

## Chapter 41

The roiling of Sophia's stomach pierced the veil of unconsciousness. Groaning, she pulled her legs tightly against her stomach in an effort to relieve her gastric distress and reclaim badly needed slumber. It only succeeded in compressing her digestive tract, intensifying the feelings of nausea.

*Oh God...* Her eyes flew open and she lifted her head.

As soon as she finished elevating her head, her stomach heaved and she vomited. The strong scent of bile and partially digested deer filled her nose and she retched again, emptying what remained in her stomach. Sliding her upper body away from the mess, she lay her head on the floor and just breathed, her tear-stained eyes staring at the blank wall. It was still dark out, but what light there was in the hallway gave the white plaster an otherworldly glow to her eyes.

*Right, I'm on the floor in my house.* The rest of her body started to come awake and she realized she was shivering violently. *I'm so cold... And everything hurts...* With some effort, she flipped to face the other side of the hall. *At least my stomach feels better.* She blinked away her tears and folded herself into a ball. *My body feels really strange, and why is my hip so wet?*

She looked down. There wasn't much light, but her enhanced eyes had no trouble making out the bare skin on her upper legs and stomach.

*Oh, I changed back. I'm human again.* Adrenaline surged through her at that recognition - as did soul-crushing disappointment. *I'm so sorry Shadow.*

Her flat mouth felt wrong and her tail was conspicuous in its absence. The hardwood floor sticking to her bare skin was a depressing confirmation that her beautiful fur coat was gone. A quick glance at her stomach confirmed she was back down to two mammaries.

*I'm lying in the hallway, completely naked, next to throw up...* Strength was returning to her limbs and she started to uncurl. *And in a puddle of something.*

Her movements disturbed the puddle, sending a current of air carrying the definitive scent of urine to her nose. She was disappointed to find she could no longer detect or parse the rich weave of chemical information she knew it contained. However, her brain readily recognized the strange mix of lupine and human the puddle produced as hers.

*Oh, crap, I must have wet myself changing back. I need to clean this up before Dad sees it.* Panic surged as certain realities of being human crashed back into her mind. *The vomit too.*

Rolling onto her front, being careful not to put her hands in the mess, she propped herself up and looked at the vomit. In the dim light, she couldn't make out colors but could see bits of bone, fur and various other chunks of deer lying in a puddle. She sniffed at it curiously,

finding the smell of bile didn't bother her like she expected it to. In fact, the partially digested bits of deer smelled like it might have actually been appetizing if she hadn't felt quite so sick still.

*Am I seriously considering eating vomit?* She forced herself away, making a face. *Yuck.*

Willing her exhausted body upright, she took a few steps towards the bathroom and then stopped. Instead of standing on two feet, she had risen to the balls of her feet and was moving down the hallway on all fours. The position was awkward and inefficient with her human anatomy, yet still felt right.

*It's going to be hard to get anything done like this and what if Dad sees me?*

Reluctantly, she forced herself up on two legs. It felt odd to be back on two feet again and she had to put a hand against the wall to steady herself. The disorientation only lasted a few seconds and she started down the hallway.

*Is dad home?* She paused at his door and listened. *I don't hear or smell anything. That's lucky.* Some of the tension drained out of her and she covered the last few feet of the hall.

Pushing the bathroom door open, she stopped as her darkened silhouette appeared in the mirror. Even in the dim light, she could see her body looked entirely human.

*I really hoped...* She slumped against the door frame as she fought back tears. *It's not fair!*

Sniffing, she flipped the light on out of habit as she stepped into the bathroom. She cried out at the sudden flare of pain in her eyes and quickly switched the light back off. Colorful spots flashed in her eyes as she closed them and turned the lights on again.

*Why couldn't I have kept my tail at least?* This time she slowly opened her eyes, letting them acclimate.

"Woah!" she uttered in surprise.

