniffed her hand. *Why did I change so much more last night? Will I be... more wolf next time?*

Phantom sensations emanated from above her butt. Idly, she reached behind and rubbed the spot where her tail nub had been. Missing it now felt wrong somehow. A thrill of excitement coursed through her as she imagined it had been not just a nub, but a full-length appendage. An appendage covered in beautiful gray fur that swayed behind her as she bound across the snow on all fours...

A sudden buzzing intruded on the fantasy as her phone signaled it was time to change the laundry over.

*Having fur would certainly have its advantages,* Sophia steeled herself as she once again pinched her nose and walked towards the washer and dryer.

## Chapter 19

*Better, not perfect but definitely better,* Sophia sniffed her freshly dried work shirt and wrinkled her nose. *Still a little citrusy.*

She had cut it close with the laundry, but the dryer had finished ten minutes before she had to walk out the door. Quickly, she stripped out of her makeshift outfit and slipped on her still-warm pants and shirt. Grabbing a hair tie, she fashioned her hair into a ponytail before looking herself over in the mirror. As far as she could tell, no one would be able to tell she was any different or just how unusual her night had been.

*No one could tell last time,* she took a breath to steady her nerves. *But I am different now.*

Leaving her room, she headed to the front door. Her dad was still sitting in the living room, and she could smell the beer he was drinking even though she couldn't see it.

"Headed to work?" her dad asked, looking up from the TV. "Will you be home for dinner?"

*As though I have anywhere else to be.*

"Yep, it's just a five-hour shift today," Sophia replied casually, turning towards the closet.

"I'll be sure to get something ready," her dad said, his glazed eyes not matching his smile. "Maybe my chili."

*That sounds good actually.*

"I look forward to it," Sophia replied flatly as she slid the closet open.

Body odor, leather, dust, alcohol and a dozen other scents greeted her and she reflexively took a step back. Regaining her composure, she did her best to block out her nose as she scanned for her coat.

"Crap."

"You okay?" her father asked, although he sounded like he was only half paying attention.

*Oops,* Sophia's mind raced as a pit formed in her stomach.

"Oh, I had forgotten I had spilled juice all over my winter coat and I still need to wash it," she fibbed, spying a long dried stain on a coat that she had long outgrew, but couldn't bare to get rid of.

*I'm getting way too comfortable with lying.*

"That sucks," her dad replied sympathetically. "Do you have something else?"

*I had a fur one last night.*

"No, just the one," Sophia replied sourly. "I'll grab a sweatshirt and my windbreaker."

“Okay,” apparently deciding the problem was resolved, he went back to watching the TV. *Shit, I didn’t wash any of my sweatshirts; I’ll just have to suck it up.*

Frustrated, Sophia rushed back to her room and quickly dug through the clothes pile, trying to ignore the burning sensation in her nose from the fragrance. Her two favorite sweatshirts had been washed recently and were intolerable, leaving her with a slightly stained, light-red garment with fading lettering as her only option. Alas, her only other sweatshirt had become a casualty of the previous night’s hijinks.

Holding her breath, she slipped it on over her work shirt. The sweatshirt was a bit embarrassing, but at least she wasn’t gagging. She felt a pang of conscience as she left the clothes in disarray on the floor, but a quick glance at the clock confirmed she was cutting it very close.

Nearly sprinting back to the front door, she found her lime-green polyester spring coat half hanging off its hanger in the back of the closet. After slipping it on, she slid on and laced up her shoes.

*Damn it, my gloves and hat are in my backpack, and I don’t have time to look for any others,* Sophia looked miserably at the empty spot on the coat rack. *It’s not that far, I’ll be okay.*

Without a word, she rushed out of the house, only pausing long enough to close the door. Her brain barely had time to register the cold or the faint smell of gasoline from her neighbor’s car before she was at the bottom of the driveway and rushing down the sidewalk.

Despite the cold now settling into her bones and the anxiety over running late, being back outside lifted Sophia’s spirits. The air was crisp and pure, a welcome change from the suffocating air of her house. Even the mountain wind penetrating her coat and chilling her skin felt like the touch of freedom. Reluctant to be back inside, she couldn’t help slowing her pace.

*It would be better without the car smells,* every time a car passed her, exhaust and gasoline fumes lingered long after. *And, oh no, cigarette smoke!*

She caught the faint whiff of cigarette smoke from somewhere down the block she was on. Scanning, she spied a middle aged woman smoking on her porch a few houses ahead. The acrid stench grew increasingly intolerable as Sophia approached. Pinching her nose, she hastily checked for traffic before jogging across the street. She was relieved to find the smoke seemed to be absent on the other side of the street. The smoking woman didn’t seem to have noticed Sophia had even done anything. She glanced at Sophia before going back to her cigarette.

*So glad mom got dad to quit when I was little,* a wave of grief crashed through Sophia. *She really knew how to talk sense into him.*

“Yip! Yip!” Sophia stopped just in time to avoid tripping over a very excited small dog.

The dog danced around her feet, sniffing and barking. Its tail was going a mile a minute and its ears were standing straight up. Sophia had seen the little terrier on numerous occasions, but the pup usually contented itself to yapping its head off at her or anyone else passing by from its porch. Forgetting that she was supposed to be headed to work, she watched the small dog intently.

*Hmm, I would be able to read her scent better down there,* Sophia cautiously knelt down on the sidewalk.

What had gotten Sophia’s attention was indeed much stronger down here. She felt like she could detect *something* (or was it *some things*?) in the air associated with the dog. The dog stopped prancing around and stared at her, its nose wiggling.

*This is weird, but getting to know this dog’s smell feels really important,* her brow furrowed as she concentrated. *Still not strong enough. Maybe if I get closer.*

Putting her hands on the cold pavement, Sophia leaned in towards the dog with her nose. The dog tilted its head, its ears rotating as it examined her. As Sophia got closer, it took a step back and stiffened, one paw up. After staring for another second, it curled its lip, showing its teeth before giving a low growl and backing up a few more steps.

*The nerve!* Sophia straightened her arms and lifted her head up high. *Who does this tiny dog think she is?*

“Muffin!” someone yelled loudly nearby. “Muffin! Come here now!”

Startled, Sophia scrambled to her feet, her cheeks warming. Muffin took a few steps back, her eyes not leaving Sophia. Glancing in the direction of the voice, she saw a graying woman standing on her porch. The woman’s eyes met Sophia’s, and the woman chuckled.

“I’ve never seen Muffin act this way before,” the woman admitted, her tone apologetic. “She’s usually quite playful and you seem like a dog person.”

Uncertain of how to respond, Sophia simply shrugged sheepishly and tried not to look back at the terrier.

“Muffin!” the woman called again, more sharply this time. “Come here!”

The small dog finally noticed her owner and gave a single, low-pitched whine. In a sudden burst, the dog turned and raced to the porch where the woman was standing. Reaching her owner, the dog ducked behind the woman’s legs before peering at Sophia from the other side, ears straight and eyes wide.

Giving a weak smile, Sophia waved and forced her legs to start moving.

“What’s gotten into you today?” Sophia overheard the woman chide Muffin. “You’ve seen the nice young lady before. She was just trying to play with you!”

*I wasn’t though*, Sophia shivered and hastened her steps. *That wasn’t me.*

Even at that moment, *something* within Sophia was upset she had been interrupted before she could let that dog know how rude it was behaving.

*There’s a wolf inside me now*, she forced down the urge to return to the dog. *I just have to ignore it. Crap, now I’m really late.*

Judging by how cold her hands and ears felt, the incident had taken some time. In an attempt to distract herself, she focused on the icy pain in her fingertips and ears. Wrapping her arms around herself, she stuck her hands into her armpits. As if to mock her feeble effort, a cold blast of wind stung her face, setting her teeth chattering.

*Just a little further*, she tried to encourage herself as she reached the field separating her neighborhood from downtown. *This is where I first saw Shadow.*

Briefly, she scanned for any sign of the wolf in the now snow-covered field. Unsurprisingly, there wasn’t so much as a pawprint that she could see in the white expanse. There was little chance he would risk getting close to town in the daytime. Still, she couldn’t help feeling vaguely disappointed and a bit lonely.

*Not today*, she tore her gaze away from the mountains on the eastern horizon. *Gah, that’s a lot worse than I remember.*

The wind had stilled and was no longer carrying the fumes from the gas station on the corner ahead away from her. Despite the cold, she cupped her hand over nose and mouth before breaking into a run. A man standing by the pump gave her a puzzled look as she rushed by, but she ignored him. Not stopping to look for cars at the intersection, she continued to run until she had reached the grocery store’s parking lot.

Unfortunately, the parking lot’s air wasn’t much of an improvement. The presence of lubricants, oil and exhaust greeted her as she made her way across the parking lot. The stench was especially bad where the plow had piled up snow - and concentrated a year’s worth of grime. Senses overwhelmed by the unexpected onslaught, she broke into a sprint again.

“What the hell are you doing?” a bearded man yelled after his truck stopped mere inches from her, the screech of brakes loud in her ears. “I almost hit you!”

Sophia recoiled away from the truck, her foot skidding on the salt.

“I didn’t see you,” she managed after regaining her balance. “Sorry!”

The man sharply gestured for her to get out of the way and scowled. Sophia managed to stagger onto the sidewalk and nearly got hit by a cart being pushed by someone leaving the

store. Heart thudding and legs feeling like rubber, she stumbled forward as the automatic doors squeaked open. Warm air engulfed her and she shivered reflexively.

*Oh no*, the scents of fruit, vegetables, grains, spices and - above all - meat swept away every other sensation or thought. *How am I going to get through this?*

“Excuse me!” Someone said from behind her, and she attempted to drag her attention away from her olfactory senses.

Sophia looked over her shoulder to see several people with carts staring at her. Sheepishly, she forced herself to move out of the entrance.

“Sophia, there you are!” Sophia looked up to see Linda walking towards her. “Where have you been? You were supposed to be here more than fifteen minutes ago and you know how busy we get on Sunday mornings!”

*Fifteen minutes..?* Sophia’s mind reeled. *Surely I didn’t lose track of that much time!*

“Go clock in and get on a register!” Linda insisted.

“I’m sor...” Sophia began.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Linda cut her off with a wave of her hand and then hurried away, clutching a clipboard tightly.

Swallowing, Sophia let her legs carry her toward the employee room. Sandy was working the other register and she rolled her eyes when she saw Sophia. A long line had formed in the girl’s lane and she was frantically scanning items. It looked like all of Woodbury was shopping at the same time. Picking her way through the customers, Sophia headed towards the back of the store.

*That smells good*, her mouth watered as she eyed a fresh rotisserie chicken in one cart. *Woah, what’s that?*

She slowed while passing the next cart. A strong, almost sickly-sweet odor emanated from inside the cart. It took her a moment to realize the offending odor was cinnamon.

*Hmm, do spices go bad?* she scanned for the source in the hopes of warning the customer, but the cart was too full. *Right, I need to clock in.*

Quickening her pace before the customer noticed, she slipped into an aisle. Luckily, the cans and boxes in the aisle appeared to have been sealed properly, because there were few aromas coming from the shelves. The carts and customers were a different matter and she collided with one shopper while trying to identify several fruit smells in another shopper’s cart.

“Pardon...” her nose wrinkled at the strong scent of perfume surrounding the woman. “Uh, pardon me.”

“Excuse me,” the woman responded, not seeming to notice Sophia’s fumbled speech as she resumed staring at the shelves.

Stepping around, Sophia reached the end of the aisle and headed towards the small hall with the employee break room. A strong, tangy odor and the sound of a microwave greeted her as she entered the hallway. Inside, one of the stockers was sitting at the employee table, hunched over his phone. As she stepped up to the time clock, she caught a strong waft of the stocker’s deodorant and reflexively coughed. Judging by the stick next to him, he had evidently just applied it.

*Uhg! I think I’d prefer his body odor... to that,* she scrunched her nose futilely as she punched in. *Does he really think that’s attractive?*

The microwave beeped and the stocker stood up, sending a strong wave of fragrance through the room. Sophia coughed again, drawing a glance from the boy. Pretending not to notice, she practically ripped off her coat and sweatshirt and hung them haphazardly. Fighting the urge to gag, she hightailed it out of the room and towards the front of the store.

She made it partway down the aisle she had gone down earlier, when the overwhelming smell of cigarette smoke struck her. Eyes darting around for someone smoking in the store, she realized the source was a bearded man wearing a camo coat a few yards down the aisle. A pack of cigarettes bulged out of his breast pocket. Sophia immediately spun around and retraced her steps.

After finding an aisle with relatively few shoppers, she finally reached the front of the store. The lines had noticeably slackened and she could see Linda had taken the other register. Sandy noticed her first and gave an exaggerated scowl. Cringing, Sophia slipped through the lines and came up behind Linda. The woman finished checking out a customer before acknowledging Sophia was there.

“Ready to work?” Linda asked with a hint of sarcasm as she signed out of the register. “All yours.”

Exchanging places, Sophia quickly signed in and forced a smile at the waiting customer.

“Find everything... okay?” her smile faltered as the scent of cigarettes flooded her nostrils once again.

Two customers back was the camo-coated man leaning on a loaded cart.

*How am I going to get through this?* Sophia mentally groaned and started scanning items.

“Young lady, what are you doing?”

Sophia jumped, nearly dropping the box of baked chicken she had been sniffing at. She quickly scanned it and moved it to the belt. Heat rose in her face as she met the frowning elderly woman's eyes.

"I... thought it smelled strange," Sophia tried to smile. "It was nothing."

"Hmmpf," the woman uttered dismissively.

As quickly as she could, Sophia finished checking the woman out. To her relief, there was no one else in line.

*I almost made it to the end of my shift,* Sophia tried to distract herself by cleaning off the scanner. *How did I not notice that smell before?*

For the first time in hours she let her face contort at the smell of ammonia in the cleaner. Earlier, it had been a struggle not to visibly react to every odor or fragrance that made its way through her lane. Somehow, she'd even kept her composure when people reeking of cigarette smoke or using heavy perfume were standing across from her.

*I just had to keep it together for fifteen more minutes,* she berated herself.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Linda coming towards her. The manager gave her a wary smile. Sophia glanced at Karen, who had replaced Sandy forty-five minutes earlier. The woman was in the middle of a large order and wasn't paying attention.

"You were almost twenty minutes late today," Linda told Sophia disapprovingly as she leaned against the register. "What happened?"

Sophia hesitated; the woman's floral-scented deodorant couldn't quite cover up her vaguely salty body odor. It made for a weird combination.

"I'm really sorry, I had some issues with the laundry," Sophia answered, a lump forming in her throat. "Some of my clothes had to be rewashed."

*Well, that's half true.*

"I'll let it go this time, but if it happens again I'll have to write you up," Linda said, sighing. "With Christmas coming, we're going to be very busy here and I can't be doing your job and mine."

"It won't happen again," Sophia replied, relieved.

"There aren't many people in the store," Linda switched topics, setting down her clipboard. "Let's get your till counted and you can go home. Have any tests coming up this week?"

*Crap, I have a history test tomorrow!*

"Oh, uh, yes actually," Sophia responded as Linda started counting. "History and math later this week."

“I certainly don’t miss tests, boys were more my thing,” Linda responded conversationally after a pause. “You’re two dollars and a quarter short. Not great, not terrible.”

“I can go?” Sophia asked uncertainly.

“Yeah, better go crack open that text or you’ll end up like me,” Linda pushed her glasses up and chuckled. “Stuck in Woodbury for your entire life. Anyway, good luck on your test.”

## Chapter 20

The trip home was much easier than the walk to work had been. After her changed nose had been subjected to a constant barrage of different scents at the store, the outside world seemed much more tolerable. Knowing where the worst smells were located also helped and she was able to avoid any panicked mad dashes this time. Still, her lack of proper protection from the cold spurred her to hurry.

*It's just as well I couldn't get laundry detergent, Sophia brought her hands as close to her skin as her pockets would allow. I can't believe how awful the cleaning product aisle was. My nose still feels like it's on fire.*

Rounding the corner onto her street, she took a few steps and stopped. Turning her head, she looked past the house on the corner towards the field and mountains beyond it. As cold as she was, she still needed to retrieve her belongings from the field before it got dark.

