

Chapter 55

“Sophia, you can close,” Janet said from the front of Sophia's belt. “I'll be along in a few minutes to count your till.”

Sophia nodded at the manager and then turned off her light. *Finally, I'm not sure I have the mental energy to focus much longer.* She stifled a yawn. *I'm going to crash when I get home.*

Turning back, she greeted her last customer, ignoring the urge to sniff him. It wouldn't have done much good anyway, her nose still burned from the scent-suppressing balm she had purchased before her shift. The stuff had worked, at the price of searing pain all along her nasal passages for almost an hour and feeling disoriented.

As she had since the start of her shift, she did everything she could to focus on the movements required for her job. For a simple motion she had completed countless times, it had required a surprising amount of conscious thought.

Reach, grab, swing and put down. Reach, grab, swing and put down. The undergirding concepts still seemed to elude her hours later.

“Your last customer for the day; lucky me,” An elderly man commented casually from the other side of the kiosk. “Any plans for the rest of the day, young lady?”

“Hmm?” Sophia answered him. “Oh, uh, not really.”

Getting away from here and cleaning this nasty stuff off my upper lip. I hope it wears off quickly. Her concentration broken, she failed to close her fingers around a can and knocked it over instead. *Oops.*

“Ah, well, tomorrow would be a better day anyway. It's going to feel like a day at the beach after the last few days,” he replied conversationally. “Whoo, it's been cold.”

Sophia paused at that bit of news, “Is it? I hadn't heard that.”

“Yep, expected to get up into the teens tomorrow,” the man confirmed as Sophia resumed scanning his groceries. “My dog will certainly be happy; he's been itchin' for some exercise. I know it's a cold one when he wants to come back inside straight after doing his business.”

I can see Shadow tomorrow! Sophia's heart swelled. *Oh, he's going to hear it from me.*

“I gotta say, young lady, you have the most striking eyes I've ever seen - almost gold,” the man observed, peering at Sophia's face. “S'pose you probably hear that a lot.”

Just the last few days, Sophia shrugged uncomfortably. *I think he's the twentieth person to mention it this afternoon. At least, only one person mentioned my teeth.*

"I guess, yeah," she confirmed and then turned her focus to scanning the last item.
"One-hundred twenty-four, twenty-six."

Ugh, Sophia shuddered as the man counted out cash from his wallet. *Of course my last customer pays in cash*. Taking it from him, she started carefully trying to count the bills. It was yet another motion she somehow seemed to have lost the muscle memory for. *Sixty, eighty, one hundred... Wait, I think I skipped a twenty... Best start over*.

"Have a good day now," the man said cheerfully after she finally handed him the change she hoped was the right amount.

Finally done, Sophia closed out and waited for Linda to count up her till. *Now to get some meat for the walk home*.

"I need to talk to you in the office," Linda told her ominously after finishing.

Oh no... Sophia's heart raced and she stiffened.

She followed the manager over to the small office at the front of the store, and Linda closed the door.

"Twelve twenty-seven off," Linda said as she took a seat in a desk chair. "And two unexcused absences this week. That's very unlike you; is everything okay? ... Sophia?"

Trapped... I'm trapped... Sophia's breathing quickened in the small space as her eyes flitted around the room. *Can't smell anything...*

"Sophia..?" Linda asked again, gently touching Sophia's hand. "Goodness!"

Linda recoiled as Sophia's head snapped towards her. Sophia bared her teeth and tried to growl at the shocked woman. Taking a step back, Sophia fell into a crouch with her hands on the floor and backed into a corner.

Trapped... Fight...

"What's going on?" Linda asked in a trembling voice, the color draining from her face.
"Sophia..?"

Stay away! Sophia pulled her lips tighter and attempted to dig her nails into the cold floor when Linda stood from the office chair.

Linda took the hint, keeping her distance as she walked over to the office door and opened it. Immediately, Sophia bolted for the opening, half stumbling and half crawling out of the office.

Escape! With the immediate threat lifted, her panic started to subside. *Escape? Fuck...* Sophia unsteadily got back onto her feet, feeling like she was going to throw up.

"Sophia?" Linda asked uncertainly from the door. "Are you okay..? Should I call your dad?"

I shouldn't be here... Sophia shakily turned towards her. *I'm a wolf. I told Candice I couldn't...*

"I'm sorry," she rasped, trying not to cry. "I didn't mean to..."

Her eyes met Linda's, and the manager's face turned even whiter.