Her face, head and shoulders were caked in dried blood, dirt and other unidentifiable substances. Strands of fur stuck to the grime and the undersides of her hands were nearly blackened with dirt. Her hair had somehow made it through the night with her ponytail intact, but loose strands of hair lay across her shoulders and the rest of it was entangled with pine needles, sticks and other forest debris. However, that wasn't what caught her attention.

*My eyes.* She leaned in closer, not daring to blink. *They're different.*

The overall shape of her irises was human but gone was their previous hazel color. Instead, two circles of striking yellowish gold stared back at her.

*They're beautiful.* Excitement stirred in her chest as she admired her changed eyes. *I can't wait to show Shadow!*

Her eyes shifted downward as something in her mouth caught her attention. Her mouth broke into a grin, fully displaying her teeth. All four canines were noticeably narrower and longer, forming four pointed peaks. They weren't as long as they had been during even the first full moon, but it gave her a decidedly more wolfish look. She playfully growled and snapped her jaw shut, her teeth clicking together.

*So I did change more. I can't wait to show Shadow!* She ran her tongue over them, exploring the changed profile of her mouth. *Ooh, I wonder if anything else is different.*

Eagerly, she looked over the rest of her body but failed to find anything aside new from her legs and armpits needing another shave. Even her pubic hair was exactly how she remembered it.

*I guess that's it; even my sense of smell doesn't seem any different.* She sighed as her elation ebbed. *But why does my body feel so weird?*

Now that she was over her earlier disorientation and nausea, she couldn't help noticing strange sensations all over her body - like the signals her brain was getting didn't quite match what it expected. It was especially prominent around her upper abdomen and chest, but her whole body seemed... different.

Idly, she gently pushed against her abdomen. *My stomach doesn't feel any different. No lumps or anything.*

Even as she probed, the strange feelings were fading.

*It's probably nothing.* She dropped her hand and shrugged. *I need to get everything cleaned up before Dad comes home. The last thing I want is to have to explain why I'm throwing up blood. At least he's probably drunk on a couch somewhere, so I have a little time.*

Bringing her right hand to her mouth, she started licking off the dirt and grime off her fingers.

*Why is it so cold in the house?* Shivering, she shut the door to the bathroom with her other hand. *Is something wrong with the heat? And why does it smell like outside?* She paused to inspect her progress. *This is going to take forever. Oh, right, sink.*

Embarrassed, she turned on the water to the sink and scrubbed her hands clean. By the time she had finished with her hands, the bathroom had noticeably warmed. Bending over, she splashed some water on her face and loosened the remains of her night. Soon, red and brown water was spiraling down the drain.

*After I finish cleaning up in the hall, I'll take a shower.* Heavy fatigue settled into her mind like a rolling fog. *And then sleep for the rest of the day.* Grabbing a hand towel, she dried off her face. *That's better.*

Sophia nearly dropped the towel as heavy knocking reverberated through the house. She spun around to face the bathroom door, not noticing she had pulled her lips back to expose her new canines.

*Who could that possibly be? It's still early and Dad's not home.* She stood still, fear rushing through her. *If I don't make any noise, they'll hopefully think no one is home.*

The doorbell rang and she fought back the urge to growl. Instead, she remained motionless, gripping the hand towel tightly. Finally, a couple of minutes passed and she let out the breath she didn't know she was holding.

*It's New Year's, why would someone be here at this hour?* She slowly opened the bathroom door and sniffed. The strong odors of cervine guts, blood and her own urine greeted her nose but nothing to suggest the identity of who was knocking. *Why do I remember throwup smelling really disgusting?*

Opening the bathroom door all the way, the temperature plummeted as the warm air rushed out.

*Oh yeah, I'm naked.* She shivered and felt goosebumps popping up all across her body. *I should get my robe.*

Silently making her way to her bedroom, she opened the door and flipped on the light.

*Huh, I guess the heat is on.* A blast of warm air greeted her as she stepped around the door to grab her robe. *I wonder what's going on with the rest of the house?*

Donning the robe, she swiftly tied it around her waist and wrapped her arms around her chest. Part of her recoiled at being covered by a pelt that wasn't her own, but the warmth it provided was entirely welcome. After a minute, she started to feel comfortable again.

