

Chapter 42

The strong scent of leather and cleanser couldn't quite cover up the smell of vomit, booze and body odor from the car's previous passengers. Nor could it fully hide the telltale smell of blood from Sophia's keen nose as she buckled herself into the passenger seat of Deputy Bowman's car. It only enhanced the oppressive atmosphere of the car's gray interior.

"Hard to believe another year has gone by," Deputy Bowman commented as he settled into the driver's seat, his door shutting reminiscent of the fireworks to Sophia's ears. "You going to be warm enough in that?"

I really miss having fur.

Sophia looked up at him, trying to hide how much she was shivering under the shirt, sweater and light coat she had managed to scrounge up. She gave a quick nod and looked back down at her lap, her cold hands gripping her knees tightly. Her chest felt like it was going to implode and it was everything she could do to keep from bursting into tears.

"Ready to go back to school tomorrow?" he asked conversationally. "Get your homework done early or wait until the last minute?"

Crap, I forgot all about my assignments. She felt like she was going to throw up again. *Not like I'll be going back to school.*

She winced as she tried to bite her bottom lip and immediately regretted it, her changed upper canines poking sharply into it. Luckily, Candice's dad was in the middle of turning and didn't notice.

"Sophia..?" Deputy Bowman prompted when she didn't respond.

"I... have a few assignments to finish," she muttered hastily.

Running her tongue over her stinging bottom lip, she was relieved to find no sign of blood.

Candice's dad chuckled, "Just like Lynn; she's going to miss some of the party at our house today. I suppose I did the same thing when I was in school." He paused as they came to a stop sign and then continued. "Candy always gets it done right away."

At the mention of Candice, Sophia could feel tears welling up and she looked back out her window to hide them. The car fell into uncomfortable silence as they drove down Forest Road.

"What happened between you two?" her former best friend's father asked finally. "All Candy has said you girls had a falling out and it was her fault."

Surprised, Sophia's head snapped towards him and blurted out, "She did?"

“Of course she is,” He cocked an eyebrow as he replied. “Candy has been really worried about you. She said you wouldn’t even talk to her.”

She... she’s been worried about me? Guilt twisted Sophia’s gut as a tear ran down her cheek.

“I... We...” She started to reply but couldn’t finish.

“Sorry, don’t mean to pry,” Deputy Bowman told her apologetically. “I just never expected anything to get between you two.”

The car turned onto Main Street and Sophia turned her head to watch as they passed the high school. Aside from the lack of cars, it looked like it did any other day.

Oh, Candice, I’m so sorry. More tears started to roll down her cheek and she sniffed.

Deputy Bowman fell silent as he guided the car into the parking lot for the county’s law enforcement building. The structure was a fairly new building in the town and had consolidated several offices previously scattered across downtown Woodbury. Sleek metal siding covering the upper third of the building gleamed brightly in the early morning sunlight, which sharply contrasted the deep red brick of the rest of the wall. The building’s glass entry with a red wave-like roof had always struck Sophia as rather ostentatious for such a small town.

“Alright, let’s just get everything straightened out, have a doctor look you over and then get you home,” Deputy Bowman tried to sound comforting as he parked the car, but Sophia couldn’t miss the edge in his voice.

Go home? Yeah right. She wiped away the tear streaks on her cheek with her hand.
How will I explain last night?

Getting out, Deputy Bowman rounded the car and opened Sophia’s door for her. Her numb fingers fumbled with her seatbelt clasp for a few seconds until she somehow managed to press the button. She again considered making a run for it but knew it was futile. Instead, she climbed out of the car and looked blankly towards the building. The deputy turned and led the way to the glass entrance. He unlocked it and held the door for her.

Inside was a small vestibule with another set of doors that led to a larger lobby that smelled of metal, plastic and rubber. A row of plastic seats were bolted to the floor to the right and a receptionist’s office with a glass partition was across from the entrance. The receptionist’s office was dark and empty.

“The only other person in the Sheriff’s office today is Deputy Johnson and he’s manning the phones,” Deputy Bowman commented as he led her to a heavy-looking wooden door to the left of the receptionist’s desk. “I already told the Browns you’re okay, but I’m sure they’d like to hear from you.”