*They should be roughly behind my house, but I don't want Dad seeing me back there,* she stood for a moment weighing her options. *Might as well get it over with.*

Briefly, she checked the windows of the corner house to see if anyone was looking. There were some people in the living room, but they appeared to be entirely focused on their TV. Turning, she stepped off the sidewalk and began skirting the edge of the house's yard.

To her chagrin, snow found its way into her shoes with every step. By the time she made it to the end of the lot, her ankles felt like they were encased in ice and even the bottoms of her feet were getting wet. She tried walking on the balls of her feet as she had the night before but found her shoes prevented her from bending her feet properly. Sighing miserably, she shunted aside the discomfort and soldiered on.

After clearing the house's backyard, the terrain became noticeably more uneven. She stumbled a few times as the ground unexpectedly dipped or rose beneath the snow. The skin on her feet ached, simultaneously feeling frozen and superheated. Forced to keep her hands out of her pockets to keep her balance, her hands were starting to ache. Teeth chattering, she finally stumbled into the part of the field directly behind her house.

*What is that..?* She stopped and sniffed, surprised. *It's familiar.*

The scent wasn't very strong, in fact, she couldn't really say there was a smell at all if she tried focusing on it. Yet, her nose and brain assured her it was there and was worth paying attention to.

*But where is it coming from?* Her brain suggested a particular direction and she resumed walking.

After a few yards, she spied a dark lump lying on top of the snow. Taking a few steps towards, she recognized it as her backpack and she hurried towards it. The main compartment appeared to be open and the bag was surrounded by small imprints in the snow. Heart sinking, she closed the remaining distance to her bag. Picking it up with a grunt, she examined it.

Part of the seam attaching the main compartment's zipper to the bag had been torn open. It was evident both from the tear and tiny tracks that a small animal had found the bag and managed to tear it open. Holding it close, she could even faintly smell whatever had gotten into the bag. She tried for a moment to see if she could figure out what it was, but quickly gave up.

Carefully easing open the zipper, she appraised the inside. To her relief, it looked like the torn zipper was the extent of the damage. Most of the contents appeared undisturbed, but the plastic bag that had held the sausages was missing. Glancing around, she failed to see any sign of the bag. Sighing, she grabbed her gloves and hat out of the bag. They were cold from lying outside, but her hands and head quickly started to warm them. Careful not to do any more damage, she zipped her backpack shut and threw it on her shoulder.

*Now, where are my coat and boots?* Attention no longer on her backpack, she noticed the smell had become stronger... and identifiable. *Oh... that's pee, my pee.*

The scent of the urine was markedly different than hers from earlier in the day, but some new recess of her brain immediately recognized it as belonging to her. That recess also seemed to know exactly which direction it was coming from. Seemingly of their own accord, her legs started carrying her toward the smell.

It turned out the hole she had transformed in was much harder to see than she would have expected. The uniform white of the snow made it difficult to judge depth and the overcast sky made it even harder to discern details. Tall grass poking through the snow further obscured the hole and she would have easily walked right past it if it wasn't for the smell. Within the hole, a mound surrounded by disturbed and flattened snow drew her attention.

*Hey, I didn't do half bad covering it,* aside from part of her coat, which had been partially unburied by whatever animal had found her backpack, it looked like an unremarkable mound of snow.

*Huh, that snow is really yellow,* she knelt down next to the mound to inspect it. *Oh, oops.*

Sliding her coat from underneath the covering snow, she was dismayed to discover a fair amount of her urine had soaked through the snow and into her coat. Frowning, she examined the garment. Where the pee had soaked in wasn't visible, but the pungent odor was quite unmistakable.

*It smells so much more... wolfy,* leaning forward, she sniffed it curiously.

*Ew, gross, I can't do that,* she mentally told the wolf in her mind as it floated an idea. *I should get back home and get these washed.*

However, she just sat there holding the coat.

*No, uh uh, I'm not going to do it,* Sophia tried to force the wolf back again. *Alright, I'll admit, I am curious and it doesn't actually feel gross. There's no one around I guess and I do have to go. Fine...*

Giggling nervously, she set the coat down and moved to a fresh patch of snow. Briefly, she looked around, half hoping someone was watching, but there was no one in sight. Quickly, she lowered her pants and underwear below her knees before squatting. Immediately, a strong odor filled the air as she heard her stream hit the snow. Finishing, she pulled her pants back up and took a step back. Kneeling, she grabbed her coat and dragged it next to the steaming snow.

*I can't believe I'm doing this.*

Kneeling, she leaned forward and sniffed at her fresh pee. It was markedly different from that of the previous night, but it still had that indescribable characteristic that allowed the olfactory part of her brain to flag it as hers. Even so, there was something about it that made the wolf now in her mind restless, like there was something wrong with it.

Shifting her knees towards her coat, she bent over and took a long breath through her nose. Despite lacking the rich complexity from the night before, it had a quality she could only describe as feral, even animalistic. There was still a bit of wrongness to it, but much diminished compared to her more recent production. She had to admit she found it pleasant and couldn't help sniffing it again.

*You like that?* She asked the wolf side of her mind as a burst of excitement radiated from her nose and down through the rest of her body. *Okay, I did it, we... uh... I should go home.*

Yet, her mental wolf wasn't quite content. At the thought of her home, it grew restless again. The memory of the mountain valley she had eaten the deer with Shadow in the previous night flashed through her mind. Despite the darkening landscape and falling temperature, she hesitated. The wolf had been so caring, so attentive. She had felt so safe and happy with him. Her time with him had been such a contrast to rest of her life.

Then the wind picked up, easily penetrating the thin material of her jacket and sweatshirt, causing her to shiver. Her mind snapped back to the present and she found herself several feet from the depression. Even with Shadow, she wouldn't last long.

*I need to go home,* reluctantly, she walked back to her things still lying in the hole. *I've been outside too long already.*

Stooping, she slung her backpack around her shoulders before threading her coat through it. Then she dug up her boots, careful not to allow any yellow snow to touch them. With a regretful glance towards the trees, she headed for home.

The television in the living room was on as Sophia approached her house, but she didn't see any sign of her dad through the window. As she hurried up the driveway and front walk, she stuffed her gloves and hat into her bag. At her front door, she stashed her bag on the side of the door before opening it slowly.

As she stepped in, the strong smell of tomatoes, beef and chilis greeted her. It smelled like any other chili night, yet there was still something off about the smell she couldn't put her finger on. Despite that, the kiss of the warm air on her chilled skin was more than welcome. The sounds of clattering dishes in the kitchen hurt her newly sensitive ears, even in the entryway. Confirming her dad was out of sight, she turned and snatched her backpack and coat from the porch. The closet door was still open and she hid both her bag and coat before shutting the door.

"Is that you Sophia?" her dad asked from the kitchen.

"Yep, I'm home," she confirmed. "Sorry I'm late. I lost track of time talking to some friends at work."

"No big deal," her dad answered, coming into the dining room. "Just finishing Dad's Special."

"It smells delicious," Sophia commented, taking off and hanging up her coat.

"Cold out there?" her dad asked. "You look frozen."

"Yeah, I really missed my winter coat," she commented. "I should probably go put it in the wash."

"Dinner will be waiting," he went back into the kitchen.

Sophia counted to ten and then grabbed her coat and backpack. Adroitly keeping them in front of her body, she maneuvered down the hall. Taking a deep breath, she held it as she entered the utility area. To her dismay, she saw her dad had left a load of his clothes in the washer and had spilled some detergent down the front of it. Rolling her eyes, she popped the lid open and hastily transferred the clothes to the dryer before starting it.

She got to the point of stuffing her coat into the washer before her chest started to demand she breathe again. Backing away, she returned to the main hallway and took a long breath. Even from that distance, the aroma of the detergent nearly made her gag. Holding it

again, she plunged back into the laundry room and started up the washer, hoping very little of the spilled detergent had found its way into the washer.

*I would much rather smell like pee than have to put up with that.*

Closing the lid, she started the washer, grabbed her backpack and hurried to her bedroom. Despite having left her soiled linens and clothes in a garbage bag, the lack of ventilation meant her room smelled distinctly of the deer's blood and other fluids again.

*I still can't believe I actually like this smell now,* she inhaled sharply to wash out the odors from the utility room. *Still, I can't risk Dad noticing it.*

Setting her backpack down next to her desk, she walked across the room and opened the window. Fresh, cold air drifted into the room and the smell immediately began to fade.

*I'll just let it air out in here and close it after dinner.*

Satisfied, she left her room and headed for the table.

"Is something wrong with the chili?" Sophia's dad asked, sounding concerned.

Resting her spoon against her bowl, she tried to compose herself. Her mouth was burning, which wasn't unusual, her dad liked it on the spicier side. Usually, a fair bit of sour cream and cheese was enough to make it manageable and she had otherwise always liked it. That first spoonful, however, had tasted *awful*. The sauce had been incredibly bitter and her face had apparently made that very obvious.

Sophia took a drink of water and then responded, "oh, it was just spicier than I expected. It's still good though."

"Just right to me!" her dad flashed a rosy-cheeked grin and ate another spoonful. "The burn makes me feel alive!"

Sophia laughed weakly and then took a large scoop of sour cream followed by more shredded cheese. Once they were thoroughly mixed, she tried another spoonful. The bitterness had been significantly reduced but was still there.

"Still no?" her dad asked, seeing her grimace slightly.

"I think my taste is off today," she reassured him, trying to keep her face straight. "It's good otherwise."

*I think just today, maybe.* Sophia found a big chunk of hamburger, drained the liquid against the side of her bowl and ate it.

At least the hamburger was palatable despite the bitterness. The beans, sour cream and cheese tasted alright too, if oddly weaker than she remembered. It seemed to just be the chilis

and spices that had such an unpleasant taste. She was just happy her dad liked to put lots of hamburger in her chili.

“How was work?” her dad asked after a few minutes.

“It was fine,” Sophia shrugged, before popping another piece of hamburger in her mouth.

“I want to apologize,” he changed the subject suddenly. “I’m sorry for being so absent.

Trying to find work takes a lot of time and energy.”

“Yeah,” Sophia stared down at her bowl uncomfortably, idly stirring it.

*It would help if you, you know, stopped drinking and actually looked.*

“I think I’ve found something though,” he continued, surprising her. “Joe’s Autobody is looking for a welder and I’ve talked to Joe last night. I think he’s going to bring me on!”

Surprised, Sophia looked up, “that’s great Dad!”

“He’ll let me know tomorrow,” her dad wiped his brow with a napkin. “Everything is going to get much better around here, I promise!”

For a moment, Sophia forgot all about the strange turn her life had taken. Then she gagged as she bit into a chili that had snuck onto her spoon. She spat the chili out and desperately reached for her glass to wash away the taste.

“Oh come on, my cooking isn’t that bad!” her dad protested.

## Chapter 21

*An urgent, but familiar howl pierced the night and Sophia felt her ears reflexively swivel towards it. The howl wasn't speech in the way humans communicated, but it carried meaning all the same:*

*"Where are you?"*

*Shadow was so close, yet still paradoxically unfathomably far away. Sophia was exhausted, her fore and hindlegs felt like they were made of lead. But there was no time to rest. Through the trees, on the eastern horizon, a faint glow heralded the coming dawn... and catastrophe.*

*Pausing her climb, she turned her muzzle skyward and answered with a howl of her own, "I'm coming."*

*Then, front and back legs screaming in protest, she resumed her trek up the seemingly endless hill. After what felt like ages, she could finally see her destination.*

*Thump, thump, thump.*

*Her strength gave out at the sound and she collapsed as it grew louder. With barely enough strength left to lift her head, she peered up the incline. Shadow appeared above her, his handsome figure starkly illuminated against the brightening sky. She tried to cry out a warning, but her tortured lungs could produce nothing.*

*'Too late', Sophia thought.*

*Thump, thump, thu...*

*... eep! Beep! Beep!*

*"No!" Sophia heard herself scream as terror-fueled adrenaline surged through her.*

*Then, her vision cleared and she found herself sitting upright on her own bed, her alarm chirping away next to her. The dream shattered into wispy fragments as consciousness returned, but the primal fear remained. Reaching out with an entirely human hand, she shut off her alarm and then scooted back to lean against the headboard. Trying to slow her thudding*

heart, she tried to remember what had been so urgent, so terrifying. Yet, every time she tried to grasp a remnant of the nightmare, it seemed to evaporate.

*I was a wolf... I think. And Shadow was there. It all felt so real,* Sophia pulled her blanket up to cover her shivering form. *Everything is okay. Nothing is wrong.*

Leaning over, she turned on her bedside lamp, illuminating her bedroom. Everything was as it had been when she had gone to bed. A full trash bag was still sitting next to her bed and her desk chair had a pile of laundry she had dumped there after rewashing.

*Huh, I wonder if my sense of smell has gone back to normal.* Sniffing, she didn't detect any strong odors, or any odors for that matter. *Seems like it.*

Taking advantage of the adrenaline still coursing through her, Sophia threw off her blanket and clambered out of bed. Grabbing her robe hanging from the back of the door, she threw it on and pulled it tight. Twisting its handle, she pulled her door open. No longer held at bay, the air in the hallway flowed into her room and she wrinkled her nose.

*Nope, everything is still really smelly,* despite the off-putting signals coming from her nose, she couldn't help a wry smile. *Today is going to be interesting. A perk of being a werewolf I guess.*

Sophia shifted her weight uncomfortably, trying to keep from coughing or gagging as she waited with several other students at the crosswalk. The girl standing next to her had apparently doused herself in floral perfume and the concentrated fragrance absolutely burned Sophia's sensitive nose. With another student directly behind her, all she could do was pray for the crossing signal to hurry.

After an agonizingly long wait, the signal changed and she darted forward. The aggravating miasma quickly faded as she hurried to the other side of the street. Her respite was all too brief though, as she reached the stream of students walking towards the entrance of the school. A boy hurried past her, his thick hairspray clinging to him like a thick cloud. Reflexively, Sophia brushed her nose as additional smells reached her. Just within the small crowd of students around her, she could detect an overwhelming array of different perfumes, detergents,

colognes and shampoos. Her eyes watered as she did her best not to show any outward discomfort.

*Almost inside...* Sophia gripped the straps of her backpack tightly as she walked up the school steps...

... And felt like she had slammed into a suffocating wall of odors of every description. So many, her brain couldn't begin to make sense of it all.

"The hell?" a boy snapped as he walked into her from behind, sending her stumbling forward.

"Oh, sorry," she mumbled as she willed her feet to start moving again.

It felt like every step brought a fresh assault on her senses. She passed a boy at his locker who had applied so much cologne that it smelled like he had bathed in citrus. A girl sprayed herself with perfume, releasing a dense cloud of vapor that sent Sophia into a coughing fit. Another girl had failed to fully rinse her hair and the smell of shampoo hung thickly around her. All that and more was enough to make her want to find the nearest exit and never return.

*How am I going to survive this?* She wondered, forcing down the urge to pinch her nose. *Great, my nose is perfectly fine with body odor.*

To her left, a dark-haired boy grabbing books from his locker had obviously not showered in some time. Everyone else was not so subtly keeping their distance, but it was comparatively a breath of fresh air to Sophia. While she couldn't say she found it particularly appealing, at least it wasn't intolerable. All too soon, she was past and it faded, leaving the other scents in the hallway to take its place.

*I'll just duck in there and wait for the hallway to clear out a bit,* she spied the girl's restroom just down the hall from her locker and headed for it.

Opening the door she stepped in. Immediately, the scent of urine and other bathroom smells displaced those from the hall in her nostrils. Unfortunately, she also discovered it had been cleaned recently as the sharp scent of ammonia promptly displaced everything else. Sophia's eyes watered and she reflexively coughed. Reaching up, she rubbed her tortured nostrils.

A blonde-haired girl who had been fussing with her hair stopped what she was doing to stare at Sophia.

“If you’re sick, stay away from me!” the girl demanded, holding up her hands in front of her as though to ward Sophia off.

Too distraught to respond, Sophia turned and yanked the door open before scurrying back through it.