*Now to clean up from last night's party.* She grinned at her little joke.

Heading back to the bathroom, she grabbed a couple of towels from the rack and headed for the remnants of the previous night. Laying out one towel over the pee, she was about to bend down to clean up the unsuccessfully digested remnants of her last meal when there was another loud knock at the door. Startled, her hand shot out to rest against the wall before she lost her balance.

"Mr. Jones!" A gruff male voice yelled from the door. "It's Deputy Sheriff Bowman; I need to talk to you about your daughter!"

A chill went through Sophia. *Me? Why would Candice's dad want..?* Memories of the previous night came flooding back. *Oh...*

Trembling, she dropped the towel to the floor and headed for the front door. Through the living room windows, she could see the world outside was just starting to be illuminated by the

early morning sun. Reaching a trembling hand out to the door handle, she unlocked and then opened it. A large, but familiar man in a sheriff deputy's uniform was standing on the porch.

"Mr. Bowman..? Sophia started in surprise.

"Sophia?!?" Candice's dad exclaimed in shock, taking a surprised step back. "What are you doing here??? We've been looking for you all night!"

"You have?" Sophia rasped and then coughed, her throat slightly raw from vomiting.

The scent of coffee was strong on his breath and he smelled like he had been quite active. Bags hung under his eyes and his shoulders slumped under his sheriff's coat.

"Yes!" Deputy Bowman snapped, sounding dumbstruck. "The Browns called the sheriff's office to report you had some sort of panic attack and ran off into the woods late yesterday afternoon!" He paused, took a breath and continued. "They couldn't find you after several hours of searching! The entire sheriff's department has been looking for you all night."

*Everyone was looking for me? Sophia felt weak-kneed. People were... worried about me?*

Candice's dad's face became concerned as he looked over Sophia. "Are you okay? Where's your father? I've been trying to get a hold of him all night."

"I don't know where he is," she answered, her heart pounding. "I haven't seen him since yesterday morning."

Deputy Bowman wrinkled his nose and peered into the house, "Have you been sick?"

*The smell!* A sudden surge of panic gripped her and she nearly snarled. *If he sees it...*

"I... yes, I threw up," Sophia told him quickly. "I was about to clean it up when you knocked." Then she asked meekly, "Am I... in trouble?"

The man shook his head and sighed, "No, at least not legally. But you should come down to the station so we can get this straightened out. Your friends will be very happy to hear you're okay." He narrowed his eyes as he met her gaze and frowned. "And we'll get a doctor to look you over."

*He noticed my eyes.* Sophia felt like she was going to throw up all over again. *Now what do I do?*

"Okay," she replied in resignation and then asked cautiously. "Can I get dressed first?"

"Ah..." The deputy blushed and he rubbed the back of his head with a gloved hand, "Of course, get dressed. I have to call in any way. Think you can be done in ten minutes?"

"I'll try," Sophia replied tentatively.

"Alright, ten minutes," he repeated and turned towards his car.

Sophia quickly shut the door and collapsed onto the ground as her legs gave out. Tears started to flow down her face as she began hyperventilating. Icy panic shot through her and every instinct, both human and wolf, told her to find somewhere to hide.

"What am I going to do?" she sobbed aloud.

*They're going to find out I'm a werewolf! They'll put me in a lab somewhere and then I'll never get to see Shadow again!* Her panic-stricken mind didn't notice when she automatically got onto all fours. *I could try to run...*

She turned, the floor freezing against her hands and feet. Her robe draped over the curve of her butt and upper legs, the tie dragging on the floor. Looking towards the back of the kitchen, she finally noticed the backdoor was open.