A flash of icy anxiety flashed through Sophia and she replied quietly, "I'd rather not right now."

Bowman opened the door and shrugged, "Up to you, but they've been up all night worried too. You gave them quite the scare."

I didn't mean to ruin their night! She looked away from the deputy's gaze as shame and guilt washed over her.

Random muscles in her butt and head twitched and she realized she was trying to flatten her ears and absent tail in shame. Tears started to roll down her cheeks and she started sniffing again.

"Ahh... I didn't mean it like that!" Deputy Bowman protested uncomfortably as he followed her through the door. "They're very relieved to hear you're okay."

The door led to a well-lit hallway flanked by windows and glass doors on both sides. Leading her past several darkened offices, he stopped at the glass door with a large star-shaped badge and "Sheriff" emblazoned on it. Bowman led her into the office space on the other side.

He waved to a deputy who was sitting in a low-walled cubicle to the right who looked up when they walked in. At first, Sophia feared they were going to the cubicle next to him and it was a small relief when he strode past it. Instead, he headed to a cubicle on the opposite side of the room and hung up his coat there. He wheeled over an office chair from a neighboring cubicle and gestured for her to sit.

"Need anything?" He asked her as she collapsed into it. "Water? Coffee?"

Sophia realized how parched her throat was, "Water."

"Sure," Deputy Bowman said cordially. "Wait here."

Where else would I go?

Too tired to do much else, she stared blankly at her legs. With her adrenaline wearing off and the warm air, she was finding it difficult to keep her eyes open. Her mind drifted, imagining she was curled into Shadow, his fur entwined with hers...

"Long night?" Bowman's sardonic voice startled her awake.

"I didn't get much sleep," Sophia mumbled.

"That makes two of us," he said dryly, holding out a plastic cup of water. "Spend some time in the Army and you get used to it."

"Thanks," Sophia said, accepting it and bringing it to her mouth.

I am really thirsty... and getting kind of hungry.

"What are you doing?" The deputy asked quizzically.

Hmm?

Sophia realized then that she had been lapping at the water with her tongue. She felt her face reddening as she moved it to her lips. She quickly drank it and set the cup on the cubicle wall before she could act on the urge to chew on it.

Not now, please. She begged Wolfgirl, who seemed to be everywhere in her mind now.

“Have your eyes always been that gold?” Candice’s dad asked conversationally as he sat down. “I’m surprised I never noticed before; they’re very striking.”

Of course he noticed those, a bolt of fear shot through Sophia as she shrugged shyly, but she felt a touch of pride too.

“Let’s get to it then; what exactly happened last night?” He asked, his voice turning serious. “The Browns said you were at their house, seemed to have a panic attack and ran out into the woods.” He watched her intently as he spoke. “They searched for you on their own for a few hours before calling us. We spent all night looking for you and you turned up at your house this morning looking rough and smelling like vomit.”

Sophia fidgeted with her cup, her heart racing again. Wolfgirl was unhelpfully switching between urging her to show submission to the large two-leg and snarling at him until he went away.

“They said you went out in just a winter coat and shoes,” he continued. “And I see you wore boots and a light coat here. Were you picked up? How did you get to your house?”

I’m a werewolf and I screwed the date of the full moon up.

Sophia avoided his eyes and mumbled unconvincingly, “I don’t know.”

The deputy blinked, “*You don’t know?*” He took a slow breath before continuing, “Sophia, this is serious. Did you have any alcohol or drugs? Have you had any episodes like this before? Where is your dad?”

Oh, that’s what this is about. Relieved, Sophia nearly broke out laughing. *He’s worried I’m crazy or being abused.*

“I haven’t seen him since yesterday morning,” she replied, keeping her gaze lowered to signal submission. “Nothing like yesterday has happened before.”

Well, that’s sort of true at least.

“So you have no idea how you covered six miles at night with temperatures in the single digits?” He asked skeptically.

“No,” she answered simply.

That’s definitely not true.