*Okay, bad plan,* she took several breaths, trying to cleanse her nose. *I guess I’ll just have to tough it out somehow.*

Trying to block out the signals her nose was bombarding her brain with, she covered the last few strides to her locker. She frowned as she noticed the paper haphazardly taped to her locker. On it, she recognized an image taken from the Halloween Party video. In it, her face was clearly visible and directly above a large white bone that had been crudely photoshopped in. Gritting her teeth, she tore off the paper and crumpled it.

After inputting her combination, she opened her locker. A meaty, yet slightly sweet smell greeted her. Looking down, she saw a bone-shaped biscuit had been forced through the vents of her locker. Part of it had broken off when it had hit the bottom of the locker. Stooping down, she picked up the broken pieces.

*This actually smells kinda good,* her mouth watered as she brought it closer to her nose. *I wonder what it tastes like...*

Snickers from behind her snapped her out of her reverie and her chest tightened. Opening her hand, she let the biscuit fall onto the hallway floor where it broke into several pieces.

“Look, Wolf-Girl was going to eat the doggy biscuit!” a youthful male voice crowed. “You like that, bitch?”

His taunt was joined by laughter.

“I wasn’t...” Sophia stammered a protest, feeling herself flush in embarrassment. “I didn’t...”

*But I was...*

“What a good girl!”, another kid jeered to more laughter.

The tantalizing smell released by the biscuit’s fragmentation only deepened her misery. Not knowing what else to do, she ripped off her backpack and coat and threw them in the locker, not even bothering to hang them up. After grabbing her math textbook and folder, she slammed her locker shut and scurried off, trying to block out their laughter.

*I did want to eat that biscuit*, she slipped into her desk for math class, trying not to cry.  
*Oh, and I can still smell it on my hand.*

Looking around, she realized she was one of the first students in the classroom. Typically, she did her level best not to show up until after the warning bell. Today, she was just glad to be somewhere without any strong aromas. Mr. Pindlewood glanced at her from his desk, his expression turning to mild surprise. Thankfully, he turned back to his computer after a beat.

*Homework folder, textbook, notebook*, Sophia turned her attention to her desk, feeling shaky. *Oh no, I forgot my pencil case!*

She considered running to her locker, it wasn’t that far, but the thought of confronting the smells and jerks in the hallway made her stomach clench. Scanning the room, she failed to see anything she could borrow and she certainly didn’t want to ask Mr. Pindlewood. So, she just sat anxiously staring at her hastily done homework as the classroom started to fill up. After what felt like an eternity, the warning bell rang.

Her mouth turned into a frown as a strong wave of lavender hit her. The girl next to her - Susan - had apparently applied a considerable amount of perfume before coming to class. Gripping the cold metal frame of her desk tightly, Sophia smiled weakly when Susan noticed her gaze.

“Hi, could I borrow a pencil?” Sophia asked quietly. “I just realized I forgot mine.”

The girl rolled her eyes, but replied, “Sure, whatever. Just don’t chew on it, mutt.”

Sophia grimaced at the insult, but Susan rummaged through a bag, found a spare pencil and handed it to her. Sophia couldn’t help noticing Susan’s hand had left a faint residue of lavender on the pencil. Deepening her dismay, she noticed Mr. Pindlewood watching her with an

inscrutable expression. Reaching a hand up, she brushed a strand of hair off her face and tried to look nonchalant.

The rest of the class filed in, bringing more scents with them. Only a few were unpleasant and those that were were blessedly faint. The deodorant of the boy behind her smelled faintly of coconut and she could smell something floral in the hair of the girl ahead of her. Desperate for a distraction, Sophia let the wolf in her mind she had been keeping at bay all morning take over.

*Hmm, that must be peppermint mouthwash*, intrigued, she inhaled through her nose quietly to see what else she could pick up. *More lavender, that boy isn't wearing any deodorant, ew, cinnamon...*

"Ms. Jones?" Mr. Pindlewood's voice pierced her thoughts. "What are you doing?"

Sophia realized she had her head angled up and had been audibly sniffing. Several students snickered and she felt a knot form in her stomach.

"Awoo!" a student behind her mock-howled.

The whole class broke into laughter and Sophia tried to sink into her desk.

"Robert," Mr. Pindlewood snapped, quieting the class. "See me after class."

Sophia glanced up at the teacher, who was no longer focused on her. To her surprise, his eyes shone with a cold fury. The class had gone dead quiet with no one daring to move. Then, the anger left Mr. Pindlewood's eyes and he turned. As though nothing had happened, he walked over to the chalkboard and started his lesson.

After an otherwise uneventful lesson, the bell rang. Sophia immediately returned the pencil she had borrowed, gathered her stuff and darted for the door. Averting her eyes from Mr. Pindlewood, she joined the rest of the class filing out. Stirred by the air, the smells she had finally been able to ignore during class returned with a vengeance. Swallowing, she stared straight ahead as she moved. Even so, she couldn't help smirking a little as she passed Robert. The boy was sitting at his desk sullenly playing with a pencil, his shoulders hunched down.

*Here I go again*, Sophia took a steadying breath as she left the classroom doorway. *Alright, don't let it get to you this time. You can do it.*

As before, the crowded hall was full of strong smells which vied to overwhelm her. This time, however, she concentrated on keeping them at the edge of her awareness. It was difficult, but she managed to get to her locker without losing her focus. Briefly, she checked for the doggy biscuit on the floor, but it looked like it had been removed over the last period. The crowd of kids that had bullied her was also nowhere to be seen.

*Damn, I can still smell it,* Sophia picked up her bag and coat to properly hang them, which sent the now familiar and tantalizing smell into the air. *Okay, I do not want to eat a dog treat.*

Pretending to tie her shoe, she surreptitiously swept the bottom of her locker with her hand. The motion sent several small crumbs flying out into the hallway. Standing, she was pleased to find she could no longer detect any trace of the biscuit. All she could smell now were the materials of her coat and the iron of her locker. After grabbing her materials for English class, she sealed her locker and headed off.

*I think I'm getting better at this smelling thing,* Sophia experimented with giving attention to her nose without getting overwhelmed. *It's kind of like a superpower. Heh, being a Wolf Girl isn't so bad... Maybe I spoke too soon.*

Entering her English classroom, she caught the acerbic scent of lemon room freshener. Frowning, she tried to find the source of the noxious irritant. Distracted, she didn't notice the students standing in the aisle talking until she plowed into the back of one of them. The boy she ran into staggered a step from the sudden impact.

"Oh! I'm really..." She started to apologize when the boy turned.

Sophia's heart gave a flutter as she saw it was Logan. Still rebounding, she took an unbalanced step back. Logan's arm shot out and grabbed her shoulder, stabilizing her. Immediately, she felt heat blossom in her face and she grinned sheepishly despite herself.

"Oh, hi Sophia," Logan greeted her, looking surprised. "Are you okay?"

It took her a moment to realize he had asked her a question, "Uh, I'm fine, just clumsy I guess. Thanks! Uh, bye!"

Before Logan could respond, Sophia had darted past him and to her seat. She plopped into it, feeling foolish. Despite the feeling, she couldn't help glancing back. Logan was still looking at her and she quickly snapped her head forward again.

*Was that... a smile?* Sophia's heartbeat rose. *No, I'm imagining things. There's no way he'd be into me. Keep it together, girl.*

She lightly brushed where he had touched her shoulder, savoring the lingering feeling of pressure from his hand. Briefly, she imagined his arms around her as she had many times in the past. Yet, the image didn't bring quite the feeling of excitement she had anticipated. There was that, but a range of conflicting emotions and a strange emptiness in her heart also accompanied the fantasy.

*Why do I feel guilty?* The bell rang, and she pushed the confusing tempest aside.

## Chapter 22

Sophia managed to avoid any more embarrassing moments during English and even the lemon smell quickly faded from her notice. The challenges posed by her improved sense of smell returned when she left the classroom, but managing it was becoming increasingly second nature. She found if she focused, she could detect more troublesome odors early and change her path to avoid the highest concentrations. Even if she couldn't physically avoid them, just having the forewarning helped her brace herself.

*I think I might be able to get through today after all,* Sophia thought optimistically as she pushed open the door to the girl's locker room. *Woah.*

The girl's locker room was unlike anything she had experienced so far. There were hints of urine and bleach in the air, but the strong array of body odors and more... feminine scents caught Sophia off guard. She paused in the doorway, trying to untangle it all.

"Excuse me," an impatient girl's voice came from behind her.

Sophia shook her head slightly and stepped forward. A number of other girls were already in the locker room and in various stages of changing into their gym clothes. Trying to avoid the numerous olfactory distractions, she headed for her locker. Despite her efforts, she couldn't help noticing the strong scent of menstrual blood coming from Michelle as she passed. The girl had her jeans off and was in the middle of pulling up her gym shorts, the outline of a pad was visible in her panties. Feeling a bit uncomfortable, Sophia looked away and put in the combination for her gym locker.

"You still excused from class, Wolfgirl?" she heard Lidia loudly inquire as the other girl walked up to the locker next to Sophia's. "Your wrist don't look so bad to me."

Sophia glanced at the girl while in the middle of working her too-small jeans down her legs. *Oh yeah, I'm supposed to have a sprained wrist. Yay werewolf healing.*

Sophia flexed her wrist experimentally before responding, "It feels much better today."

"Huh, it doesn't look hurt in the slightest," Lidia studied Sophia's wrist and then sniffed. "Lucky, when I had a sprained ankle, it took almost a month before I could walk on it without limping."

"I guess I heal quickly," Sophia replied, feeling self-conscious.

Lidia shrugged and started changing. As she did so, the distinctive scent of vaginal fluid wafted into Sophia's nose. It was intense and had an oddly sweet undertone to it.

*Oh, oh, ohhh! She's ovulating*, Sophia felt her face start to flush and she yanked her shirt over her head to hide it. *That was definitely not something I needed to know.*

"Were you really going to eat a doggy treat Wolfgang?" Sophia heard Michelle ask suddenly behind her and Sophia nearly strangled herself in surprise with her shirt.

Conversations in the rest of the locker room came to an abrupt halt and Sophia felt multiple eyes suddenly turn towards her. Nausea rose in Sophia's stomach as she finished yanking her shirt off. Turning, she found Michelle staring at her with an exaggerated look of disgust that couldn't entirely hide the mischievous gleam in her eyes.

"What? Doggy treats?!" Lidia responded excitedly. "I got to hear this!"

"No, I..." Sophia started to protest.

"A couple of guys were talking about in my last class," Michelle interrupted, loud enough for the entire locker room to hear. "They said they had stuck a dog treat in Wolfgang's locker."

"That's mean!" a short red-headed girl with glasses exclaimed.

"That's what I thought too, but they said Sophia brought it to her nose and smelled it," Michelle continued, demonstrating with her hands. "They said she almost took a bite, but then realized she was being watched."

"Were you really going to eat it?" a dark-haired girl, Savannah, asked Sophia, her eyes wide.

"Well, uh," Sophia stammered, panic gripping her. "I, uh..."

"Wow!" Lidia clapped her hands. "You really are a wolf-girl!"

"Ew!" Sophia heard someone exclaim.

*I guess so*, the comment pierced the uncertainty clouding her mind. *Why deny it?*

Feeling a wave of calm wash over her, she locked eyes with Michelle, "Yep, it smelled sooo good. It's just what a wolf-girl likes."

Michelle held her stare, although she looked less certain now.

Unable to help herself, Sophia's mouth pulled into a sly grin and she added, "But what a wolf-girl really craves is meat; I wonder what you taste like?"

To Sophia's shock, the other girl actually flinched, the mocking disgust gone from her expression.

For a moment, no one said anything. Then Lidia clapped her hands together.

"Hah! Nice one!" Lidia chortled.

The rest of the locker room seemed to relax and several other girls giggled. Michelle laughed too, but it sounded weak and forced. Even as the girls filed out of the locker room, Sophia couldn't help noticing the normally haughty girl waited for Sophia to leave first.

“You’re asking to play?” Mr. Rindler asked Sophia skeptically, lowering his clipboard. “Sprains usually take several weeks to heal.”

“Yes,” Sophia confirmed, trying to ignore the teacher’s strong-smelling body wash. “My wrist is much better today.”

*I can’t believe I’m arguing so I can play in gym class,* Sophia flexed her wrist to demonstrate. *I guess I really have changed.*

“Even if it doesn’t hurt right now, it’s still injured,” Mr. Rindler warned her. “Playing could easily injure it more.”

“I know, but I really want to play today,” Sophia insisted, exasperated. “If it starts hurting, I’ll stop playing right away.”

Mr. Rindler sighed and then cracked a smile, “Alright, I’m not one to stop a student from physical activity. I just never thought you’d be one of my students demanding to participate.”

“Thank you!” Sophia exhaled in relief. “I’m feeling really restless today.”

“It saves me the trouble of having an odd number of students,” he looked around. “Just be sure to let me know the minute your wrist hurts. I don’t need the administration coming down on me.”

“I will!” Sophia flashed a smile before running to join the rest of the class.

Mr. Rindler had them pair off by sex and Sophia found herself with a boy in her grade named Mathew. The dumpy brown-haired kid gave her a shy greeting before trying to look anywhere but at her. They found an open side on one of the nets and waited for the class to sort itself out.

To her dismay, their first opponents wound up being Lidia and a tall boy named Todd. Lidia mimed a wolf howl and then flashed a smirk towards Sophia. Rolling her eyes, Sophia looked towards Mr. Rindler who had dragged a net full of volleyballs to the middle of the gym.

“Start playing once I blow the whistle,” he announced. “You’ll get ten minutes per opponent and then I’ll have you rotate partners. Leave the ball on the side of the court it’s on after I blow my whistle again. Try to focus on setting and spiking today.”

Bending over, the teacher picked up a ball and tossed it toward one side of the net on the far court. Immediately, Sophia felt her eyes lock onto the ball as it bounced across the gym.

*Is it just my imagination or is something... different?* The ball bounced into the hands of a waiting student. *It seems... slower somehow. Come to think of it, everything has looked a little off. Like the world isn’t moving as fast as it should.*

The teacher threw another ball and again it appeared to move a hair more slowly than her brain was accustomed to expect. He repeated tossing the ball for each court in succession, and each time Sophia found herself mesmerized by what she was experiencing. It was less noticeable, but even the teacher's throwing motion looked oddly sluggish. After a few throws, the mismatch between what her brain expected and what her eyes reported began to narrow and the feeling of uncanniness waned.

When it got to Sophia's court, she saw him hesitate for a second before tossing it in her direction. She watched it bounce towards her, feeling strangely detached from her body. Every time it bounced, she felt her eyes smoothly follow its trajectory. As it got nearer, she felt her muscles twitch and slide as her body automatically adjusted to intercept it. The ball bounced one final time and her legs launched her forward as her hands stretched towards it.

*Got it!* Triumph blossomed as she felt her hands contact the ball and the smell of rubber entered her nostrils. *Wait...*

The unexpected feeling of her knees contacting the waxed wooden floor interrupted her before her face finished its plunge toward the ball. For a second, she warred with the wolf driving her to finish sinking her teeth into the ball. Reason won out and she belatedly realized she was on her knees with her hands pinned to the sides of the ball with her mouth open. Snapping her mouth shut so quickly that her teeth clicked, she looked up to find everyone staring at her.

Lidia had her hand over her face, trying to hide a smile. Mr. Rindler had a frown across his face as he held another volleyball in an outstretched hand, momentarily forgotten. With an embarrassed grin, Sophia scrambled to her feet. Mr. Rindler shrugged and resumed tossing the last couple of balls. Lidia gave a quiet laugh and shook her head. Fortunately, most of the rest of the class had not had a clear view of her face.

*Bad girl,* Sophia chastised the wolf that now prowled the recesses of her mind. *Not here, not now.*

"Tweet!"

Lost in her thoughts, the piercing whistle startled her and she visibly jumped. Remembering she was holding the ball, she went to the right corner of the court. Drawing her arm back with her palm extended, she let out a breath and set her feet.

*Here goes,* she brought her arm forward to serve the ball. *Keep my hand open...*

The ball sailed forward... right into the net. On the other side of the court, Lidia laughed and rolled her eyes. Mathew audibly groaned and drooped his shoulders.

"Ah, oops," she tittered in embarrassment, brushing her hair over her shoulder.

Lidia retrieved the ball and tossed it to Todd. Putting the mis-serve out of her mind, Sophia positioned herself in anticipation of the serve. Briefly, she marveled at her hand. Aside from her skin stinging from contacting the ball, her wrist was perfectly fine.

