

Chapter 59

The telltale aroma of strawberry suffused the air half a second before Candice's cheery voice sounded above the hall noise. "And you thought you couldn't make it through the day!"

Sophia finished squeezing her sociology text into her backpack and then turned around. Candice was standing a few feet away, carrying some class materials. She smiled broadly as Sophia's eyes met hers, or rather, her exposed teeth.

She's excited to see me and is presenting her teeth for me to lick! Sophia started towards her friend before catching herself. *No, that's not what humans do.*

"Hey," Sophia greeted her friend with a stiff nod and then remembered to smile. "I was going to go find you after getting my stuff."

Day is finally over. I'm sooo hungry and I really miss Shadow.

"Ah, yeah, I had to talk to my language arts teacher after class about a project," Candice explained. "So, I figured I'd swing by and see if you were at your locker yet. And you were! Ready to head to that shop? I've been looking forward to it all day!"

Shop? Sophia's eyes narrowed in puzzlement.

"You know... the one with the story dude?" Candice reminded her when she didn't reply immediately. "Indian legends..?"

Her whole body suddenly felt heavy with exhaustion. *Oh, that...*

"Oh, right, yeah!" Sophia laughed nervously, feeling a lump in her throat. "I completely forgot about that, but that should be fun!"

Where Candice hopes to find a way to "fix" me...

"Great!" Candice responded. "Meet me at my locker when you're ready, and we'll head over."

"Yeah, sure!" Sophia forced a smile and then turned back to her locker.

Knowing more wouldn't hurt. She wrestled with her backpack's zipper to close it. *But I really need to tell Candice what I really want soon.* The safety pin holding the main compartment's damaged zipper to the backpack strained to hold the overstuffed compartment. *And I'd rather face a hundred mountain lions.*

I bet there are mice burrows under the snow in that field. Ignoring the insistent instinct to get her nose close to the ground was getting painful. *Or maybe even a rabbit.*

It took her a moment to register that Candice had said something as they walked away from the school entrance.

"Hmm?" Sophia said, turning her head to look at Candice.

"I asked what you were looking at," Candice laughed. "You seemed really interested in something in the field."

"Oh, nothing," Sophia fibbed. "I'm just happy to be outside."

"It does feel nice," Candice agreed. "Especially after all the cold last week. Normally, I'd be in pep club for another hour or two." Then, her eyes lit up. "So, how did your day go? I didn't hear about anyone getting mauled, so I assume it went okay. Not that you would do that, of course."

"It was fine," Sophia replied simply. "Better than I expected."

"I'm sorry I didn't come by to check on you," Candice blurted out. "I tried to before fourth period, but couldn't find you. Then you waved me off at lunch, and I wasn't sure if you wanted me to come by later. Alexa said you seemed to be doing okay, if a bit stressed, but then I heard people talking about you..."

"Candice, it's okay," Sophia assured her gently. "Really, it is! You don't have to look out for me."

"I just feel like such a bad friend," Candice admitted, looking at the ground. "I got you into this whole mess, and it's not fair that you have to suffer for it. You've been dealing with this huge... burden... all by yourself for the last two months, and I had no idea!"

Well, not quite alone...

"It's not your fault; I was the one who pushed you away," Sophia reminded her and then changed the subject as they passed the first shops marking the start of downtown. "After we talk to the guy, could we get something to eat?" Her mouth watered as she picked up the smell of freshly grilled beef. "Like burgers or something? I'm starving."

Maybe find a place that sells whole cows?

"Sure! There's a new burger place on the south side of town!" Candice replied enthusiastically. "I hear they have awesome smash burgers! Of course, I was really hoping to spend some time at the antique shop while we were there! I bet they have some really cool stuff! Ooooh, you think this guy is a shaman and there's a hidden magic section? That's how they hide among normal people in books! They have secret rooms full of potions, charms, and spellbooks."

Come to think of it, how do we know we can trust this man? Ice ran through Sophia's veins. I didn't think magic existed a few months ago. What if wizards and witches are real? What if this guy is looking for werewolves? Maybe he hunts or catches them? She shivered as her

imagination continued to conjure up ever more horrific possibilities. *Maybe he puts them in a cage until the full moon and then skins them alive.*

"Who knows? Maybe he's actually a medicine man and knows how to cure you!"

Candice speculated giddily. "Wouldn't that be amazeballs?"

This is just what I am; there isn't anything to cure...

"I guess..." Sophia managed, wanting to get on all fours and run as far from town as possible.

What if he does know how to stop it? How do I tell Candice I really am a wolf?

"Don't worry," Candice replied, misinterpreting her reluctance. "Even if he doesn't know anything, we'll find something to help you!" She looked up and grabbed Sophia's arm suddenly. "Oh! Here it is!"

Sophia looked up, examining and sniffing the building warily. The wide, two-story building was completely unremarkable as far as she could tell. Two large windows flanking the door revealed a shop absolutely crammed with old-looking merchandise of every possible description. A white oval sign with "Antiques on Main" stenciled on it was fastened to the wall's second floor.