Deputy Bowman sat back, sighed and rubbed his forehead.

"I can't force you to tell me," he conceded. "But if you're protecting someone, it isn't worth it - and we can get you help if it's something else." He paused and then added gravely, "There were wolves nearby last night - at least two. We were worried they got you."

One did. She intentionally bit her lip hard to keep from blushing as she remembered her night with Shadow.

"There were?" She asked innocently, tasting and smelling blood. "Oh wow."

"Yeah, they were howling nearby," Candice's dad confirmed. "It's rare for them to get this close to town." He chuckled. "I imagine the fireworks scared the sh... bejesus out of them."

That they did. Sophia feigned a smile as she squirmed in her chair.

The deputy's phone rang before he had a chance to say anything else.

"That would be the doc," he told her, standing and grabbing his phone. Putting it to his ear he said, "Dr. Banks? Yeah, I'll be up there in a moment."

Sophia's intestines gargled and she suddenly had an urgent need for a bathroom - or anywhere.

Deputy Bowman hung up and said, "I'll be right back."

"Is there a bathroom I could use?" Sophia asked before he could leave.

"Wait a moment on that," Bowman told her, holding up a hand. "The doc is going to want a urine sample."

Urine sample? For what? Sophia grimaced and her vocal cords tried to make a lupine whine but failed. *Drugs or alcohol?*

She crossed her legs and looked around the office as the deputy walked away, sniffing. There was warm plastic, the bitter smell of coffee and traces of cigarette smoke from where the other deputy was sitting, but no sign of any candid urine or scat. There was one her mind, or rather, Wolfgirl, got excited about.

I doubt they'd like it if I went on the floor in here anyway. The chair squeaked as she squirmed. *Is that... a wolf?*

She furrowed her brow, sniffing. Sure enough, there was a faint lupine scent in the air. Looking around, she tried to pinpoint it. Unfortunately, her olfactory abilities fell far short of what they had been a few hours before. As she was about to give up, her eyes noticed a bit of fur on the table with the coffeemaker in the middle of the back wall.

It couldn't be...

Before she knew it, she had stood up and walked to the other side of the room. There, next to the coffee supplies was an all too familiar wolf pelt. Despite the repellent smell of the nearby coffee, she stood there, transfixed. The skin looked so small and sad lying there.

This is what started it all.

Reaching out, she lowered her hand slowly towards the fur. When her fingers made contact, she expected a jolt of magical energy or an electric shock, but there was... nothing. It felt like ordinary fur. She ran her hand through the beautiful fur, feeling sadness for the creature it had belonged to.

I'm sorry, whoever you were. Sophia brushed a cold ear and then the leathery nose. *But tell me, did you do this to me? Can you undo it? Do I even want you to if you could?*

Picking it up, she brought it close to her nose to sniff. She could faintly detect hand lotion and cosmetics, but there was nothing out of the ordinary as far as the wolf part of her brain was concerned. The animal it had belonged to smelled like an ordinary wolf. It had been female and relatively young but no quality that suggested magic.

It wasn't you, was it? Sophia sniffed what would have been the skin and fur on its snout, feeling oddly sure of the conclusion.

"Sophia?" Deputy Bowman's low voice came from behind her.

Startled, Sophia dropped the wolf pelt back on the table. A leg flopped off the edge and she hastily pulled it back up. Several new odors had joined those already present and she spun, blushing furiously.

"Sorry, I..." she stammered, her eyes darting frantically around the room.

"No worries," Deputy Bowman replied, chuckling. "That thing always fascinates visitors." He paused and gestured at an older man standing next to him. "This is Dr. Banks. He helps us with medical issues and agreed to come here to give you a quick checkup."

"Good morning Ms. Jones," a man that smelled like juniper and sage said, smiling.

Sophia recognized his face from the town's clinic, although she had never been his patient. Dr. Banks was a thin man with white hair and a face lined with age. His polite smile noticeably slipped when he met Sophia's eyes but quickly recovered.

"Hey," Sophia greeted him uncertainly and then grumbled, "Why is this necessary again?"