*I wonder what the limits of werewolf healing are. Hopefully, I'll never have to test them.*

A \*smack\* reverberated across the court as Todd served hard. Sophia's attention snapped to the ball. It was moving fast, but it still felt like she had all the time in the world to react to it. Attention, on the ball, Sophia quickly anticipated where it was coming down and hustled to be below it. The ball started to arc down and she set her feet while raising her hands.

Feeling like everything had been slowed down, she pushed off with her feet. Her hands struck the ball above her head and it bounced up. Moving out of the way, she looked towards Mathew. Who looked almost frozen.

*Why aren't you moving?*

After what felt like an eternity, he finally moved to spike the ball.

*He's coming in too high,* Sophia could readily see the ball was going to strike in the center of his wrist rather than his closed fist.

His wrist contacted and the ball flew off wildly before hitting the net and falling to the floor.

"Excellent set Sophia!" Mr Rindler complimented her. "Robert, you're rotating your wrist just before you make contact on the serve."

"Sorry", Mathew mumbled an apology.

"That's one!" Lidia crowed triumphantly.

She grabbed the ball and tossed it back to Todd. Sophia bent her knees, feeling exhilarated despite allowing a point. Again, Todd served, this time toward Mathew. After another painfully long delay, Mathew moved to intercept.

*He's going to hit too far up on his fingers. It's going to bounce behind him,* Sophia immediately started moving to where she expected the ball to go.

This time, she reached out with her hands together as she moved to where the ball was falling. Swinging up, she struck it perfectly with her forearms and it arced up and over the net. Todd reacted faster than Mathew, but still rather slowly to Sophia's eyes. The boy hit the ball as it came down on his side of the net. Unfortunately for him, he hit it at too shallow of an angle and it bounced straight into the net.

"Nice job!" Mathew congratulated her.

"Impressive", Lidia begrudgingly admitted.

*Wow,* Sophia allowed herself a smile. *I feel amazing!"*

Todd bounced the ball to Mathew and Sophia waited for him to serve.

Despite her newfound athletic ability, they still were trailing when Mr. Rindler whistled for the teams to change. In the next round, Sophia found herself with a muscular boy named Mark. Despite his antiperspirant, she could readily smell his sweat-fueled body odor. She had to admit she found it a bit arousing.

Mark was no slouch at volleyball and between the two of them, they managed to pull away convincingly.

“When did you get so fast Wolfgirl?” Lidia grumbled sourly afterward.

Sophia simply shrugged and adjusted her ponytail, *Good question actually.*

Mr. Rindler signaled for the girls to switch courts this time and Lidia stalked away in a huff.

The final two rounds of class went by quickly, although her side lost both rounds. It turned out her seemingly enhanced reflexes weren't quite enough to overcome the skills of a girl on the school's volleyball team. Still, Sophia felt as though she gave a good showing both times.

“Nice job today, Sophia,” Mr Rindler stopped her as she was leaving the gym. “I'd like to see that effort from you every day. How's your wrist?”

“Great!” Sophia exclaimed holding it up, still on a physical high. “No pain.”

“Incredible,” Mr Rindler replied after examining it. “It doesn't look injured at all. Based on how it looked Friday, I expected you to be laid up for a couple more weeks. I've never seen a sprain heal so fast.”

“I'm just lucky I guess,” Sophia shrugged suddenly feeling anxious.

Bracing for him to somehow expose her secret then and there, she was surprised when he simply scratched the back of his neck and shrugged, “It must not have been nearly as bad as it looked. Still, good work today.”

“Thanks, Mr. Rindler!” Sophia jogged toward the girl's locker room.

The scent of sweat-fueled body odor was much stronger now, but that didn't bother her. The various antiperspirants in use were a completely different matter and Sophia hastily changed into her regular clothes before seeking refuge in a bathroom stall. On the way there, she passed Michelle and braced herself for the inevitable barb. Instead, Michelle edged away from her and looked away.

*Huh, I could get used to this.*

"I don't have all day girl," a kitchen lady standing behind the serving counter prodded Sophia impatiently.

Sophia stared down at that day's selection. Today's main entree was spaghetti with meat sauce, something she would have jumped at just a few days prior. Now, the sweet smell of tomato sauce and succulent hamburger was spoiled by the sour smell of garlic and onions. Even worse was the stench of the garlic bread sitting next to the noodles. Ravenous just a few minutes before, Sophia's appetite fled her.

"I'll just have a hamburger," Sophia finally answered despondently.

The woman stiffly grabbed a wafer-thin patty and plopped it on a plain bun before grabbing a handful of soggy fries. A scoop of sorry-looking mixed veggies completed the meal and the server handed Sophia her tray.

Approaching the condiment table, the scent of garlic faded, just to be replaced by a new rancid odor. It took her a moment to realize she was smelling mustard. Sighing, she hastily pumped a bit of ketchup on her burger and next to her fries.

Leaving the food line, she made her way to her usual lonely spot at the far side of the cafeteria. Setting her tray down, she set the textbook tucked under her arm down next to it before sitting herself. Opening her text, she moved the sociology homework she had forgotten about in the weekend's excitement to the side.

Grabbing her burger, she took a bite and started reading. She made it halfway through the first sentence before making a face. Mixed with the taste of hamburger, bun and the oddly muted sweetness of the tomato ketchup, was a bitter taste. It wasn't particularly strong, just enough to be bothersome.

Turning her gaze towards her burger, she examined it. It looked like it always had, two mounds of bread punctuated by a thin line of meat. Curious, she sniffed it. The hamburger was appetizing, the bun was, well, a bun, but the ketchup had a faintly bitter aroma.

*Fine, I can live without condiments,* she opened up her bun and used a napkin to clean up as much as she could off the patty. *I wonder what that is?*

Using a spoon, she scooped out the ketchup-soaked bun before putting it back together. She took an experimental bite. She could still taste the bitterness, but it was tolerable at least. Putting down her hamburger, she picked up a fry and sniffed it.

*At least potatoes seem to be okay,* she popped it in her mouth, chewing. *It tastes a little different, but not in a bad way.*

Repeating the exercise with her mixed vegetables, she moved her fries and burger as far from the ketchup as she could before going back to her book.

*I made it! I survived the day,* Sophia zipped up her backpack before throwing it over her shoulder with a flourish. *Sophia, the teenage werewolf, is leaving the building!*

Sophia was halfway towards the school's exit when she spied Candice walking in the opposite direction. Candice's eyes met Sophia's and the former quickly looked away, staring off to the side as she passed. Sophia caught a strong whiff of the strawberry shampoo Candice used as she passed. The scent brought a swirl of memories in its wake and a wave of guilt and loneliness washed through Sophia.

*I don't need her,* Sophia fought back tears. *I'm better by myself anyway.*

## Chapter 23

Sophia's hopes of hearing about whether her dad got the new job or not were dashed when she arrived at an empty house following her shift at Albertson's. After fixing herself a couple of hotdogs (plain of course), she settled down on her bed to do her math homework. She completed two problems before the last few days finally caught up to her, and she fell into a dead sleep with her hand still gripping her pencil.

At school, she found two doggy treats on the floor of her locker. The smell was as enticing as ever, but her experiences the day before were still fresh on her mind. She was about to swat them out into the hallway, but a thought occurred to her and she surreptitiously dropped them into her backpack instead.

The rest of the morning went more or less smoothly and she managed to keep any intrusive thoughts of the lupine variety at bay. Even the locker room before gym class was fairly subdued, and she found she actually enjoyed the class when she wasn't making a fool of herself. Lunch turned out to be another disappointing selection and she reluctantly chose the rubbery wafer that the school insisted were hamburgers once again.

*It barely even smells like anything and I'm a werewolf,* she cautiously sniffed the charred patty. *At least mayonnaise is still edible.*

Cracking open her environmental sciences book, she turned to the chapter she had a test on in just two hours. She made it several paragraphs before her mind drifted to her brief encounter with Candice the day before. Looking up from her book, she glanced over to where Candice now sat. Her former friend was surrounded by other students and was chatting away.

Turning her head forward, she glanced around her table. There were a few geeky-looking boys at the other end who had a bunch of books, paper and dice out for some sort of pen and paper game. One of the kids rolled a strange looking die and the kids cheered when it stopped.

*I wish Shadow could come here,* she sighed forlornly and looked back down at her book. *And I work tonight and tomorrow night, so no opportunity to even visit the mountains until Thursday.*

The thought of the mountains jogged a memory of something her dad had said a few weeks ago about hiking clubs.

*I'll see when the Outdoors Club meets. If nothing else, it gives me an excuse to be away from home. I think Ms. Taylor is the advisor for it; I'll ask her after the test.*

The bell rang, signaling the end of lunch, and she closed her text, still open to the first page of the chapter.

Her environmental science test on a chapter she hadn't read went about as well as she could have expected. She answered as best she could, but had no idea what many of the terms even meant.

*Maybe the Outdoors Club isn't such a good idea after all,* Sophia awkwardly handed her test forward and swallowed.

Her mind flashed back to lunch and Candice talking to all her new friends and a feeling of determination buoyed her. *No, I need to just do it.*

After the bell rang, she waited for the majority of the class to file out before getting up herself. Ms. Taylor was at the front of the room paging through the tests. Steeling herself, Sophia picked up her things and walked forward.

"Ms. Taylor?" Sophia started tentatively.

The graying woman's head snapped up in surprise, "oh, yes Sophia?"

"You run the Outdoors Club, right?" Sophia asked and then plowed on when the teacher confirmed. "I've been considering joining for a while and was wondering when their next meeting is."

"Oh, how wonderful!" Ms. Taylor's face lit up. "There's actually a meeting tomorrow right after school in this room. I won't be able to attend unfortunately, but some of the students are meeting to discuss winter activities."

*I'll have an hour before I need to be at work,* Sophia considered her schedule. *That should be enough time.*

Ms. Taylor's excitement dispelled much of Sophia's trepidation and she smiled, "I'll be sure to be there!"

Sophia was sitting at the kitchen table after work when she heard her dad's truck pull into the driveway. Excitedly dropping her pen, she looked up from her sociology assignment and turned towards the door to the garage. Her dad opened the door and the kitchen was immediately filled with the smell of burnt metal and beer. She could also detect the faint smell of cigarette smoke on his coat.

"Hi dad!" She put the unpleasant odors aside and stood up. "Did you get the job?"

He stopped in the doorway, blinked and then smiled, "I did! He had me start today; they're really desperate at the shop."

"That's great!" Sophia exclaimed happily. "Will it be full time?"

“Yep! I’ll be headed to the shop by eight every morning,” her dad told her. “I’ll be done at 4:30. Things are going to change around here!”

Overcome by elation, Sophia started towards her dad to give him a hug, but stopped as the smells on his jacket intensified. Instead, she sat back down in her chair.

“I’m going to go to the Outdoors Club tomorrow,” she changed the subject. “It’s right after school and I’ll have time before work.”

“Great!” Her dad exclaimed. “You shouldn’t have to work so hard anymore with me pulling in the big bucks again.”

Sophia smiled, and went back to her homework.

\* \* \*

The school had largely emptied out by the time Sophia stepped into her Environmental Science classroom. Inside, five other students were in a haphazard circle. Some were sitting at a desk and a couple were sitting *on* the desks. They all stopped talking when she entered and turned to look at her in surprise.

She raised an uncertain hand, “Hi. I’m... Sop...”

“Wolfgirl!” a tall stocky boy sitting on a desk blurted out.

Sophia sighed, “Yes, I’m Wolfgirl.”

As if to emphasize that, her brain noted the presence of a few different body odors in the room. They weren’t strong, but still detectable to her keen nose. Briefly, she tried separating them into the distinct scents she knew them to be, but frustratingly couldn’t.

“Hey girl! It’s been a while since we hung out!” A brown haired girl in a multi-colored sweater exclaimed suddenly.

Sophia blinked as she tried to place her, “... Maggie?”

“Yep!” Maggie confirmed. “When’s the last time we did something together? Sixth grade? Seventh? And the tea is you’re still obsessed with wolves.”

Before Sophia could respond, a tall boy with messy blonde hair cleared his throat, “Ms. Taylor isn’t here right now; this is the Outdoors Club. Were you looking for us?”

Sophia smiled meekly and nodded, “Yeah, if you’re looking for new members.”

“We’re always looking for new members,” the boy responded and waved her into the room.

The end-of-day smells of several people got stronger, but remained a maddening jumble.

When she had found a seat close to the circle of students, he continued, “I’m Craig, club president. Your name isn’t actually Wolfgirl I assume?”

“No, I’m Sophia,” she replied and shrugged. “But Wolfgirl is fine too.”

Maggie laughed, “hah, you used to hate it when we called you that.”

“I sense a story!” the stocky boy who had first identified her said loudly.

“Ever since I’ve known her she’s been obsessed with wolves,” Maggie recounted. “All through elementary school she had a wolf backpack, wolf lunchbox, wolf folders... And every time she could pick an assignment, she picked wolves. She got in trouble a few times when she went off alone to look for wolves. Anyway, after one such time in fourth or fifth grade, someone called her ‘Wolfgirl’ and it stuck.”

As Maggie finished, the other students looked at Sophia who gave an embarrassed shrug.

“That’s tight!” the boy exclaimed.

“Sounds like you’d be a great fit then,” Craig broke in. “It’s a bit of an off-season for us right now. But we still do a fair bit through the winter. Let’s go around and say our names.”

“Oh, right, I’m Camden,” the large framed boy introduced himself, raising a big hand.

A small girl in a light blue blouse who hadn’t spoken yet, gave a small wave, “Katie.”

Sophia caught a faint whiff of spearmint when Katie spoke and realized the girl was chewing gum.

“Patrick,” a geeky looking boy in thick glasses said.

“We have another guy who’s usually here, but he had band rehearsal tonight,” Maggie told Sophia. “There are a few others who don’t attend the meetings very often, but sometimes come to the events.”

“What do you like to do, Sophia?” Craig asked conversationally.

*What do I like to do?* Sophia blinked.

“Well, I enjoy hiking,” Sophia replied slowly. “And yes, I like wolves.”

“Good, good,” Craig nodded encouragingly. “We don’t do much hiking this time of year, but we did go snowshoeing last February.”

“Yeah, I couldn’t walk for a week,” Camden interjected brusquely.

“It was definitely an experience,” Craig agreed. “We usually have a ski trip over winter break. That’s always a good time.”

The sudden presence of spearmint prompted Sophia to turn towards Katie before the dark haired girl asked in a soft voice, “Ever seen a wolf in the wild?”

Sophia hesitated before replying, “Yeah, once, from a distance. It was pretty cool.”

“Neat,” Katie replied.

“Have to head over to Yellowstone sometime,” Patrick piped up. “You’re a lot more likely to spot one there. Though there was that one spotted around town a month ago and the ranchers constantly complain about them.”

“I certainly wouldn’t want to come across a wolf on my own,” Maggie commented. “Or a bear. Or mountain lion.”

Feeling defensive, Sophia replied tersely, “Wolves are afraid of people. They don’t bother you if you don’t bother them.”

“I need to leave in fifteen minutes,” Craig spoke up. “Let’s get back to planning a club event.”

“We could go snowmobiling,” Camden suggested. “My fam has a few snowmobiles we could use.”

*Snowmobiling?* Sophia suppressed her disdain. *Yuck. Maybe this group isn’t for me after all.*

“The school wouldn’t allow it as an official activity,” Patrick pointed out. “Too dangerous.”

“True, but you guys could still come hang out sometime,” Camden persisted.

“Ice skating could be fun,” Katie suggested. “The park allows skating in the winter. My family often goes.”

Craig nodded, “That could be fun.”

“I don’t have any skates,” Sophia replied hesitantly.

“Neither do I,” Patrick echoed, relieving Sophia.

Katie piped up, “Chaudoir’s rents them out during the winter. They’re pretty affordable.”

Camden smirked, “I’m down with it. It would be fun seeing Craig fall on his ass.”

“Says the guy who couldn’t figure out how to fasten a snowshoe,” Craig retorted.

“Sure,” Maggie agreed. “Why not.”

Patrick shrugged, “I’ve never ice skated before, but I’ll try it.”

