

Chapter 44

The muddy prints Sophia had left that morning were gone when she walked into the dining room. Like the hallway, the awful lemon smell lingered. Unfortunately, the smell of raw chicken in the trash was no longer present to offset the smells coming from the rest of the kitchen. Instead, a particularly fragrant fresh trash bag irritated the inside of her nostrils.

I really need to get some non-fragrance cleaners, Sophia grimaced as she hastened to the kitchen. *Maybe something safe for pets would work.*

Any unpleasant odors in the kitchen were instantly forgotten the moment she opened the fridge as the sweet aroma of raw meat greeted her. Inhaling excitedly, her eyes darted around the fridge, looking for the source. They came to rest on a large bowl of raw pork cuts on the lower shelf of the fridge with a large bag of sauerkraut lying next to them.

That smells sooo good, she sniffed the pork covetously. *He won't notice if I took just one.*

Reaching her hand into the bowl, she grabbed a large cut and brought it up to her waiting mouth. Sinking her front teeth into them, she savored the liberated juices as they ran into her mouth. She was particularly fascinated by how much more easily her new canines penetrated and tore through the meat compared to her other teeth. Tearing off a small bite, she chewed on it while savoring every burst of flavor.

Raw meat has a nice flavor to it. She swallowed happily. *Much harder to chew, though.*

"Sophia?" panicking, Sophia dropped the pork back into the bowl as her dad called from the living room. "Is that you, sweetheart?"

He sounds agitated, why?

Sophia quickly closed the fridge before responding, "Yeah, I'm just looking for something to eat."

"Okay, just stay out of the taco dip," he told her. "I'm having the guys over later and we'll have it then."

Great, just great, she reflexively pulled her lips back, baring her teeth for a moment before she caught herself.

Taking a breath, she asked sweetly, "Oh, that's cool, when?"

"In about an hour," her dad told her and then his tone turned serious. "After you find some food, I need to talk to you."

Sophia's blood went cold, "What about?"

The crowd on the television roared.

"Oh come on!" he yelled at the TV. "He was down!"

“Dad!” Sophia exclaimed in exasperation.

“I’ll tell you when you’re in here,” he told her.

“Okay, fine,” Sophia responded dismissively even while her mind raced.

What could this possibly be about? She opened the fridge again, trying to ignore the titillating smell of the pork. *I’ll just grab a couple of hotdogs and come back.*

“Just hotdogs?” her dad commented in surprise when she walked past him into the living room. “We have buns and stuff.”

“I’ve been liking hotdogs by themselves lately,” she shrugged and plopped down on the couch as far from her dad’s drink as she could manage.

Too hungry to care about manners, she took a giant bite of the salty weiner.

“Whaff, uff?” she asked with her mouth full.

Her dad didn’t look at her immediately, instead taking a long drink from his glass while looking at the TV. Sophia rolled her eyes impatiently and finished chewing.

“Janet, reduce volume to half,” he said authoritatively after setting the glass down.

There was a chime and the noise from the speakers dropped considerably. Sophia blinked in surprise.

“Pretty cool, eh?” her dad commented proudly as he finally turned towards her. “It’s called a smart home; I set it up while you were sleeping.”

Aren’t you behind on bills? How much is all this?

His tone was conversational, but she didn’t miss the lack of a smile or the tension in his voice.

You didn’t call me in here to show me you can talk to the TV.

“Yeah, really cool,” Sophia responded, trying to sound impressed. “So…”

“I’m looking at getting some smart bulbs,” he told her, clearly stalling. “That way we can control the lights from anywhere Janet is.”

Sophia nodded absently and took a large bite of her hotdog. She chewed as she waited for him to get to the reason he had called her in there. Finally, he straightened in his chair and took a deep breath.

“Now you know I value your independence and privacy,” he began hesitantly.

Sophia stuffed the rest of the hotdog in her mouth while squeezing her thigh with the other hand. *Here we go…*

“But you’ve been acting real strange lately,” he continued, gradually sounding more confident. “More anxious and, well, bitchy. Like you’re hiding something.”