*That explains why it's been so cold, oops.* She shivered even as sobs continued to rack her. *No, I can't run. Not without fur and I lost my gloves and hat.*

Her limbs nearly gave out again as fresh despair threatened to overwhelm her. Sniffing the air, she searched desperately for any sign of Shadow nearby but found nothing. Forcing herself to move, she padded into the kitchen. She stopped when she noticed the mess leading into the hallway and her heart sank further. Streaks of dried mud led from the entrance of the hall to the backdoor. Mixed in with the streaks were prints that looked like a bizarre blend of hands and paws.

*How am I going to clean this up too?* Sighing, she continued on into the kitchen and stopped at the open door. *Why didn't I say yes and stay with Shadow?* She gazed mournfully out the open door. *Will I ever see him again?*

*Wait, I'm on all fours.* Sophia looked down at her painfully cold fingers and blushed. *I didn't even notice!*

She struggled back to her feet and slid the door shut. Immediately, the kitchen started to warm. The scent of vomit and urine intensified as well and she put all of her focus on them. Her sobs slowed and a new feeling of determination went through her.

*Alright, I can get through this,* She brushed her hair over her shoulder and took a steadying breath. *Just clean up and find some clothes. And try not to let Wolfgirl take control.*

Heading over to the hallway, she knelt down and sopped up most of the mess with the towels. Holding them out at arm's length, she took a deep breath and held it as she walked over to the laundry area. Using the utility sink, she rinsed them out and tossed them in the washer. Holding her nose, she took a breath, wincing at the little bit of detergent fragrance that always seemed to make it through.

*Crap, the fragrance-free stuff is in my room. I'll have to use the regular stuff and run it through again later.* She measured out a bit of citrus-scented detergent, threw it in and started the wash. *If there is a later,* she shook her head as her pulse accelerated. *Focus Sophia.*

Distracting herself by mentally going through what clothes she had available, she headed to her room. Once inside, she closed the door and stripped off her robe.

*Huh, my scent in here seems off somehow.* Narrowing her eyes in puzzlement, she sniffed the air curiously and shrugged. *I'll have to figure it out later.*

Heading over to her mirror, she looked over her naked body. Most of it was surprisingly clean, with just the occasional dark smudge on her skin. Her pubic hair was a bit matted and her now human labia had a bit of white crust on it, but it appeared most of the evidence of the night's activities had disappeared with her fur. There was the matter of her shoulder, however.

*I can't go anywhere without rinsing off at least. Mr. Bowman is just going to have to wait.* She ran her fingers over the dried blood that was the only indication her left shoulder had ever been injured. *I don't think he'd like how I smell right now.* She giggled nervously. *Too bad, I like having Shadow's scent on me.*

Wrapping her robe back around her, she headed to the bathroom and started the shower. Soon, the last of the night's remnants were streaming off of her.

*Not even a scratch,* she examined her shoulder after the blood had been washed off. *I'm not sure I'll ever get used to that.* Squatting, she took advantage of the running water to relieve herself. *No time for shampoo or soap.*

Standing, she shut off the water. Immediately, she tried to twist her torso in an attempt to shake the water off her body.

*Well, that didn't accomplish much.* She laughed anxiously as water continued to drip off of her.

Wrapping the towel around herself, she hastily dried off even as her sensitive ears registered the sound of knocking at the front door. She snarled at the noise, baring her elongated canines, but picked up her robe and scurried towards her bedroom.

"I said ten minutes," Deputy Bowman snapped as Sophia opened her front door. "I'm supposed to host a party later today and I've been up all night looking for you." He gave her a scowl and gestured towards his car.

Sophia's heart thudded as she fought back the urge to bite him. Her agitation must have shone through because Candice's dad sighed.

“Relax Sophia,” he said tiredly as they headed towards his car. “You’re not in trouble. I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

His reassurance did little to calm her nerves or exhausted mind. As she waited for him to open the rear door, she looked northeast towards the mountains. The snow-covered peaks gleamed beautifully in the light of the rising sun. For a brief moment, she thought she caught the faintest hint of a familiar scent in the mountain air. But it was gone the moment she turned her attention to it.

*I'm sorry Mischievous Nose.*