“I…” Sophia started and then gave a shy smile. “That could be fun.”

“Alright,” Craig said. “Looks like we have an event. Email me what works for you guys and we’ll hammer out a date. Sophia, you’ll have to give me an email.”

“Okay, yeah,” Sophia took the slip of paper and pen he held out.

*This is going better than I expected,* Sophia wrote down her school email. *It seems like a friendly group.*

“Oh yeah,” Maggie said, turning to Sophia. “Me, Katie and a couple other girls are going to check out the winter sales at Bruin’s after school tomorrow; you’re welcome to join us!”

Surprised at the invitation, Sophia considered it. *I have off tomorrow night and I'm trying to make friends. It could be fun... I really should go.*

"I..." Sophia started to accept, but couldn't bring herself to finish.

"Maybe some other time," she said instead. "I'm busy tomorrow night. Thanks though!"

"Sure!" Maggie responded, unaware of Sophia's inner turmoil. "I'll let you know when the next girl's night is."

Sophia glanced at the clock and her blood froze, "Oh! I have to be at work in ten minutes!"

"Great to meet you Wolfgirl!" Camden called after her as she darted towards the door.

## Chapter 24

*Should I have rejected the invitation to hang out with Maggie?* Sophia asked herself for the thousandth time after leaving the Outdoors Club meeting. *It would have been a great way to make friends. Human friends. And rejecting shopping to go to the mountains when it's almost winter is definitely not what a normal girl would do.*

A glance at the wall clock showed there were only ten minutes left of school for the day. It had been a long twenty-four hours and every time she thought about changing plans and meeting up with Maggie agitated the wolf that now seemed to reside in her all the more. Unable to focus on class, she tried to occupy herself by doodling in the margins of her notebook.

Someone in a seat in front of her raised their hand, and a sudden wave of oddly metallic deodorant caused her to mess up the line she was drawing. *But I'm no longer a normal girl. Why couldn't I be normal? Why can't I want to be normal?*

The more she tried to force herself to consider heading to Bruin's, the more she found herself aching to hear the sound of trees swaying in the wind and the bite of the cold on her cheeks. She missed the strong scent of pine in the crisp mountain air... the feeling of her claws digging into the frozen ground... the taste of warm, fresh meat and blood as her fangs sank into muscle and bone...

"Alright class," Ms. Evans, her sociology teacher, announced loudly. "I want you to answer the three questions at the end of chapter twelve for tomorrow."

Sophia looked down at her notebook thoughtfully, the page was mostly blank aside from the left margin of her notebook. There, she had roughly drawn the face of a girl - a girl with the fangs and sharply angled ears of a wolf.

*Wolfgirl*, the two syllables echoed through her head.

Quickly, before she forgot, she wrote down the assignment and started organizing her things. The final bell rang and she was out the door before most students had even stood from their desks.

*That should do for a couple of hours*, Sophia looked down at her backpack sitting on her bed. *I'm just going for a walk. I'll be back with plenty of time to finish my homework.*

Haphazardly, she gathered the school books, folders and notebooks she had emptied out of her backpack into a pile. Increasingly feeling claustrophobic in the house, she picked up the backpack and inspected it. So far, the safety pins she had been using to patch the hole that some critter had created seemed to be holding.

*Almost ready,* she assured the restless Wolfgirl that she had taken to imagining pacing around her mind as she laced her boots. *I'm not furry today.*

The assurance didn't seem to calm the wolfish figment, if anything she became more insistent. When Sophia had arrived home, she had contemplated dropping her backpack at the front door and heading straight for the wilderness. However, Sophia's more rational mind won out, insisting she at least get her boots and a water bottle.

*I don't know the difference between what I want or she wants,* Sophia grabbed her boots and headed for the kitchen. *That should bother me, but it's been so hard restraining myself... her. I feel so much more alive when I'm her.*

Sensing it was at the cusp of freedom, the Wolfgirl pushed all the harder against the restraints Sophia had placed on her. Barely taking the time to pull the knot on her last boot tight, Sophia stood up so fast she nearly knocked over the kitchen chair she had been on. Unable to be contained any longer, Wolfgirl pushed Sophia out the backdoor as fast as her legs could carry her. It took nearly a superhuman effort just to pause long enough to close the door.

*Tonight, I'm her,* Wolfgirl wanted to run and Sophia ran.

The weather had warmed up above freezing over the last couple of days and patches of mud punctuated piles of slushy snow. Her boots were caked in mud by the time she was across the field and her breaths were fast and hard. Ahead of her, the world was a mess of whites, grays, yellows and browns and a damp, rotting smell seemed to permeate everything. With every step, her backpack bounced against her back, causing her shirt to wick the sweat from her increasingly drenched back.

Despite the dour state of the land around her, each step which carried her away from the world of dead wood and flame wrought metal felt lighter than the last. In Sophia's mind's eye, it wasn't her, but Wolfgirl bounding towards the mountains and taking in every scent on the wind. Finally, as trees started to grow in frequency and the land started to slant upwards, increasing fatigue forced Wolfgirl to slow her gait. Pausing briefly to take a long drink of water, Wolfgirl resumed her prowl.

*Everything is so different today,* Wolfgirl took in her body and the world around her as she walked. *I feel like I'm numb...*

Each step felt distant as her foot was insulated from earth and stone by soft cotton and hard leather. Her hands, separated from the world by wool and polyester, felt like they were trapped in a warm cocoon. There was no feeling of the wind through thick fur, only the feeling of

cloth rubbing against bare, human skin. Instead of her ears freely rotating towards an unexpected sound, the world was eerily silent.

Most disorienting of all, no rich tapestry was meticulously detailed by her sense of smell. Where Sophia had felt overwhelmed by the unfamiliar sensitivity of her nose over the past few days, Wolfgirl felt almost blind now. Thrilled as Wolfgirl was to be away from the artificial human world, she felt anxious and vulnerable with the stunted olfactory and auditory senses available to her.

*I have no claws or fangs today*, Wolfgirl shivered, as a draft of cold air made its way down her sweaty back. *No fur either.*

Icy fear swirled through her mind as she became keenly aware of the ruthless hostility of the world she had entered.

*I don't belong out here*, Wolfgirl seemed to waver and fade as Sophia felt panic rising. *I should have gone shopping.*

At the thought of the safe, but artificial human world, Wolfgirl recoiled strongly. She far preferred the freedom of the wild to a sterile cage - even with a form ill-equipped for the former.

*No, I won't go back yet; I can't*, Wolfgirl overcame her feeling of vulnerability and reasserted herself. *At least for a little while.*

Still, the lengthening shadows created by the rapidly setting sun made Wolfgirl uneasy. She was all too aware she'd be lacking the lupine night-vision she'd had just a few nights before. Ahead, branches formed fearsome shapes in the gloom that dissolved as she got closer. It wouldn't take much for a cougar or bear to hide in the darkness until it was too late.

*I suppose a bear would be hibernating at least*, Wolfgirl stopped as a smell of interest grabbed her attention.

It took another half a second before Sophia's conscious brain caught up and recognized it as the faint scent of animal scat. Although Wolfgirl couldn't make out anything on the forest floor in the dim light, she traced it to a pile of pine needles. Getting to her hands and knees, she sniffed at it even as melted snow soaked into the knees of her jeans.

It was definitely scat and... that was about all she could tell. After a few more sniffs, she gave up detecting anything useful from it in frustration. Her sense of smell was just too human.

*This is fun*, Sophia got back to her feet. *But it's almost dark and it's getting cold; I really need to head back,*

Wolfgirl didn't seem to hear however and was busy getting excited over something new in the air. Furrowing her brow, she tilted her head back and sniffed. Sophia couldn't consciously

identify anything, but Wolfgirl was absolutely certain something was there. Taking a step forward, she continued sniffing.

*Shadow!* Joy blossomed in her chest at the recognition. *He's close!*

Although she couldn't even begin to describe how, Wolfgirl recognized it as sure as she would her own scent. All her worries vanished and she strained to determine which direction the scent came from. Alas, even as comparatively superhuman as it was, her nose proved inadequate for the task.

*He'll have to find me*, Wolfgirl began pacing impatiently, the sound of her boots loud in her ears. *At least he'll be able to hear me.*

By the time she heard a quiet \*chuff\* behind her, Wolfgirl was starting to worry. The thin denim of her jeans made for poor insulation in the falling temperature and her thighs were starting to feel numb. Hunger was starting to gnaw at her and she became keenly aware she had not brought food.

However, all her discomfort was forgotten in her elation at hearing the familiar sound. Wolfgirl turned, trying in vain to wag a tail that wasn't there. For a moment, she could see nothing, but then moonlight glinted off a pair of approaching eyes. Wolfgirl got onto her hands and knees in preparation to meet her friend in the manner of a wolf.

Shadow gave a soft, questioning whine and Wolfgirl was disappointed she couldn't understand him like she had a few nights before. Still, it wasn't hard to guess the source of his confusion.

"I changed back," she told the wolf regretfully. "Well, mostly."

Shadow whined again, but this one sounded worried. Wolfgirl could hear his claws clicking against the hard ground as he slowly approached her.

"I probably shouldn't be out here, but I couldn't stand being away any longer," Wolfgirl admitted.

Silence fell for several seconds, and then what sounded like a deep, but pleased yip came from the darkness. The sound of nails clicking against the ground started again, faster this time. Although she still couldn't really see him, Wolfgirl started crawling forward as fast as she could. Excitement and relief washed through her as her nose contacted his leathery snout. Opening her mouth instinctively, she reciprocated his greeting licks as they slid across her teeth.

*I hope he's not offended*, Wolfgirl felt a flash of shame as she leaned in to run her small, inadequate human tongue across his long incisors. *Wow, this feels sooo good.*

Eager to feel his fur against her cheek, Wolfgirl stopped licking and brushed her cheek against the short fur on his muzzle before leaning forward to rub her shoulder along his torso.

Several layers of clothes dulled the sensation, but she could have melted into his soft, but strong side.

As she was rubbed against him, an electric thrill emanated from her nose as she caught a whiff of a faint, but musky aroma. Her breath caught at the unexpected sensation and she had to exhale sharply. After finding a proper breathing rhythm again, Wolfgirl inhaled slowly, trying to draw in as much of the scent as she could. The feeling of electricity started up again and she let herself fall into it. The wave spread through her chest, across her stomach and then went further.

Sighing pleurably, she felt her panties suddenly getting wet as her fluid lubricated down below. She jerked slightly as wet fabric brushed against her suddenly swollen and sensitive folds. The smell of vaginal fluid joined with Shadow's own masculine scent. Heat flooded through her and she suddenly felt extremely hot. Reaching up, she yanked off her hat, letting her ponytail fall across her shoulder.

*He smells sooo good,* Wolfgirl rubbed her face in his side luxuriating in the feel of his thick fur, wishing she could rub every inch of her body against his.

Shadow let out a quiet yelp as he suddenly tensed. Wolfgirl could feel his muscles shifting as his tail rose. She spread her legs slightly as she imagined him clambering on her back, his rod poking at her folds and then sliding into her wet entrance...

*No! Sophia's eyes widened as she felt another round of warm fluid trickle out of her. I can't! This is wrong!*

Mentally flailing about, she tried to picture Logan, someone, anyone. Slowly, she felt her arousal ebb and she realized she was panting. Shadow let out a disappointed whine as she withdrew her face and shoulder from his side.

"I'm sorry," she apologized sharply. "I like you, but not like that. I mean, you're a wolf and I'm human."

*Am I? Wolfgirl felt herself blush. Am I not a werewolf? A wolf-girl?*

"And there's a boy," Sophia explained, trying to distract herself.

Shadow let out a low, menacing growl that made Sophia's blood chill.

"Ah, we're not going out... yet. I've wanted... I want to," Sophia babbled on. "He's attractive; I mean you're attractive too, for a wolf."

Sophia sat on the ground, her damp panties clinging uncomfortably to her still blood-engorged labia.

"I guess I'm a werewolf, but..." she hugged her knees close, flustered. "Oh, why does this have to be complicated."

Shadow let out a chuff before stepping out into a moonlit patch of ground. Sophia's face reddened at the silhouette of a long rod-like appendage underneath the wolf, although she couldn't bring herself to look away. Distantly, she realized she was shivering and getting very tired all of a sudden.

*Oh, I can still smell him,* Wolfgirl quivered.

Stepping forward, he caught the sleeve of her coat with his teeth and gently pulled.

"Come with?" Sophia asked hesitantly, starting to shiver violently. "Just a minute."

Luckily, she had dropped her hat close by and she pulled it down over her ears. Shadow waited patiently in the moonlight until she stood. By this point, Sophia's legs were quite numb and she couldn't help her teeth chattering. The big wolf yipped and started trotting away. Folding her arms around herself, Sophia unsteadily followed.

*So cold...* Sophia stumbled over an unseen root, barely keeping her balance.

After a few dozen yards, Shadow stopped in front of a bulge in the hill and whined softly. There, a large pine tree had fallen, excavating a large hole in the side of the hill with its roots. Shadow nudged her leg tenderly and Sophia dropped to all fours and crawled into the small cave. Lying down on the hard ground, she struggled to get her backpack off before curling up into a ball.

What little light there was in the cave disappeared as Shadow clambered in after her. Wiggling forward, he shifted his back until it was pressed up against her. Grateful, Sophia uncurled as much as she could and embraced his warm body. After several long minutes, feeling started to return to her legs and her violent shivering subsided.

"Thank you," Sophia whispered.

For the next ten minutes, Sophia just lay there, holding Shadow tightly. With her face pressed into his back, her nose was saturated with his scent and she could think of nothing she wanted more. When she felt she could move again without shaking, she uncurled a bit.

"It was foolish to come out here," she admitted. "I wanted to feel like I did during the full moon. I was so happy and felt like I could do anything."

Shadow made no noise, only wiggled further back against her.

"I didn't even think werewolves existed two months ago," Sophia continued. "Now I am one and all I can think about is how miserable I am when I'm not trying to be a wolf."

Her stomach growled and she felt Shadow raise his muzzle briefly. She laughed miserably.

"It doesn't help me, but I brought you something," she said, reaching behind her for her backpack.

Dragging it over herself, she wrestled the middle zipper open with a gloved hand. Immediately, the cave was filled with the savory smell of the doggy treats she had been saving. Her mouth watered as Shadow squirmed excitedly. Taking one out, she held it in front of Shadow, letting him sniff it. Then, she felt a tug as he clamped his mouth down on it, his teeth clicking. She giggled softly as he noisily chewed.

“They do smell good,” she grabbed another one out of her bag and sniffed it. “I guess what’s good for a wolf is good for a wolf-girl.”

It smelled slightly stale, but it had a savory, meaty aroma to it. Bringing it to her mouth, Sophia bit into it. To her delight, it had a strong beef-like flavor. Overcome by hunger, she scarfed it down, licking at the crumbs that had fallen onto Shadow’s fur. Grabbing the last two in her bag, she gave one to Shadow before consuming the other. Feeling better, she basked in the feeling of the wolf’s powerful body.

*He’s so caring, so loving, Sophia thought. I’m a werewolf; would having a wolf for a boyfriend really be so wrong? I don’t have to do... all that.*

“I love you,” she whispered and gave the wolf’s head a lick.

Shadow’s tail jerked and she felt him gently lick her gloved hand that was draped across him. Feeling safe and her hunger sated for the moment, Wolfgirl closed her eyes and smiled.

The Dream:

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1o5NjB7MV\\_i--LL4T0oITbviMFK3p8DkFX1WyGAASqos/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1o5NjB7MV_i--LL4T0oITbviMFK3p8DkFX1WyGAASqos/edit?usp=sharing)

## Chapter 25

*Urg... My head hurts...* Sophia woke to a throbbing headache, a parched mouth and the feeling of desperately needing to pee. *Did I fall asleep..?*

She could feel she was laying partially on her side with her legs curled inwards. Her shoulder was awkwardly scrunched against the side of the cave Shadow had guided her to. To her relief, Shadow's large warm body was still pressed into her's. The small cave was dark, but she could vaguely make out the wolf's shape in the little moonlight that made its way into the cave.

"Ohh..." she uttered as pins and needles radiated through her pinned right arm.

Shadow shifted and let out a concerned whine.