"We'll... we'll talk about this later..." The woman mumbled and retreated into the office.

Later..? Sophia stared at the door dumbfounded. *Shouldn't I be fired?*

Unsure of what else to do, she headed for the back of the store.

"So yeah, I'm probably fired," Sophia said glumly into her phone as she trudged home.

And starving. And I can't smell. She had considered washing her upper lip before leaving work but had been too afraid of having another incident. *At least it's warmed up enough that I don't need that stupid scarf.*

"Don't lock you into small rooms, got it," Candice's voice came through the speaker.

"Candice, this is serious..." Sophia said in exasperation.

"It's a big yikes for sure, but she didn't fire you then and there," Candice pointed out. "So you might still have a chance."

"Even if I'm not fired today, what's the point of going back?"

Sophia turned her head to look longingly across the field she was passing at the distant moonlit trees and mountains beyond. *It would certainly free up some time...*

"Can you even afford to lose this job? Didn't you say being a werewolf is expensive?"

Sophia sighed and then answered reluctantly, "Yes."

"So, give her a call and apologize," Candice suggested. "Tell her that you're claustrophobic or something. Say you're still feeling off after being sick the last few days and it won't happen again."

"But it will happen again," Sophia protested. "This is what I am."

And what I want to be... Just not quite like that.

"I don't think that's true," Candice insisted. "We're finding ways to help you control 'Wolfgirl,' and you said it yourself, the balm really helped."

"I hate it though," Sophia admitted sullenly. "My nose still hurts, and I can't smell a thing."

"But it got you through your shift. That's what you needed, right?"

"I guess," Sophia conceded. "Fine, I'll give her a call after we're done talking."

"Glad I could help," Candice replied smugly.

Sophia heard the chime of a new message through the speaker.

"Hold on, I just got a message I've been waiting for," Candice said.

Sophia heard rustling and then a *thunk* as Candice set the phone down. The sound of keys clicking echoed from the speaker, followed by several seconds of silence and then another chime. *What's going on?*

Suddenly, Candice's excited voice came through the earpiece. "Soph, you're not home yet, right?"

"I'm a couple blocks away. Why?"

"Okay, good. Patty just told me she called your dad," Candice explained quickly.

"What?" Sophia asked dumbstruck. "How?"

"I may have given her his number," Candice admitted sheepishly. "I figured it would be fine since it was in the school directory, but probably should have asked you first, sorry. Don't worry, though, we went through everything beforehand. She's pretty used to talking her way out of trouble. That's not to say she's bad; she just has issues with authority. Like, nothing illegal. Well, except for maybe..."

"Candice!" Sophia interrupted in exasperation. "What did she tell my Dad?"

"Like we discussed at Bruin's, she told him you had a panic attack and then went to her house," Candice replied. "She said she told him you didn't spend much time there and just wanted to go home. That you seemed 'absolutely mortified' - her words."

"And my Dad believed her?" Sophia asked somewhat skeptically.

"I, uh, don't know," Candice admitted. "Here, I'll send you her number and address so you can add them to your contacts at least."

"I guess I'll find out," Sophia said. "Thanks for trying. I'm almost home."

"Of course!" Candice replied cheerfully. "Tell me how it goes!"

"Sure," Sophia half-heartedly agreed as she ended the call.

So much for a nap. She stopped walking and took a mournful look at the distant mountains. *You know, between fighting a cougar and dealing with people, I think I prefer the cougar.*

"Hey Dad," Sophia greeted as nonchalantly as she could manage as she shut the front door.

"Do you know a Patty by chance?" her dad asked from the living room.

Here we go... Sophia leaned against the divider between the entryway and living room, trying to look innocent.

"Yeah, she's a friend from school," Sophia answered, trying to sound surprised. "We met at Candice's Halloween party. Why?"

Too much detail, Sophia cringed inwardly.

“Did you go to her house on New Year’s Eve?” he asked suspiciously.

Alright, like I rehearsed on the way home.

“Yeah, after I ran out of Camden’s h...,” Sophia replied and then stopped herself. “How do you know that?”

“Damn it, Sophia, why didn’t you tell me? Was it really better letting me think it was a prank instead of tellin’ me it was nerves?” Her dad ignored the question. “Or you got help from a friend?”

Look ashamed.

Sophia dropped her head and tried to fold her ears and absent tail down. “I was soooo embarrassed afterwards; I didn’t realize it would freak out everyone. I’m really sorry.”