Bitchy? Sophia tried not to react. *I mean, I guess.*

“I’ve been letting you live your life as you wish, but after yesterday, I can’t anymore,” he said, fixing her eyes with his. “I talked to Mr. Brown while you were napping and, well, he’s really upset. And, no foolin’, I am too.”

I really should have grabbed some water, Sophia tried to swallow, but her mouth was too dry.

“He said you was in his kitchen, seemed fine one moment and then looked like you’d seen a ghost before running out,” her dad related. “At first he thought maybe you were afraid of the dog, who’d been botherin’ you all afternoon, but then you left the house in nothing but your coat and shoes. Even left your phone there. They looked for you for hours. Then they called the sheriff and got them involved.”

Her dad paused and took another drink. A pit formed in Sophia’s stomach and she felt a lot less hungry.

“I didn’t know their house was outside of town earlier,” he added gravely. “And it got down into the ones last night. So, you certainly wasn’t off in the woods all night.”

Actually...

Her dad leaned forward, his eyes locked with hers, “I know it must have seemed fun at the time, but you need to apologize for your prank and tell me who helped you.”

“What?!?” Sophia exclaimed in disbelief before her brain fully registered what he had said.

“Come on Sophia, you’re not fooling anyone. Who’d you do it with? Did they put you up to it?” he pressed her. “And why the yellow contacts and fake teeth today? I thought you’d grown out of pretendin’ to be a wolf.”

He thinks it was a... prank???

“I...” Sophia stammered, trying and failing to think of something to say.

“Now, I’m sure it seemed really funny to you, but you got a lot of people worried shitless,” his voice took on a hard edge. “You even got the sheriff looking for you. That was incredibly foolish and I know you know better.”

Sophia might have followed Wolfgirl’s strong suggestion to find something to hide under if she hadn’t completely forgotten how to use her body at that moment.

Her dad inhaled slowly and then said, “I hate to do this sweetheart, but you leave me no choice. You’re grounded and need to apologize to everyone.”

“Grounded???” Sophia exclaimed in horror as her eyes went wide. “You can’t..!”

“While you’re living under my roof, I sure can,” her dad cut off her protest sternly. “You can go to school and work, but then need to come straight home. Once you’ve apologized and promise not to hang out with whoever you did it with, we can discuss lifting it.”

“But...” Tears formed in Sophia’s eyes.

This can’t be happening!

“One other thing, don’t embarrass me with the guys tonight like last time,” he said, anger seeping into his voice. “I make the rules in this house. If I say a man can smoke in it, he can smoke.” He slapped his hand against the arm of his chair. “And for fuck’s sake Sophia, get rid of those silly fake teeth. You’re too old to be doin’ that.”

Shadow... How am I going to see Shadow..?

Her soul felt like it had been just torn in two as her world seemed to implode around her. The plate and remaining hotdog fell to the floor as Sophia jumped up from the couch and ran out of the room, crying. She slammed the door of her bedroom and buried her face in her pillow, sobbing.

Sophia lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling with a tear-stained face as she tried to tune out the noises coming from the other room. Even with the door closed, the putrid scent of cigarette smoke had infiltrated her bedroom, further adding to her misery. The agony she felt over being away from Shadow had only intensified and every attempt she made to distract herself only seemed to make it worse.

“It’s not fair,” she whispered.

Wolfgirl whined pitifully off in the recesses of her mind and Sophia realized she was trying to produce a whining sound with her throat.

I could just... tell him... She mentally flailed for something, anything she could grab hold of. *Tell him... what? That his daughter really is a werewolf and dating a wolf?* Another sob racked her, but no tears came. *Oh, and I might be slowly turning into a wolf. Yeah, he’d definitely be fine with that even if he believed it.*

Sighing hopelessly, she propped herself up onto her forearms. She looked at her snowsuit draped over her desk chair where she had left it two days before. On the chair lay her gloves and hat.

Huh, I thought I had brought those with me yesterday. That’s a bit of good news. Hope rekindled inside of her. What if I snuck out?

Sitting up all the way, she listened intently to the men talking and laughing in the other room. They were entirely engrossed in their party and her dad was unlikely to notice she was missing for hours.