"I'm okay," she assured Shadow in a raspy voice. "Just sore."

Reaching her left hand across her body, she gave the wolf a reassuring scritch on his back. She shivered as an icy draft punctuated the otherwise warm air in the cave.

"I guess I fell asleep," she observed. "Thanks for staying with me."

*If Shadow hadn't been there...* She shivered again, this time at the thought of freezing alone in the mountains.

"I should head back," she said, feeling around for her backpack. "I have school tomorrow."

She expected Wolfgirl to protest at the idea of going home, but she seemed chastened after the night's events. Finding the backpack tucked against the back of her legs, she worked it up her body. As she did, a savory burst of air made its way to her nose as the bag was compressed. Shadow let out a hopeful whimper.

"I'm sorry Shadow," Sophia apologized. "We ate them all. They were good, weren't they?"

*I'll have to see about buying some. I wonder if they're cheaper than human food?*

With a few quick jerks, she managed to get her main compartment open wide enough to fit a gloved hand in. Reaching in, she felt around the interior.

*Waterbottle... pen... ah!* Her hand felt the hard shape of her phone.

Grabbing it, she brought it out and flipped it open, partially illuminating the small space. The signal bar was unsurprisingly empty and the "no service" icon was active. But what she was really looking for...

"5:32 AM???" Sophia exclaimed, panicking. "I need to get home!"

Her bladder complained as she squirmed and tried to maneuver around Shadow. The startled wolf rolled away and yelped. With her hand freed, Sophia managed to get onto her stomach and started pushing herself out of the entrance made by the fallen tree's root.

Shadow let out a cross between a yelp and a whine.

"I know it's really cold," Sophia replied, sensing the wolf's worry.

Even as she spoke, she could feel the cold night wind penetrating the paltry protection offered by the denim of her jeans. When her head cleared the cave entrance, she staggered to her feet. Pain seemed to emanate from every muscle in her body and she clutched her pounding head.

*Need to pee...* she clenched her legs as her bladder threatened to empty itself.

"Uh, just a minute," she told the wolf whose head was now poking out of the cave entrance. "Please don't look."

Stumbling, she made her way to a small copse of young evergreens. They were just big and thick enough to afford some modesty. Undoing the button of her jeans, she worked them and her underwear down her legs. She bit her lower lip in embarrassment as her panties briefly stuck to her skin and the smell of dried vaginal fluid reached her nose. That scent was shortly overwhelmed by a strange mixture of human and lupine urine as she emptied herself.

After pulling up and fastening her jeans, Sophia let Wolfgirl satisfy her instinct to inspect the rapidly cooling waste. As ever, there was little Wolfgirl could glean with her nose aside from that it belonged to her. Still, the act felt necessary and seemed to appease the strange urges and instincts that had appeared with the latest full moon.

Walking out of the copse, Sophia saw Shadow's dark form in front of the cave. He was still as she approached and so she was caught completely off guard when the wolf suddenly stepped forward and stuck his nose between her legs and sniffed. Briefly, Wolfgirl suggested letting him, but her human sensibilities came in a rush. Heat flowed into her face and she roughly pushed his snout away. Immediately, she regretted her response.

"Oh! I'm sorry!" she exclaimed as he yelped and staggered to the side.

Quickly squatting, she wrapped her arms around the wolf in a tight hug to reassure him, "You surprised me and... well, it's not something people do."

Shadow let out an irritated chuff, but turned his head and gave her an affectionate lick on the cheek. Down here, she could faintly smell the wolf's musk and her face felt like it got even hotter. Sensing that the wolf forgave her, she let go before Wolfgirl could get any ideas. Shadow whined and turned his head towards the cave.

"I know it's dangerous and cold, but I really need to go home," Sophia told him as she knelt in front of the cave. "Trust me, I'd much rather be with you."

Reaching in, she felt her backpack and pulled it out. After zipping closed the front compartment, she pulled out her water bottle and downed several gulps of the near freezing water. Thirst quenched, but now feeling chilled, she screwed the cap back on and threw it back in her backpack.

Shouldering her backpack, she looked around. It had grown even darker as the moon had slipped behind the mountains and she could barely make out the cave entrance a few feet away. In her confusion the night before, she had lost track of which direction her house was. Tossing her head back, she sniffed the air, hoping to catch the scent of something that might point her in the right direction. Unfortunately, her nose was still too feeble to find anything. Fear threatened to overwhelm her and she looked down at the silhouette of her companion.

"Can you help me get home?" Sophia asked, gesturing vaguely, desperately hoping he understood.

Shadow was silent for a moment and then let out a clipped bark. Turning, he started trotting away from the cave.

"You're the best!" Sophia smiled gratefully and jogged after.

Shadow moved quickly, forcing Sophia to stay close lest she lose him in the darkness. A few times she did lose him, but he always came back to find her. Each time, the wolf let out an irritated growl as though he were scolding a young pup. Sophia could feel Wolfgirl's shame and she couldn't help lowering her head.

After thirty minutes, Sophia's legs were starting to feel numb and she feared she was going to end up hypothermic again before they ever made it out of the mountains. However, her fears were allayed when they rounded a foothill and she glimpsed artificial lights through the trees. As the trees started to thin and more lights became visible, Shadow stopped and sat on his haunches. Once she had covered the distance between them, Sophia crouched down next to him and placed an arm around him.

"Thank you..." Sophia whispered emotionally. "For everything."

Letting Wolfgirl take over, she nuzzled the wolf's head with her own before giving him a lick across his furry cheek. Shadow returned the gesture before letting out a whine.

"I... Well, I'll miss you, Shadow," Wolfgirl told the wolf, feeling like she was going to cry. "I'll come back as soon as I can... and be better prepared."

Before she could have second thoughts, she sprang up and took off running across the field.

Shivering by the time she reached her house, she was relieved to find it still dark. As she slid the door open, the lingering smell of freeze dried mashed potatoes and barbecued pork from a TV dinner along with the scent of beer greeted her. The smell and sight of the empty tray her dad had left on the table reminded her she hadn't eaten much since lunch the day before. Before she could think about raiding the fridge, she noticed a distant beeping.

She glanced at the microwave clock. *Oh no, my alarm has been going off for half an hour. For once, I hope my dad got plastered.*

Carefully pulling a chair from the table, she carefully untied and removed her boots. Picking them up, she walked as softly as she could. The beeping got louder as she neared her room and it was shortly joined by the sound of another alarm clock going off in her dad's room.

*Crap, that's right, he gets up at 6:00 now,* she closed the last few steps to her room, opened the door and slipped in.

After closing the door quietly, she closed her eyes and exhaled. The familiar scent of her room was welcoming, although she already missed the smells of the forest and Shadow. Somewhere in her mind's recesses, Wolfgirl whimpered in resignation at her renewed confinement.

As the immediate threat of discovery faded, the rest of her body started filing its grievances. Bringing her hands to her face, she cupped her head as it started pounding. The skin on her legs, numb until now, started burning and itching as feeling returned. Her back, forced to lie contorted on uneven and hard ground for hours, ached as she slipped her backpack off. Opening it, she greedily sucked down the remaining water in her bottle.

*Well, last night was not one of the smarter things I've done,* she curled into a ball under her bed covers and tried to will her head to stop pounding. *I'll have to get some warmer clothes for the winter and other stuff. I certainly can't rely on my... my boyfriend to save me every time.*

Her headache seemed to ease as her heart beat faster at the memory of Shadow's strong, but gentle body pressed against her.

"You're four dollars and eighty-four cents off," Rob told her roughly after counting her till. "Cutting it really close there. You have, what, one more write-up before a suspension?"

"I'll do better; I promise," Sophia pleaded softly. "Today was just really rough."

"We all have rough days," Rob sneered. "Most of us do our best job anyway. Don't stay up all night on Facebook or whatever it is you kids are on these days."

*Jerk,* Sophia quietly fumed. *At least I don't smell like I haven't showered in months.*

Losing the battle to keep from reacting to the awful combination of his body odor, cigarette smoke and a mix of dozens of chemicals that seemed to cling to him, she felt her eyes watering. The unpleasant mixture was aggravating the headache she hadn't been able to fully shake all day.

*Did you bathe in every cleaning supply we sell?* Sophia rubbed her burning nose.

"Are you crying?" he asked contemptuously and rolled his eyes. "Girls always fall apart at the slightest problem. Anyway, here's your check."

He held out an envelope with Sophia's name on it and she took it.

*One bright spot today at least.*

"Can I go?" she asked impatiently.

Rob waved dismissively and then stalked off carrying her till, leaving a lingering stench. Eager to put the day behind her, Sophia wasted no time in leaving the register. Following the least odorously unpleasant path through the store she'd found over the last week, she headed for the time clock in the break room. Unfortunately, she discovered someone had washed down the table in the break room recently as she entered.

*I wish I had stayed in the woods this morning.* Sophia punched out, grabbed her belongings and retreated from the breakroom. *Gah, I'm starving.*

Pausing outside the breakroom, she took a moment to take a look through her wallet. It was depressingly thin.

*Only a few dollars,* she grimaced. *That's not going to get me far. I could get a chicken leg or maybe a beef stick.*

Unfortunately, there was no fried chicken left at the deli when she checked. Walking over to the snack food aisle, she stared longingly at the beef jerky. Wolfgirl suggested just grabbing a bag and tearing it open, but Sophia nixed that idea. Briefly, she considered peanuts, but nothing except meat sounded appetizing.

*Why couldn't I be a were-something-that-wants-cheap-food? I'll grab one of the beef sticks up front, that should get me home at least.*

As she stood there, a shopper stopped to grab a box of microwave popcorn. Sophia smiled weakly at him when something in his cart caught her eye.

*Hmm, I wonder if there's something Shadow would like?* She considered the big bag of dog food at the bottom of the customer's cart. *I'll just take a look and see what the store has.*

As she approached the pet food aisle, the scent of rawhide and various kibbles reached her nose. The rawhide smelled good and there were some appealing meaty smells, but even Wolfgirl didn't find most of it particularly appealing.

*Ugh, how do cats stand to pee in that stuff?* Some of the scented cat litter reminded her of the cleaning aisle. *Wow, there's a lot of grain in dog food. Ooh, those smell good.*

Hanging from a strip of plastic hooks were rawhide bones advertised as being made of cowhide. Stopping, Wolfgirl couldn't help sniffing the display curiously.

*Too expensive, plus they're for chewing.* She forced herself away from the display before she bit one. *I... Shadow wouldn't like that.*

Finally, her eyes came to rest on small bags of dog treats that were only a few dollars. Wolfgirl started salivating as she saw the small morsels of meat peaking through the transparent parts of the bag.

*I could... get these. I'd get more per dollar than a beefstick.* Wolfgirl plucked the bag off the shelf and sniffed at it. *They do look really good.*

A woman with a basket walked into the aisle and Sophia quickly dropped her arm holding the bag to her side. Feeling like she had been caught doing something naughty, Sophia smiled innocently. The woman didn't even look at Sophia as she walked past and stopped by the cat food.

*Okay, I'm a hungry werewolf, but I'm not stooping to eating dog treats.* Reluctantly, she put the bag back on the shelf.

*Was my laptop always this noisy?* Sitting at her laptop as she licked the remaining juices from two chicken breasts from her plate, Sophia tried to ignore the high-pitched whine of the fan as it powered on.

After she had logged in, she pulled up her school email inbox, wondering if the Outdoors Club had sent anything. Immediately, she regretted it. All three emails were from teachers informing her they were missing the day's assignments. Mr. Pindlewood's email further expressed disappointment that she had nodded off in class several times and asked if she needed someone to talk to.

*For last night, it was worth it,* closing her inbox, she started searching for better cold weather clothes.

## Chapter 26

*Of course there's a snowstorm,* Sophia stared out her window at the swirling snow.

Sitting down at the foot of her bed, she turned to look over the supplies she had carefully set out on the bed. Picking up her new black snow pants, she looked it over before laying it next to a scarf with a red and white wolf pattern and a moisture wicking set of shirt and pants. Also on the bed were a thermos and several packs of jerky. It had been a struggle not to dig into the jerky after picking it up the night before. Over the last week, she had spent most of her free time either researching what to wear in cold weather or buying it.

Now, the howling wind outside seemed to mock her efforts. Feeling disheartened, Sophia picked up her sketch she had made over the weekend. The paper depicted her, or rather how she had come to picture Wolfgirl, leaning against Shadow. Spying a mistake on one of the wolf ears she had given herself, she worked the pencil out of the sketchbook's spiral binding and redrew the offending line.

*I suppose I could just go out anyway,* restlessly, she dropped the sketchbook on her bed. *No, even Shadow will be under shelter in this weather. If only I could change whenever I wanted...*

Although she had tried several times over the last week without success, she tried to will herself to transform. Looking in the mirror, she strained to see something, anything different. To her complete lack of surprise, nothing had happened.

*What's the point of a superpower that can only be used one night a month?* Feeling defeated, her eyes drifted to her backpack. *I suppose I should do my homework if I'm going to be stuck here.*

Retrieving her math book and notebook from her backpack, she started working on her assigned problems. At least she tried to. Every time she tried to focus on the first problem, her mind drifted to Shadow. She could almost feel how his tongue felt caressing her cheek, the softness of his fur, how gentle and caring towards her he was despite his strength...

"Ah! This isn't fair!" She exclaimed and threw down her pencil in frustration. "There has to be a way to change!"

Clambering off her bed, she pulled her chair away from her desk. Powering up her laptop, she gritted her teeth at the high pitched whine of the harddrive. Opening her browser, she looked through her folder of bookmarks she had collected over the last month and a half. There was one site in particular she had been curious about, but had felt silly about looking at.

*Here goes...* She clicked the link and waited.

A short time later, the page loaded and she found herself looking at dozens of art pieces of varying quality. Most of them featured anthropomorphic animals engaged in various activities, although there were a few pieces of writing and photos of people in giant animal costumes. However, what had drawn her a couple of weeks earlier was there was a subset that featured people in various stages of transformation into animals. As before, she couldn't help feeling more than a little self-conscious.

*I'm alone*, she glanced at the door to make sure it was closed. *Who's going to know?*

Looking at the top of the page, she spied a search bar and typed in 'werewolf'. Immediately, dozens of pictures and stories popped up, most showing people somewhere on the spectrum between human and lupine. There were even a few sequences thrown in and more than a few that were... suggestive. None of them looked similar to what she had experienced, but she found she enjoyed looking through the gallery anyway.

Clicking on one particularly well drawn comic of a female werewolf, she admired the artist's skill. The sequence itself depicted the woman's transformation as a curse, which Sophia found a bit discouraging. Still, she navigated to the folder containing the sequence to see the whole thing. It didn't take long to discover most of the sequence required an account.

*Oh, the hidden pics probably contain nudity*, Sophia blushed at that epiphany.

After looking at the pictures she could see, she went back to the search results. For a while, she found herself just examining the various styles and found she could quickly recognize art from an artist she had seen before. Most were poorly drawn, but some were extremely well done. Finally, she noticed there was a menu option for groups. Seeing there were several werewolf related groups, she selected the largest one.

*Okay, now I'm getting somewhere*, the group was named "The Werewolf Pack" and described itself as a community for both werewolves and werewolf lovers. *Huh, they have a chat group. Ah, I need an account.*

For a moment, she hesitated before shrugging. She hit "Create Account" and continued on.

*Username, uh*, she pondered for a moment. *'Wolfgirl'*.

A message appeared: 'Username already exists.'

*Damn*, she tapped her fingers on her keyboard before typing, 'IdahoWerewolf'.

This time, the 'success' page came up and she found herself in an unfamiliar chatlike application. The chat page she found herself on had some discussion about cats from earlier in the day and some cute pictures, but hadn't had any activity since.

*Now what?* Sophia stared awkwardly at the empty message input and then shrugged.

**IdahoWerewolf:** Hello?

**Nerius:** Yo

**CrazyWolf33:** Hey there.

**IdahoWerewolf:** This is my first time using Disarray so go easy. 😊 What do you all do here?

**CrazyWolf33:** Just like it says in the description, we're a group of werewolf enthusiasts and all around wolf fans. Mostly we just talk about whatever and shitpost.