I'm not going to bail now. Sophia swallowed, trying to get rid of the lump in her throat.

Candice was already opening the glass door, and Sophia hurried to join her. As soon as she stepped into the shop's warm air, a bevy of scents washed over her. She stopped in the doorway, with her nose upturned as she took it all in. There were woods, metals, oils, and other materials of every possible description present, but what struck her most of all was the unmistakable impression of age.

Just imagine what I could learn if I could smell as well as Shadow! She stepped towards a wooden spinning wheel and leaned down to sniff it more closely. The faint scent of linseed oil tickled her nose.

"May I help you girls?" A man's voice startled her from behind.

She snapped her head away from the spinning wheel to see a middle-aged man of Native American descent standing in the doorway of a small room behind the store's register. He looked to be only a few inches taller than they were, and his dark hair was flecked with wisps of silver. The plain tan pocketed, button-down shirt he wore was neatly tucked into blue jeans and held up with a brown leather belt. His dark eyes studied them warily as he wiped his hands with a stained rag.

"Good afternoon!" Candice took off her hat and then asked, "Would you happen to be Mr. Dann?"

The man blinked in surprise. "I am."

Huh, he's definitely not what I was expecting. He certainly doesn't look like a shaman or medicine man.

"Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Dann!" Candice greeted him.

"Carl, please." The side of his mouth curled up in amusement. "Mr. Dann makes me sound old."

"Carl! Got it!" Candice moved closer to stand next to a display case stocked with old but beautiful fine china. "I'm Candice, and this is Sophia!" She gestured at Sophia. "We're working on a project for school, and a friend of ours told us you know a lot of Native American stories from tribes that lived around here!"

"Did they now?" He smirked. "I should start charging."

He turned his head to watch Sophia as she navigated her way through the tightly packed shop to join Candice. Carl's smile turned into a frown as she approached him. His brow furrowed, and his eyes seemed to study her intently. After a few moments, he shook his head slightly and looked away.

An uneasy feeling settled into Sophia's stomach. *Does he suspect something?*

"Yep, she said you were very helpful!" Candice said with just the right amount of reverence in her voice. "And we were hoping to ask you some things!"

Carl walked around the front counter and leaned back against it. His expression was neutral, but his eyes betrayed enthusiasm.

"Alright, guess I've got a few minutes. What're you looking for?" He inquired. "I've collected all sorts of stories from everywhere; it's a hobby of mine."

"That's really cool!" Candice replied. "How'd you get into that?"

"I grew up hearing stories from my grandfather," he answered. "They always fascinated me, and he was a wonderful storyteller." He smiled, his eyes twinkling. "When it was time for him to tell a story, you could hear a pin drop before he started speaking. He could bring them to life in a way that just captivated you."

Just ask about the legend so we can leave! Sophia's attention drifted over to a vintage wooden dog crate sitting near where the man was standing. *I wonder if I'd still be able to smell any dogs that used that? I bet Shadow could.*

"Is that why you own an antique shop?" Candice asked, looking around. "I imagine you hear a lot of interesting stories!"

He chuckled, "You might say it played a role. And yes, many of the items in here have stories associated with them. I record them as best I can. However, the ones that interest me

most are the legends and myths from different cultures. If you really want to get to know a people, listen to their stories.”

“Like the brothers Grimm?” Candice asked curiously.

“Absolutely! I even have several 19th-century editions of their books.” His face turned downcast. “I just wish I had thought to record my grandfather’s stories while he was still alive. He had some that I haven’t heard anywhere else. I’ve compiled them as best I can from memory, but I don’t remember everything.”

Why is she stalling? We didn’t come here to hear him talk about himself! Sophia’s stomach rumbled grumpily as she shifted her feet impatiently.

“We’re wondering about...” Sophia started before Candice cut her off with a wave of her hand.

“I imagine the Shoshone must have a lot of interesting legends,” Candice said brightly, getting out a notebook and pen. “They’ve lived in the area for thousands of years!”

Right, school project. Sophia took the cue and retrieved the first notebook she found from her backpack.

“Oh yes, many, what are you looking for?” He asked while Sophia rummaged for something to write with. “Perhaps the legend of how the Wakinu, the Grey Bear, created the white trail in the sky, or the one involving Wolf, Coyote, and the origin of death? Then there is my personal favorite: how the wolf, fox, cougar, and bobcat defeated the vicious Nimerigar, or Little People. If you’re willing to go further afield, there are...”

Candice is going to want to hear all of them, isn’t she.

“What about the tribe that could turn into wolves?” Sophia interrupted impatiently.

Candice shot her an exasperated look.

Carl shrugged. “There are quite a few stories about people who could turn into wolves. Were you thinking of one in particular?”

“About the tribe that used to live around here,” Sophia clarified.