Her dad sighed, “Next time, tell me instead of leaving it up to someone else. Save everyone a lotta trouble.”

To her shock, he unmuted the television.

That’s it..? Sophia nearly forgot she was supposed to be supplicating herself. *Really?*

“Am I still grounded..?” she asked cautiously.

“I’m still pissed at how disrespectful you’ve been,” her dad replied, raising his voice above the TV. “And that you hid everything from me. But no.”

YES!!!

Not wanting to press her luck, Sophia high-tailed it from the front hall. As soon as she was out of sight, she broke into a grin. Her throat muscles worked, trying to produce a deep-throated growl of satisfaction. Nothing came out, but she was too excited to care.

I can’t believe that actually worked! Thank you, Candice! She stopped just inside her bedroom. *And thank you, Patty. Maybe Candy is right about her.*

After shutting her door, she dropped her backpack and then pulled off her boots and snowsuit. Sitting on the side of her bed, she took out her phone and mashed out a quick message to Candice:

IT WORKED1 THNX1111

Within seconds, she received a reply:

Yeah??? No cap???

Sophia grinned and sent:

Yep Tell u mor in a bit

Now to get this stuff off and let the wolf out, she set her phone down and headed for the bathroom.

Ten minutes later, she was back in her room, holding a plate with the last two hotdogs in the house, her upper lip feeling raw. The burning sensation in her nose was finally dissipating and she eagerly sucked in the aroma of the two cold weiners as she carried them down the hall. Even the omnipresent stench of alcohol was welcome after the scentless void of the previous few hours.

That was awful. Sophia nudged her door closed with her foot. *It felt like walking through a thick fog.* She yawned as fatigue replaced the last of her tension. *This week has been exhausting; at least I can be myself for a little while.*

Willing herself to hold onto her human side a little longer, she shuffled over to her bed and set her plate down on it.

Be myself, she worked to pull her shirt off. *I guess there is no other way to think of 'Wolfgirl.'* She dropped the shirt to the floor and reached down to undo the clasp on her pants. *Like I told Candy, it's just me in here.*

She tugged her pants over her hips and to the floor before stepping out of them. Standing back up, she reached behind her back and slipped her fingers under her bra strap before hesitating.

I wish I could trust Dad wouldn't come in here. She pulled at her bra strap angrily, trying to alleviate some of the irritation it was causing her. *The nerve of him.*

Sophia jumped as her phone buzzed on her bed.

Someone's calling me? She sat down on the side of her bed and reached for her phone. *Could it be Candice? But why would she call instead of text?* Then she saw the name and her heart stopped. *Work... Oh no...*

Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath as her heart raced. Despite her mental exhaustion, she willed herself to ignore her desire to swat the suddenly terrifying lump of metal and plastic off the bed. Opening her eyelids, she reached down and picked up her phone. Flipping it open, she grasped it tightly in her shaking hand and brought it to her ear.

Have to be human a little longer.

"H-hi Linda," she stammered into the microphone.

"Sophia!" Linda's voice came through the other end. "I was calling to check on you and apologize; I don't know what came over me earlier."

She's calling to apologize to me??? Sophia nearly dropped the phone in surprise.

"I'm okay," she replied flatly.

"Good!" the tinny quality of the speaker didn't hide the relief in Linda's voice. "Maybe I've been workin' too much lately because my mind is playin' tricks on me; I thought you were snarling at me like an animal earlier, but that doesn't make any sense."

"Oh," Sophia replied simply and forced a laugh. "Yeah, that would be weird."

"Then I realized you might have been having an allergic reaction or somethin' and had just left you. Glad to hear you're alright and apologize for abandoning you like that," Linda told her, sounding embarrassed.

"Thank you?" Sophia replied uncertainly.

"Well, I should get home," the woman said. "Just wanted to make sure you were okay, and I'll see you next week. Pay more attention when you're counting change!"

"Uh, bye," Sophia replied dumbly and closed her phone.

That was not at all what I was expecting, but I'll take it.

Sophia was again startled when the phone buzzed in her hand. This time it was a message from Candice. Flipping the phone back open, she read it:

Got to go, up for hanging out tomorrow?

Turning her head to look towards the window, Sophia gazed at the moon in its waning phase. Its light seemed to call to her, pull at something within the shadowed recesses of her soul. With the stress of the last week dissipating at last, all that remained was a need, a loneliness within her that could not be filled by anything human. Turning back to her phone, she quickly sent a response:

Thnx alrdy have plns tmrw.