**IdahoWerewolf:** Are there any like real werewolves here?

**CrazyWolf33:** We might have a few of those around here ;)

Buuuuut they might not be a bit shy 😊

**IdahoWerewolf:** Like, get furry kind of werewolves?

**Nerius:** We love all types of werewolves baby, as long it's a person turning into a wolf :3

**CrazyWolf33:** @IdahoWerewolf Just fyi, this is the general chat, so if you are interested in our RP section, it's the channel right below this one!

**IdahoWerewolf:** Cool. I'm kind of a new werewolf and could really use some help.

**Nerius:** Help with what? Deciding whether you prefer turning into a wolf on a full moon or shift anytime you want?

Sophia blinked in surprise, *how did they..?*

**IdahoWerewolf:** I mean yes actually.

**Nerius:** I don't personally RP that much here, I mostly discuss all things werewolf but if you need some ideas I'm happy to help. Personally I would go with the "shift anytime you want" option because full moon restriction seems bleh.

**CrazyWolf33:** Who's roleplaying? 😊

**Nerius:** @CrazyWolf33 I mean let's be real, as much as I love werewolves they don't exist as far as I know. And I'd have to see it to believe it.

**CrazyWolf33:** Ever the skeptic. Suit yourself. 🐾

**Nerius:** @IdahoWerewolf Right, you were in need of some help right? As a self-proclaimed werewolf expert, I'm sure I can be of use.

**IdahoWerewolf:** Dope! So yeah, I've only been a werewolf for a couple of months and I'm kind of confused. how does it all work anyway?

**Nerius:** Anyways, you gonna have to be a bit more specific my friend. Assuming we're talking about a western depiction of a werewolf, there's a lot of stuff to talk about. If we're talking about where the hair comes from, the bones changing, that stuff is way out of my expertise. That's more science-y stuff.

**IdahoWerewolf:** Oh, okay. I didn't know there were different types of werewolves. what do you mean a 'Western depiction of a werewolf'?

**FurBill73:** Heeey, another werewolf! Right on! You're from Idaho?

**IdahoWerewolf:** Yep

**FurBill73:** Awesome! Nerius knows a lot about werewolves, but swears they don't exist! The fool! Arooo!!!

**Nerius:** @IdahoWerewolf Well the usual werewolf stuff, like a full moon makes a person turn into an anthropomorphic wolf, usually because they got bit. There's also stuff related to their behavior in their human form, like extra cravings for meat and chasing squirrels. The last one was a joke. Mostly. Movies like Van Helsing are a great example. Of course there are... spicier stuff on the internet.

**IdahoWerewolf:** Definitely noticed the meat cravings. Spicier stuff?

Nerius: Let's just say I like to learn about all things werewolves, and that includes the sexual stuff... If you are a guy I'm sure you know what I'm talking about ;)

Sophia paused for a moment, taken aback. *Just what am I getting myself into?*

**IdahoWerewolf:** oh. No, Im a she.

**Nerius:** That's a surprise, well I suppose it shouldn't be but guys do many questionable things, including impersonating girls. I just assume everyone's a guy until otherwise. So my lovely shewolf, what other things do you wish to talk about? Ask me anything, I won't bite :3

**FurBill73:** A lady were? Not nearly enough of those! You're definitely welcome to talk to me!

Sophia stared at her monitor, a feeling of uneasiness creeping over her.

**IdahoWerewolf:** So, I know people are sposed to become weres by getting bit. But its weird because i didn't get bit. I'm not sure how it happened.

**Nerius:** Huh? Well that's a first. I suppose if you didn't get bit then you should roll with magic. Or I suppose supernatural is a more apt term. Did you pick up some cursed object that you weren't supposed to?

**IdahoWerewolf:** I dont know. A wolf skin? That's all i can think of.

**FurBill73:** That's different. I got bit a ways back and been howling ever since!

**Nerius:** o\_O

**Nerius:** Never heard of that, sounds like something some indigenous folks would do. I hear they tend to skin animals and use them in odd rituals to connect to the spirit world or something. Never heard of anything wolf related though. Plus, where would you even get wolf skin from?

**IdahoWerewolf:** A friend of mine had it at a party.

**Nerius:** Interesting friend you got lol

Well I suppose if this wolf skin is the cause of your werewolf transformation, then that would probably have a different effect. If I had to guess, would you be able to shift whenever you want? Cause this is definitely not your typical werewolf.

**IdahoWerewolf:** i just change on full moons so far Thats part of why im on here. I was hoping someone could tell me how to control it.

**FurBill73:** Like, not change at all? I get seeing it as a curse and all but its got its upsides. Once a month is fun!

**IdahoWerewolf:** no. change when its not the full moon.

**FurBill73:** That would definitely be awesome!

**Nerius:** You want to control when you shift into your werewolf side? Well that doesnt seem easy given you're a new werewolf but Id reckon you could try channeling your wolf side by high emotional response or... Hmm not sure if that's something you would want to explore.

**IdahoWerewolf:** an emotional response? Like what? What do you mean i wouldnt want to explore it?

**Nerius:** Well something that'll make you angry or aroused might trigger something to change, although thats for you to figure out. As for latter option... Well to put it bluntly, sex seems to be a potential method of shifting. But if you are not interested you could try a sex toy instead.

**IdahoWerewolf:** oh

**CrazyWolf33:** @Nerius Don't scare off the newbie! Going a little strong there.

**Nerius:** Im just giving what I know, plus you did put this server up for adults anyways

**CrazyWolf33:** Just sayin'. I know you ;)

**Nerius:** Well what do you think @IdahoWerewolf? Too much info?

**IdahoWerewolf:** I guess i hvant thought about it. But im kind of uncomfortable right now

**Nerius:** I see, well shoot me another question or DM whenever you want. I'll be sure to not mention anything too sexy :p

**IdahoWerewolf:** uh so i changed only a little the first time, but a lot more the second. Is that normal?

**CrazyWolf33:** Woah... What do you mean? I've always gone full anthro, although everything is fuzzy after I change.

**Nerius:** Gradual change? Thats a new one. Could you elaborate on your changes?

**IdahoWerewolf:** the first night it was just a bit of fur and my teeth and nails changed a little. I could smell and hear better. My ears got a little pointy. Second time i got a lot more fur, my ears could move, i grew big claws and pads on my hands and feet. And wow i could smell everything!

**Nerius:** Well doesnt sound too far off from a typical werewolf, just a slow burn change. I'd imagine you are gonna end up a full anthro sooner or later based on your descriptions. At least you won't be in heat xD

**IdahoWerewolf:** Full anthro? What's that?

**Nerius:** Oh I suppose you aren't a furry then, apologies for the lingo. It's basically a typical werewolf appearance, you know the whole digitigrade stance + the wolfman appearance, well wolf woman in your case. Just a wolf + human combination in general.

**IdahoWerewolf:** sounds neat! Any idea how long?

**Nerius:** Your described changes seem pretty slow, Id bet you would see a full anthro form maybe 3-4 full moons from the last one. But you know, if you did try my suggestions above you might see some quicker results. Quicken the pace I suppose.

**IdahoWerewolf:** Oh okay.

**CrazyWolf33:** She ain't sending you nudes @Nerius.

**FurBill73:** And we wonder why there aren't any lady weres.

**Nerius:** @CrazyWolf33 Hey I never asked for any, plus its not like she's actually a werewolf that could send feet pics or something, although I am a sucker for beans

**IdahoWerewolf:** One more thing. Is it normal to smell better after the second change? Everything seemed normal after the first one, but i can suddenly smell a lot better after the second.

**Nerius:** You mean you are keeping the changes after full moons?

**IdahoWerewolf:** I guess, yes, is that weird?

**FurBill73:** I can smell really well. I think that's normal, but I'm no expert.

**Nerius:** I mean if its just smell thats not something abnormal... Unless you have other kept changes?

Sophia thought for a long moment, but didn't feel comfortable bringing up the strange new instincts and urges yet.

**IdahoWerewolf:** No, that's it.

**Nerius:** You've got a pretty interesting set up for your werewolf character

**FurBill73:** 😊

**IdahoWerewolf:** thanks i guess. So thanks for answering my questions, but I have to go now.

**Nerius:** Nice meeting ya, hope to see you around here more :P

**FurBill73:** see ya girl! And awoooooo!!!

**IdahoWerewolf:** thanks ttyl

Sophia closed the tab and stared at her laptop screen. *Well that was... something. Those guys were a little creepy and I don't think they took me seriously. Like a sex toy? Really? Still, it was nice to be able to talk about what's happening to me.*

The fan page with the link to the chat was still up and she hovered the cursor over the x to close the tab. She couldn't quite bring herself to hit the mouse button though. Instead, she bookmarked the page and went to the site's search bar and simply typed 'wolves'.

## Chapter 27

Despite a six hour Saturday shift, Sophia felt ebullient as she turned the handle to her house. Smiling, she glanced over her right shoulder at the snow capped Tetons to the east. The day's light was just starting to fade and the air temperature had grown noticeably chillier. As the door swung open, the now familiar scents of stale beer and liquor greeted her as they rode the warm air. What she did not expect was the long cardboard box sitting in the entryway, partially blocking the hallway, nor the aroma of new plastic. She jumped as the unexpectedly loud roar of a crowd boomed from the living room.

"Sophia!" Her dad exclaimed eagerly from the living room as she stepped in. "Our early Christmas present was delivered today!"

*Early Christmas present..?* Sophia took a few steps forward and looked towards her dad's favorite chair.

He raised a hand holding a large remote she hadn't seen before and waved at her. Her dad's eyes darted back towards the television and he pumped a fist as the crowd roared again. Standing to either side of him on metal rods were dark gray speakers. Off to the side, resting against the wall, was their old television and TV stand. Stepping up to the threshold of the living room, she leaned to look at where it had once sat. In its place was a much larger television sitting on a new TV stand with a football game on.

"What do you think?" he asked enthusiastically from the living room.

She stared at him, unsure of how to respond, "it's nice I guess."

"I got a full entertainment system!" her dad beamed. "It was on sale for the holidays so I thought I would treat myself... and you of course. So, early Merry Christmas!"

"Isn't this really expensive..?" she inquired tentatively.

"Ah, don't you worry about that," her dad waved his hand dismissively. "I've got it all figured out."

He took a drink from the beer can in his other hand and continued, "Oh, I invited some work friends over. They should start arriving soon; you can hang out here with us if you want!"

Sophia glanced down nervously, "that's okay, I have... other plans."

At that moment, a knock sounded at the door.

"Hey babe, could you get that?" her dad requested.

Sighing, Sophia turned and opened the door to find a blond and gray bearded man around her dad's age standing there in a bulky tan coat. She smiled politely despite the overpowering scent of cigarettes and motor oil on him.

“This the Jones house?” he asked, looking her over in a way that made Sophia’s skin crawl.

“Ron!” her dad called from his chair. “Glad you made it! Come on in!”

The man grinned and stepped into the hallway, forcing Sophia to take a few steps back. He closed the door behind himself, and Sophia suddenly felt claustrophobic in the small hallway. She could feel Wolfgang urging her to find somewhere to hide.

“Hey Eric!” Ron greeted boisterously. “Your girl’s cute!”

A lump formed in Sophia’s throat even as she forced a smile.

“Hey, hey, she’s much too young for you!” her dad chided him. “Come see the new member of the family!”

“I’ll be in my room,” Sophia mumbled as the man started to take off his coat and boots.

Still in her own coat and boots, Sophia clomped quickly towards the relative safety of her room. Closing the door, she was perturbed to find she could still easily hear the television booming from the living room. She had barely gotten her backpack off when she heard the front door open and another male voice echo through the wall.

*Great, she stripped off her hat and gloves. Just what I need. Well, I have somewhere better to be anyway.*

Leaning back against the door, she pulled off her boots one after the other. Dropping them next to the door, she took off her coat and laid it down on her bed. Kneeling, she grabbed the plastic bag she had been keeping her new winter stuff in from under her bed. Pulling it out, she tossed it on the bed.

*Let’s see, she opened the bag and started pulling out its contents. Snow pants, balaclava, thermal underwear, jerky...*

Her stomach growled hopefully as she pulled out the beef jerky.

*I suppose I should save the jerky; it’s pretty expensive.* She jumped as the door slammed on the other side of the wall and several male voices again boomed through the wall. *But that means I have to go out there.*

Reluctantly, she opened her bedroom door again. The guys cheered loudly from the living room as the game announcer called a touchdown. Picking up her pace, she beelined for the kitchen.

She had just opened the fridge when she heard footsteps coming towards the kitchen. Looking up, she saw her dad enter, chuckling about something or other.

“Could you hand me the big red bowl of guacamole, sweetheart?” He asked her nonchalantly.

“Uh sure,” she replied, seeing and grabbing the bowl he described.

“You should meet the guys,” her dad suggested as she handed the bowl to him.

“I might in a bit,” she told him noncommittally, scanning for something quick to prepare. “I just want to eat and be by myself right now.”

Spying a package of hotdogs, she grabbed it and shut the fridge. There were only two hotdogs in it, but it would be enough. Stepping over to the counter, she set them on it while she grabbed a plate. Meanwhile, her dad had retrieved a large party bowl and was in the process of tearing open a bag of tortilla chips. Opening the microwave, she set her plate on the turntable before sliding the hotdogs onto it. Her mouth watered at the smell of the salty meat.

“You’re welcome to some guacamole,” her dad offered as he removed the plastic wrap. “I whipped it up earlier.”

“Maybe later,” she declined with a polite smile, trying not to flinch at the biting aroma of onion and jalapenos. “I’m sure it’s delicious.”

“No need to be shy, they’re great guys!” he insisted as she grabbed a bag of buns from the pantry.

“Fuck the refs!” someone yelled from the other room as several other voices groaned.

*I’m sure*, Sophia anxiously flipped her hair back over her shoulder as she filled a glass of water.

The microwave chimed and she grabbed the plate of sizzling hotdogs from it. Grabbing a pair of buns from the package, she set them on the plate.

“Enjoy your party,” she told him flatly and started walking out of the kitchen.

“Nothing on your dogs?” he asked her, mild surprise evident in his voice.

*He would notice that...* she felt her heart skip a beat.

“Not feeling like it today,” she stopped and shrugged.

“Hey Eric!” a voice called from the other room. “You’re missing the game!”

“That your girl in there?” Ron yelled. “No need for her to be shy!”

Something in Ron’s voice put her on edge and her mouth reflexively pulled into a snarl. Her dad stopped what he was doing and stared at her. Before her dad could say anything, she darted for the hallway.

Fifteen minutes later, she had scarfed down the hotdogs and was starting to feel uncomfortably warm underneath her winter gear. Grabbing her freshly prepared backpack, she headed for her door and frowned.

*Is someone smoking..?* The telltale scent of cigarette smoke tickled her nose. *Maybe I really should just go live in the mountains with Shadow.*

Taking a steadying breath, she yanked open her door.

*What. The. Hell?* Her anger spiked as the noxious smell of nicotine and tar seared the inside of her nose.

In the living room, she could see three other men besides her father. Aside from Ron, there was a guy who looked only a few years older than her and a burly man who was around her dad's age. Both Ron and the man with the beard had lit cigarettes in their hands. All four turned their heads towards her as she entered the hallway.

"Hey babe!" her dad called out casually before noticing her winter gear. "Where you headed?"

"Out," Sophia replied tersely. "Where it doesn't reek of middle-aged guys, cigarettes and beer. You're letting them *smoke?*"

"Watch your tone!" her dad admonished sharply, his expression becoming angry.

"And don't expect me back!" she bit out before opening and slamming the door so hard the windows rattled behind her.

*Asshole!* She fumed as she stomped down the house's front walk. *I'd much rather spend my time with someone who actually cares about and respects me.*

At the end of the driveway, she turned right and headed down the sidewalk. As the distance between her and her house grew, her anger ebbed. Within her, she could feel Wolfgirl growing restless as she sensed freedom and the unshakable feeling Shadow was waiting for her resurfaced. As her thoughts turned to the wolf, her frown transformed into a sheepish grin as she remembered some of her... activities from the night before and the role Shadow had played in her fantasies.

*What is wrong with me?* Sophia bit her lip as a feeling of warmth ignited and spread below. *I'm human! I should find such ideas too disgusting to even imagine! It simply isn't right!*

She stumbled as her legs suddenly felt rubbery.