Again, his eyes seemed to bore into her. “That one? That’s just a legend my Grandfather used to tell when he ran out of other material,” He stammered, and then he gestured apologetically. “If your project is on stories, I’m afraid there isn’t really much of a narrative to it. There aren’t any characters or anything in it.”

“Our friend told us about it and we found it fascinating,” Candice explained smoothly. “We thought it would be especially cool to include since it’s local!”

“Alright, sure,” He sighed, rubbing his chin. “It’s an obscure tale that I’ve only heard from one other person. It goes like this: long ago, there was a tribe with particularly fierce warriors

that lived in this area for many generations. They spent their summers in the mountains to the east but would make their winter camp along the rivers, here, in the valley.”

Candice had opened her notebook and was furiously writing as their storyteller spoke.

Carl continued, his voice and hands becoming more animated as he slipped into his role, “This tribe mostly kept to itself, but woe to any tribe that worked up the courage to raid them. For, on the brightest night of the month, the tribe would repay such mischief tenfold!” He paused for dramatic effect. “On that night, the tribe would perform a ritual only it knew. They covered themselves in wolf skins and called upon the spirits to bestow the abilities of wolves upon them. The other tribes attempted to learn their secrets but never succeeded.”

But I didn't know the ritual. Sophia nervously licked her upper lip. *Why would it have worked for me?*

“Once the ritual was completed, the offending tribe would soon find itself beset by warriors carrying the spirits of wolves. Eventually, only the especially brave or most foolish warriors tested themselves against it,” he finished. “That’s the story my grandfather told, at least.”

Candice clapped vigorously.

That's it? Sophia shifted her weight impatiently. *That's just what Rachel told us!*

“So they were like werewolves?” Candice asked.

“Sort of?” Carl replied thoughtfully. “They only had the blessing of the spirits for that night. Otherwise, they had to perform the ritual again if they wished to receive it. So, similar to the European werewolf legends, but not exactly the same. They couldn’t spread it to others, for example.”

“Not even biting?” Sophia spoke up.

“Only the ritual,” Carl confirmed.

Huh, that's good to know.

“Fascinating,” Candice replied. “Was there any more to it?”

Carl glanced at Sophia warily before saying, “It’s strange, but for years, the only source I ever heard it from was my grandfather. I thought he had made it up, even though he swore he hadn’t. However, when I was a young man, I came across an elderly woman who knew a version of it that had some additional details.” He shrugged. “She said it was passed down within her own family.”

“What did she say?” Sophia asked eagerly, leaning forward.

“The way she told it, it was less a story than a warning. According to her, there were rare individuals with whom the spirits resonated with particularly strongly,” he explained. “These

individuals only ever needed to perform the ritual once. From then on, they changed every full moon and even kept some of the Great Wolf's blessings during the day. These individuals and their abilities were highly revered by the tribe."

"What do you mean they kept some of the blessings?" Candice asked, scrawling in her notebook.

"From my understanding, they kept some of the abilities even when there was no full moon," Carl replied, crossing his arms.

So, they didn't change into wolves? Sophia felt crushing disappointment.

"That doesn't sound so bad," Candice commented, sounding relieved.

"However," Carl said suddenly, holding up a finger. "She also said it was as much a curse as it was a blessing; they had to resist the call of the wolf spirits or risk losing their humanity."

"What does that mean?" Sophia asked, perking up.

"If they gave in, they eventually turned into wolves, mind and body," Carl told her bluntly. "Reduced to nothing more than wild beasts."

"But they're not...!" Sophia protested before she could stop herself.

Both Carl and Candice turned to stare at her. Sophia felt her ears twitch as her face heated up. *They're not beasts!*

"So, to stay human, they just had to act human?" Candice interjected quickly.

Carl shrugged, "That would be my understanding of it, yes. The more they behaved like a wolf, the more wolf-like they became. She said it was considered very shameful to lose oneself like that." He paused to look out the store window before turning back to them. "There really isn't much else to it, and it honestly isn't the most exciting tale. There are other stories..."

"What happened to the tribe?" Sophia asked quietly.

Carl sighed, "The legend doesn't say. Just that it existed a long time ago."

I'll have to ask Shadow more next full moon. Without thinking, Sophia flicked her tongue upwards in an attempt to wet her nose.

"Look, girls, I don't know what you're playing at, but I'm a busy man," Carl said crossly.

"We're not pranking you!" Candice protested desperately. "Please, just one more question: Could they be cured? I mean, was there a way to change them back?"

"Not that I know of," Carl responded curtly and then moved back around the counter. "I've told you all I know."

"Did they change more every full moon?" Sophia asked quickly. "Become more wolf?" Silence filled the store.

Finally, he said, sounding irritated, “Girls, I’m done indulging this foolishness, and unless there’s something you’re looking to buy, I have work to do.” And then he started towards the back room, but not before Sophia heard him mumble. “It’s only a legend.”