"Sophia..." Deputy Bowman sighed. "You ran outside in the middle of winter, at night and now tell me you have no memory of what happened between that and me finding you at your house, miles away, this morning. It's your choice, but it's absolutely in your best interest."

"I just need to check your vitals and collect a urine sample," Dr. Banks told her.

If this is what I need to do to prove I'm not on drugs or alcohol.

"Could I do the urine sample now?" Sophia asked pleadingly, clenching her butt together. "I really need to go."

“Ah, of course,” Dr Banks replied, opening the medical bag he was carrying.

“The bathroom is through that door and on the left side of the hall,” Deputy Bowman told her, gesturing to a door behind her.

“Fill it to about there, please,” Dr. Banks indicated a line on an empty cup and then handed it to her.

Sophia spun, opened the door and waddled down the hallway. Even without Candice’s dad’s instructions, she would have been able to find it by the smell of cleaner and urine alone. She flipped on the light and closed the door, gagging at the strong smell of bleach.

I’ll just go right over there. She started lowering her pants and panties as she prepared to get on all fours in the corner next to the toilet where she could smell urine on the floor and wall. *Wait, that’s not right.* Shifting over, she sat on the toilet. *This is what I should do, right?*

Before she could ponder it further, her bowels decided for her. The bathroom was quickly filled with an odd combination of human, wolf, rabbit and deer.

Okay, I remember this is what I’m supposed to do but it still feels wrong. She started to pee and stopped. *Oh, right, cup.*

Grabbing the cup, she carefully filled it to the line and screwed the cap on. Setting it aside, she finished up on the toilet. Standing, she pulled up her pants and then turned around and knelt. She sniffed at the contents of the bowl curiously, noting the bits of fur and bone in her stool. To her surprise, the scent was considerably more lupine than human, although somewhat less lupine than it had been during the night.

Is this my scent now? She wondered as she stood back up and flushed. *Or will it become less wolf as the month goes on?*

She quickly washed her hands and left the bathroom, being sure to only crack the door and leave the fan on. Deputy Bowman and Dr. Banks were still in front of the coffee maker, talking quietly when she entered. The doctor was holding a steaming coffee cup that had a weird milklike smell mixed in with the foul-smelling brew.

“Thank you,” the doctor said as she handed him the warm container. He quickly stuck a label on the container and showed it to her. “That look right?”

“Yep,” Sophia confirmed after a cursory glance.

“Alright, is there somewhere private we can go?” The doctor asked Bowman after putting it in his bag, glancing at Deputy Johnson.

“Through here,” the deputy replied and led them back through the door Sophia had just come through.

Great, they’re going to smell it. Sophia swallowed as she followed the two men.

Luckily, the bathroom door had done a good enough job containing the smell and neither showed any sign of noticing it as they passed. Just past the bathroom, Bowman ushered them into a small, windowless conference room. A table surrounded by several chairs stood in the center and a large screen hung from the left wall. Dr. Banks set his medical bag down and pulled out a chair.

"I'll be at my desk," Deputy Bowman told them, turning to leave.

"I'd rather you stayed in here," Sophia said quickly, glancing warily at the doctor.

Candice's dad looked at the doctor, who simply nodded in response as he put on a pair of latex gloves.

Am I trying to protect me... or him?

"Okay, no problem," Deputy Bowman said, closed the door and sat down in a chair on the far side of the table.

Dr. Banks turned towards Sophia and said, "Alright my dear, I'm just going to take some vitals and look you over to be sure you don't need anything more urgent. You should set up an appointment with your primary care physician as soon as possible though." He gestured for her to sit in the chair he had pulled out. "Do you have a history of psychosis, seizures or any other mental disorders?"

Sophia grudgingly sat down. *Better to let them think I'm crazy than the truth.*

"No," She replied simply as he shone a bright light in her eyes.

"I've never seen anyone with such golden eyes before," the doctor commented as he moved the light back and forth. "They're very pretty."

"Uh, thanks," Sophia replied, shifting uncomfortably.