*I'm not entirely human anymore though. Her entire body felt like it was tingling and her heart was beating rapidly. I'm a wolf-girl and he's a wolf. Besides, it's not like we're going to actually... do anything.*

Stopping at the intersection, she stopped and looked around her. Apart from her, the streets and sidewalks were empty. Confident no one would interfere, she headed north. The road continued on for a few feet before giving way to the same grassy field behind her house.

As she stepped off the pavement and onto the frozen snow-covered earth, Sophia allowed herself to be displaced by Wolfgirl.

The night was moonless and away from the houses, the available light was minimal. Wolfgirl moved as fast she dared across the frozen field in the darkness, each step sinking into several inches of powdery snow. The wind was blowing strongly, but her prep work over the last week was paying off. Her snow pants and coat may not have been the thick layers of fur she desired, but they were adequate. Even so, the occasional sting of ice landing on her exposed cheeks was a constant reminder she wasn't a true creature of the wilderness.

A gust of wind carried the enticing scent of some small animal to her nose and Wolfgirl lowered into a crouch. Placing her hands between her legs, she scanned for the prospective prey. Unfortunately, the scent had only been on the wind for a moment and she continued on.

*What would I have done if I actually did see something?* Wolfish desire for freshly hunted meat dueled with her still human conceptions of food and horror at the prospect of killing. *And what if I caught it?*

As the open field gave way to conical evergreen trees, the darkness seemed to consume everything ahead of her. Her pace slowed as she was forced to carefully place each step. The only sounds were frozen branches swaying in the wind, her own footsteps and the material of her own pants and coat rubbing together.

*I wish I could stay out here forever,* Wolfgirl paused to savor the mountain air, angling her nose upwards. *Ooh, what's that?*

The scent of pine and spruce was strong of course, but she could also smell the barest hint of what she instinctively recognized as animals. Focusing on the tantalizing traces, she tried to identify what she was detecting. Somehow she knew there were multiple sources, but what they were and where they were coming from was maddeningly out of reach. That was for all but one.

*Shadow?* A faint, but familiar scent rose above the others and a wave of giddiness rolled through her. *I can smell him!*

Unfortunately, it was only the briefest hint and she couldn't determine the direction it was coming from. Sniffing the air, she tried to pick up his alluring musk again and started carefully threading her way through the trees.

*Maybe if I get closer to the ground...* getting to her hands and knees, Wolfgirl again concentrated on her olfactory sense. *Ah! I found it!*

Elated with her success, Wolfgirl let her instincts drive her. Swiveling in place on all fours, she continued sampling the air. Without consciously telling herself to, she started crawling

forward. To her delight, the scent grew stronger as she progressed. Eager to be with her friend, she jumped to her feet.

“Ah!” Wolfgirl yelped as her forehead struck a branch.

Clutching her now aching forehead, she sank back onto her knees. *If only I had paws!*

A whine came from somewhere nearby. At least the human part of her mind heard it as a whine. Deep within the bestial subconscious now driving her a different interpretation floated up to her conscious mind:

‘Safe?’

It wasn’t a word so much as an instinctive comprehension of lupine auditory communication and thought. There was far more being said Wolfgirl sensed, a layered complexity she could only understand in the most rudimentary way. Even compared to her primitive ability to understand Shadow under the light of the full moon, it was painfully lacking.

“Shadow!” she grinned happily, forgetting about her stinging scalp. “I’m okay! I just hit my head.”

Peering through the gloom, she looked eagerly for the wolf, but didn’t see more than pine needles and branches dimly silhouetted against faintly glowing snow. In that moment, Sophia’s human mind finally caught up to what her wolfish side had just experienced.

“Wait, you talked!” She announced gleefully. “Sort of!”

Shadow growled. Sophia concentrated on the sound, but she was disappointed to find it didn’t sound like anything other than a growl.

“I can’t see you,” Sophia admitted, still on her knees.

Something pushed against her back and she let out a startled yelp. Falling onto her hands, she scrambled on all fours several feet away before pivoting, spraying snow everywhere. Muscles tense and heart beating, she stared wide eyed towards the spot she had just left with her teeth bared.

In the gloom, she could barely make out a candid shape that was sitting on its haunches. The form made an amused sounding ‘chuff’.

“Shadow!” Sophia breathed in relief. “You scared me nearly to death!”

The wolf let out a series of ‘arfs’, chuffs and whines as the dark shape moved towards her.

Again, she tried to glean something, anything from the wolfish communication without success. *Why did I feel like I could understand him a few moments ago and not now?*

Her confusion was quickly forgotten as Shadow gave her an affectionate lick across her mouth. A thrill emanated from where his tongue had brushed her face and traveled through the

rest of her. Relaxing, she gladly threw herself into Shadow's strong, captivating musk. Leaning forward, Wolfgirl rolled her own pitifully small human tongue across Shadow's muzzle.

Shadow let out a rolling growl, 'Missed you.'

"You've been all I can think about," Wolfgirl murmured as she brushed her cheek against the side of Shadow's furry head. "I wish I had a fur coat like yours."

Shadow whined, 'worried'.

Although she was distantly aware she could understand the wolf, she was too lost in the moment to give it any thought.

"It's okay," Wolfgirl guessed at what he was worried about. "I got some new fake 'fur' so I could see you."

She could sense Shadow was puzzled by her human vocalizations, but he seemed to understand the underlying sentiment. The wolf moved away from her and she nearly fell over trying to remain in contact.

'Follow,' Shadow rumbled quietly and the wolf's dark shape started moving away from her.

Knowing she'd quickly lose him if she stood, Wolfgirl awkwardly started following on her hands and knees. Shadow, for his part, seemed to be aware she wasn't going to be able to move quickly and kept his gait slow. His casual stride left a furrow in the snow blanketed ground and Wolfgirl followed within it.

With her nose so close to the source of Shadow's intense musk, it quickly became difficult to focus. Heat and desire blossomed within her chest and her movements became clumsy. Every fiber of her being wanted nothing more than to melt into the wolf's powerful and protective embrace.

*Stay focused*, unused to moving on hands and knees for an extended period, especially in snow, she gasped for air. *Just have to keep moving*.

After a couple hundred yards, the dense foliage started to subside and Wolfgirl staggered to her feet. Shadow was still just an amorphous shape, but at least she could walk and see him. The wolf increased his pace and Wolfgirl was forced to jog to keep up on the dark and uneven terrain.

Finally, the wolf stopped under a stand of tall trees next to a tall boulder that was leaning against several other rocks, forming a sheltered area. In front of the boulder, the snow hadn't piled up as deeply and the air was fairly still. Shadow disappeared in the darkened hole formed by the leaning rock.

'Safe', the wolf let out a rumble as Wolfgirl cautiously ducked into the shadow.

Aside from Shadow and her breathing, Wolfgirl could hear nothing but silence. Then, she heard the clicking of the wolf's claws coming towards her. To her surprise, she felt Shadow's paw gently push against her upper leg. Sensing he was telling her to sit, she cautiously squatted down. Patting around, she discovered the exposed rock they were on was bare of snow. She let out a tired, but contented sigh as she let herself sink down onto the rock.

Nuzzling her shoulder with his nose, Shadow gently pressed against her until she lay on her side. Then the wolf maneuvered himself behind her and contorted his frame around her as best he could. Wolfgirl's heart fluttered as the wolf's bulk snuggled into her. Feeling his paw stretch across her, she stroked it affectionately with a gloved hand.

'Friend... Wolf...' Shadow let out a sequence of quiet yips and whines.

It took Wolfgirl a moment to register he was 'talking' about her.

'My mate...' Shadow continued. 'Love...'

## Chapter 28

Shadow's "words" reverberated through Wolfgirl's mind, down to her heart and into her soul. Butterflies took flight in her stomach and her body trembled from the excitement running through it. Grinning, she pushed herself backwards, trying to fit as much of her body into Shadow's furry embrace as she could. In response, the wolf leaned onto her. Her hand holding the wolf's forepaw laying across her body tightened as though she was afraid he'd pull away.

"I love you too," she murmured, her heart pounding in her ears.

*If only it wasn't so cold!* She desperately searched for any hint of his fur contacting her skin, but her artificial cocoon of winter clothing proved too complete.

Trembling slightly, she reached her left hand around her chest. Though the thought of releasing her hold on the wolf felt too terrible to contemplate, she willed herself to let go of his forepaw. In a flash, she tore her glove off and spared no time reestablishing her grip. The feeling of the wolf's fur against her bare skin sent shockwaves down her arm. Wolfgirl closed her eyes and sighed contentedly, allowing herself to sink into the feeling of security his body's weight and scent brought.

Wolfgirl giggled softly with her eyes still closed, "I never expected my first boyfriend to be a wolf."

Shadow simply leaned in and nuzzled the bottom of her wool hat, forcing it up. Then, she felt his snout rub against her hair and exposed neck with his nose, making her skin tingle as though energy was skittering across it. Wolfgirl giggled again, her grin widening.

Opening her eyes, she rubbed his foreleg and murmured, "Of course, I certainly never expected to become a werewolf. I've dreamed of being a wolf, but never truly believed it could happen."

Shadow chuffed quietly, 'strange sounds, but mate sounds.'

Immersed in her wolf side as she was, her instincts picked up on his meaning. *Oh! He doesn't know what I'm saying, but likes the sound of my voice!*

"I wish I could talk with you," Wolfgirl said wistfully. "But I'm happy you'll listen anyway. People see wolves as just another animal, but you're so much more."

The two lay there for several minutes, and then Wolfgirl lay on her back. Shadow maneuvered in response, draping his body across her's. She couldn't see the wolf in the dark, but could feel his gentle breathing against her cheek. Sophia might have found the slightly rotten smell of his breath offputting, but it held a certain allure to Wolfgirl.

Reaching her left hand down to her now pinned right arm, she managed to remove her last glove. Carefully, she felt for her companion and then buried her now bare hand in the thick

fur on the wolf's upper body. Running her fingers through his coat, she enjoyed the contrasting feeling of his long, wiry outer coat and cottony undercoat. Finding the wolf's neck, she scratched deeply, marveling at how solid the muscle underneath was.

'Feels good', Shadow let out a pleased rumble deep in his throat.

Smiling, Sophia began steadily making her way down his body with her hand, scritching as she went. The wolf shifted, leaning into her fingers. After a bit, Wolfgang found herself feeling uncomfortably warm underneath Shadow's furry bulk.

"Get up for a moment," she told him softly as she gently pushed against him.

The wolf got the hint and rolled off to her side. Quickly, Wolfgang unzipped her coat and took her left arm out of it. Laying back down on the coat, she gave the wolf a scratch. Shadow took no time resuming his position on top of her. This time, Wolfgang made sure her left arm was free and she wrapped it around the wolf in a loose hug. Despite the chilly air, her hands felt quite warm enmeshed as they were in the wolf's coat.

Reaching down, she pulled her sweatshirt and undershirt up so Shadow's underside could directly contact her stomach. His head rested against the left side of her and she inhaled, basking in her lupine boyfriend's unique scent. Although she couldn't detect nor interpret the wealth of information she knew was there, it was as healthy and pleasingly masculine as ever.

As she allowed herself to be consumed by her lover's intoxicating scent, she found herself becoming acutely aware of her breasts, thighs, butt and womanhood as she felt blood rushing into them. Squirming slightly, she ground her left breast into the wolf's ribs. Covered, as it was, by her clothes, she found the muted sensations it engendered frustratingly inadequate.

She sensed Shadow lift his head next to her and she turned her face towards him. The caress of his breath touched her face and she felt one of his whiskers tickle her cheek. Giddy, she stuck out her tongue and managed to make contact with his upper lip and nose.

The wolf moaned and chuffed, 'like'.

Wolfgang continued to run her tongue across his snout. To her delight, Shadow's tongue found hers and they started a slow, but sensual dance. Soon, they had moved past each other's tongues and Wolfgang started running her tongue across Shadow's lips and exposed teeth as he ran his along her neck. She let out an involuntary moan as his gentle strokes sent shivers down her spine and her embrace of her lover tightened.

As the sensations cascaded through Wolfgang's body, her arousal reached heights she didn't think possible. Her already sensitive nipples hardened and rubbed against her bra as she twisted to expose even more of her neck. Each new stimulation caused spasms to ripple through her muscles. Below, she felt her vaginal lips twitch and pull apart as blood rushed in. An

intense feeling of heat and wetness soon followed along with a desire for the space that was her vaginal canal to be filled.

Her nostrils flared as several new enticing smells entered them. One she recognized as that of her own arousal: feminine and a strange mix of human and wolf. The other was male: fully lupine and no less primal than hers. This new scent from her lover was almost too much for her to handle and she sucked in the air it rode greedily.

In the back of her mind, she became aware of a new sensation on the bare skin of her belly. It felt like a warm, slightly squishy stick pressing into her soft flesh. This curious new arrival didn't have a coating of fur, but felt oddly smooth and hard.

*Is that..?* Wolfgirl stilled her tongue as she tried to process the feel of the strange object.  
*It is..!*

Heat flooded into her face, and she giggled as the wolf's extended rod slid across her belly.

"Can I..?" she asked hesitantly, too bashful to complete the question.

Shadow seemed to sense her desire anyway and rolled a bit to the side. Tentatively, Wolfgirl reached her hand across her stomach. For what felt like an eternity, her hand found nothing. She was about to lose her nerve entirely when her fingers at last contacted the strange appendage. Shadow jerked at her touch and she pulled her hand away in alarm.

The wolf whined, 'want'.

With ragged breaths, Wolfgirl brought her hand back to the long shaft. Curious, she ran her fingertips along it, enjoying the feel of the smooth, soft skin punctuated by the occasional blood vessel. Beneath the layers of her snowpants, pants, thermal underwear and panties, she felt her vaginal walls convulse longingly.

*I'm touching a wolf's penis!* Wolfgirl bit her lip as she continued to explore his length.

As her fingers reached the shaft's tip, she discovered it narrowed instead of flaring into a bulb like she expected.

*Huh, that doesn't feel like what they showed in health class,* her fingers trembled as the rod continued to taper.

Wolfgirl's eyes widened as her fingers drifted into something slimy and sticky at the end of the wolf's manhood. Withdrawing her fingers, she brought them to her nose and sniffed. The scent of the sticky fluid was thick with the wolf's musk, metallic and faintly sweet. The strong musk made her heart flutter and she exhaled reluctantly.

On a whim, she brought her fingers to her mouth. Bringing them to her lips, she ran her tongue over them.

*Huh, a bit salty and somewhat bitter,* Wolfgirl explored the taste thoughtfully. *Not too bad.* Shadow, meanwhile, had put his weight back onto her.

'Love' he emitted a low, but gentle rumble and then licked her cheek. 'Mate?'

She felt his member press against her stomach as she licked him in response. Her thoughts drifted to her bestial fantasy from the night before...

"Too fast," Sophia whispered before letting her head sink to the ground.

*This is wrong, so why doesn't it feel wrong?* A surge of anxiety and uncertainty extinguished the fire in her loins and she suddenly felt drained.

"I love you, but this is too much, too fast," she murmured. "And, well, you're a wolf and I'm human, mostly."

Shadow let out a disappointed whine that needed no translation even with Sophia's chaotic emotions drowning out Wolfgirl. In response, she gave the wolf an affectionate scratch along his neck.

"It's all so confusing," Sophia reflected. "I shouldn't want to be out here and I shouldn't be attracted to a wolf, but I am."

Running her hand down his soft, but muscular back, she continued, "I should be terrified by what's happening to me and all I can think about is how much happier the more wolf-like I am."

Shadow simply snuggled his head against hers. She was simultaneously relieved and disappointed to note she could no longer feel his erect penis against her stomach. A line of coldness on her skin was all that assured her she hadn't imagined it.

"My heart wants me to be a wolf and be with you," Sophia admitted. "But what if this is as far as it goes? What if this is it?"

Inhaling, she savored Shadow's calming scent and smiled in the darkness. Blindly, she lifted her head and extended her tongue, managing to awkwardly lick the top of Shadow's head and ear.

"And maybe that's okay," Wolfgirl said finally. "But I hope for more."

Then, she reached her arms around her furry lover and just held him against her.