How hard would it be to climb out my window? Slipping out of bed, she went over to her window and pushed the inner pane up. *I could manage this, even with my snowsuit.*

The storm window took a bit more effort to open but soon the chilly winter air was blowing into her room, carrying with it the crisp smells from the mountains. She could feel Wolfgirl coming alive in her mind at the possibility of reconnecting with their pack. Satisfied, Sophia shut the inner window.

I could slip out for a couple of hours, see Shadow and come back. Growing excitement tingled throughout her body. *He wouldn't even know I left.*

She let out a startled yelp when there was a loud knock at her door.

"Sophia?" her dad called from the door. "Are you awake?"

Fighting off crushing disappointment, Sophia replied with a sullen, "Yes Dad."

"Okay, there's food if you want any. Meat'll be done in an hour," he told her through the door. "Also, Mr. Brown's son will be dropping off your phone in a bit."

Thanks a lot, Camden. Couldn't wait til tomorrow?

"Okay," she acknowledged sourly.

Footsteps echoed from the hall as her dad left her door. With a frustrated growl, she swiped at her snowsuit, knocking it and the chair to the floor. Wolfgirl seemed to feed off her anger, her presence rapidly growing in Sophia's mind.

I promised Shadow I'd be there today! I promised!

One of her dad's friends laughed and Sophia's temper flared. In her mind's eye, she pictured herself sinking her small fangs into the throat of the owner of the laugh. How dare they trespass in her territory! Growling, she sank to all fours and started for the door.

"What am I doing?" she asked aloud in horror as she realized what she was contemplating.

No Wolfgirl! Sophia berated her wolfish mental counterpart as she scrambled back to her feet. *I can't attack people!*

She took a step back and sank to the end of her bed, suddenly feeling ill. Wolfgirl relented in the face of Sophia's abject horror although she still urged Sophia to run the unwelcome guests out of her house.

She's so much stronger today, Sophia closed her eyes and focused on steadying her heart rate. *If I don't learn how to control her, she's going to make me hurt someone.* A horrible

thought occurred to her. *Could she take over entirely? If I let her take over out there, will I be able to come back? Maybe going out today isn't a good idea.*

Trembling, Sophia slipped off her bed, bent over and righted her chair.

But why didn't that happen last night? I remember mentally being a wolf for the most part but still me somehow. She furrowed her brow, faintly desiring something hard to chew on. *Where did Wolfgirl go anyway? She sank into her desk chair. Maybe that messageboard can help. Even if they can't, I need someone to talk to.*

Opening her laptop, she turned it on. She tried to fold her ears down in response to the high-pitched whine of the electronics but only managed to twitch some muscles.

Oh, wow.

Her eyes widened as her computer came out of standby. The tab of her browser containing her social media profile indicated dozens of new alerts. Against her better judgment, she reflexively clicked on the tab.

Most turned out to be just people wishing everyone on their friend list a happy New Year. However, there were multiple messages from Maggie and Camden:

Maggie @ 6:17 pm, Dec. 31: Sophia, if you see this somehow please respond. We're all really worried. Cam has your phone BTW.

Maggie @ 10:25 pm, Dec. 31: Please be okay! There are wolves howling nearby!

Maggie @ 9:42 am, Today: OMG, Camden just told me you were found at your house and were completely fine??? What. The. Fuck. I've been up all night worried sick about you and you were okay the whole time??? I can't even. Don't even bother responding.

Sophia covered her face with her hands, feeling tears forming again. Her throat worked, futility trying to produce another whine.

I just wanted to be normal! Of course, I ruined everything for everyone.

Another tear ran down her cheek, but she was too emotionally spent to cry again.

Looking back at her screen, she read Camden's message:

Camden @ 9:36 am, Today: My Dad just told me the sheriff found you at your home and you were apparently there all night. WTH Wolfgirl, if that was supposed to be a joke, it wasn't funny.

They think it was a stupid prank and I have no way to prove it wasn't! Feeling crushing despair, she stood up from her chair before collapsing back onto her bed. I hope you're happy Wolfgirl! Now everyone hates me and I'm even letting Shadow down. All because of this stupid, stupid curse!

For a long while, she just stared vacantly at her window. When she moved again, it was to grab her sketch pad and a pencil. Flipping to a new sheet, she started drawing with swift, deliberate strokes.