"Pupillary light response is fine, that's good." He turned the light off and set it down. "No other unexplained lapses in memory?" he asked, grabbing a blood pressure cuff. "What about any concussions you know about?"

Sophia shook her head and offered her arm.

"Just lay your arm on the table and relax," he told her, wrapping the cuff around her arm.

After finishing with the cuff, he took her pulse.

"Heart rate and pressure are good and no signs of frostbite," He commented after finishing. "Let's get your temperature." Putting away the cuff, he took an oral thermometer out of its case. "We'll just slide it under your tongue."

He'll see my teeth! A bolt of panic shot through Sophia and she snatched the thermometer from his hand with her mouth.

She blushed and took it out of her mouth before saying, "I can do it."

“Oh, well, okay,” Dr. Banks said, clearly taken aback.

Keeping her lips over her canines, she managed to get the thermometer between them and under her tongue. After a few moments, it beeped.

“99.3,” Dr. Banks announced thoughtfully. “Slightly elevated temperature.”

Did I run a fever after the last full moon? She handed the thermometer back to the doctor. *I don't remember if I even checked.*

“Were you feeling sick at all yesterday?” he asked, wiping down the thermometer.

Sort of. Nothing that couldn't be explained by being a werewolf on a full moon.

“Not really,” Sophia told him, shrugging.

“Hmm, let's check your throat,” he said, grabbing a tongue depressor.

“No!” Sophia blurted out and then in a strained voice added, “I'd rather not.”

Dr. Banks looked at her in surprise, “I'm just checking for signs of injury or illness. Nothing invasive.”

You said it was my choice...

“No,” Sophia said more firmly, feeling her confidence building.

“Sophia...” Deputy Bowman started, looking up from his phone.

“No, it's fine, have it your way Ms. Jones,” Dr. Banks conceded, putting down the tongue suppressor. “We won't do anything you're not comfortable with right now. Can I check your heart and lungs?”

I guess that should be fine... She nodded stiffly. *I've never said no to a doctor before.*

“Just my back please,” she added.

“Sure,” the doctor responded, shrugging. “Go ahead and lift up the back of your sweatshirt for me.”

Sophia did as he said and waited tensely as he walked around her chair.

“Your skin is remarkably clear,” Dr. Banks commented after a bit. “I don't see so much as a freckle. I've been practicing almost forty years and I don't think I've ever seen skin as unblemished as yours.”

“Huh,” Sophia responded nervously, jerking when the cold stethoscope touched her.

“Breathe in,” he said. “And out.” After doing this in a few spots he said, “Everything sounds good.”

“How much more?” Sophia asked impatiently.

“Almost done,” He said and then added, “Can I see your left shoulder?”

Sophia froze, a shot of icy fear running through her. *Mr. Bowman must have seen something. Good thing I took a shower.*

“Uh sure, no problem,” she replied and adjusted her sweatshirt and shirt to expose her shoulder.

She couldn't help but notice Deputy Bowman watching intently, with an unreadable expression on his face.

“Nothing,” the doctor announced and she got the distinct impression it was meant for the deputy. “Do you have any... unexplained bruising or other marks?”

“No,” Sophia replied curtly. “Can we be done?”

She knew she was being rude but was too tired to care.

Dr. Banks sighed, “Alright, I'm pretty much out of tests I can perform here anyway. Aside from your temperature, everything looks normal.”

“Can I go home then?” Sophia asked hopefully. “It's the last day of winter break and I'm really tired.”

“That's up to Deputy Bowman now,” the doctor said, packing up his bag. “You need to see your regular doctor as soon as possible about what happened yesterday though and get a more thorough checkup.”

“Well, I'm ready to go home,” Sophia said, yawning.

Please... I'm not sure how much longer I can stay awake.

Deputy Bowman sighed, rubbed his beard and stood, “Fine, I'll take you home. Just know that I'm here to talk to... about anything and if you're in trouble...” At that moment the deputy's phone rang and he looked at it. “Oh, I think it's your dad, Sophia.”

Picking it up, he answered, “This is Deputy B...”

“WHERE THE FUCK IS MY DAUGHTER???”