

Chapter 60

Did I do something wrong? Sophia stared in the direction of the door Carl had disappeared through, perplexed. *Why did he think we were pranking him?*

Candice sighed loudly as she threw her notebook and pen into her backpack and then muttered, "I'll be outside."

What's her problem? Sophia scrambled to stuff her notebook into her own backpack as her friend left the antique shop. *We got what we came for; didn't we?*

Leaving the store, Sophia found Candice pacing on the sidewalk outside. The knuckles of her bare hands were white from clutching the straps of her backpack tightly. She didn't look up when the shop's door closed behind Sophia.

"Are you... Okay?" Sophia asked uncertainly, slowly approaching her friend. "Do you still want to go for some burgers?"

Candice stopped pacing and looked at Sophia with a scowl. "I was hoping to befriend him, maybe ask him about a few other stories first," she said. "That way, he'd be more open to talking and maybe even finding out more about it. But you just plowed right on ahead and freaked him out. Now, he thinks we were messing with him and won't help us anymore. If you had just let me handle it like I was trying to..." She threw up her hands in frustration.

Sophia blinked, caught off guard. *Freaked him out...? What...?*

Candice closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. After opening them, she said, "I'm sorry; I'm just frustrated, and I should have said something ahead of time. Ever since this started, well, you don't seem to realize how... *different* you act and look. It makes people nervous."

"But I didn't do anything!" Sophia protested, feeling hurt.

"It's the way you stand and move," Candice explained as she studied Sophia. "And the way your face moves... doesn't seem quite, well, human." She looked away, blushing.

"Oh..." Sophia replied, stung by her friend's appraisal.

What am I supposed to do if just existing is enough to bother people? It's not my fault I'm supposed to be a wolf!

"That came out harsher than I wanted, sorry." Candice looked back at Sophia. "It's just... every time I've started to doubt... to wonder if you really are faking, or just sick, I see you and know it's real." Candice finally relaxed her grip on the straps of her backpack, allowing it to sag, and looked back up at Sophia. "I was hoping, really hoping he knew of a cure..."

Setting her own feelings aside, Sophia covered the last few feet between them and placed her forearm on her friend's shoulder.

"At least we know a little more," she tried to sound upbeat. "That I have some control over it."

Leaning in, she nuzzled her friend's face comfortingly with her nose.

"Stop that!" Candice snapped loudly, jerking away from Sophia.

Sophia backed away, startled. "Stop what..?"

"Stop acting like a wolf! That's what makes it worse!" The other girl's voice was less demanding than pleading. "Please!"

"I thought you said..."

"I know what I said!" Candice interrupted sharply. "But I didn't know giving in to... whatever it is... was what was causing you to change!"

"But..."

"All you have to do is act normal; be human," Candice pleaded.

I can't..! Sophia looked away, a lump in her throat. *Because that's what I am. It's what I've always been.*

"But you're not going to, are you?" Candice whispered, her voice cracking. "We know how to stop it now, and... You're not going to. You want it to happen..."

"That's not..." Sophia started to say, but couldn't bring herself to deny it.

"It is true, isn't it? This is what you've always wanted." Candice started to cry. "You think being a mindless animal would be so great! But you didn't think about the people you'd leave behind! People who care about you!"

Ohhhh, that's what's worrying her. A strange sense of calm washed over Sophia.

"Candice, you won't lose me!" Sophia told her gently. "I'll still be me!"

"You heard what Carl said: Those who gave in became nothing more than mindless wolves!"

"But he's wrong!" Sophia insisted. "I know he's wrong!"

"How? How do you know that?" Candice yelled hysterically. "How could you possibly know that, Sophia?"

A passerby looked at them in surprise and then hastened past.

"Because Shadow said...!" Sophia froze as the words left her mouth, and she felt queasy.

Shit...

Candice stopped sobbing and stared at her, "Who's Shadow?"

I had to tell her eventually. Sophia took a breath.

"Shadow is my mate," she admitted. "I should have told you... I've wanted to tell you..."

"Your mate?!?" Candice gasped.

Sophia nodded, grinning sheepishly.

"Is he, like, another werewolf? I thought you said you didn't know anyone else like you!"

"No," Sophia told her. "He's a wolf, but he's descended from the tribe in the legend and is smart like a human. Last full moon... I was able to talk to him."

"You talked to a wolf?" Candice asked incredulously.

And a dog...

"Yes," Sophia confirmed. "I don't know how, but I understood him that night and knew how to talk back. He said his... pack has a legend that their ancestors were humans with the spirits of wolves." She hesitated and then added softly, "Like me."

"Have you two..?" Candice weakly made an open fist and vaguely pointed at it, blushing.

"No!" Sophia exclaimed sharply, her own face heating up. "Not yet, but I do love him. He asked me to, well, he proposed to me."

"He *what*???" Candice asked in disbelief.

"He asked me to be his mate for life," Sophia replied, feeling her confidence growing. "Like his wife, I guess. Yesterday, I said yes."

"Sophia..." Candice's throat worked.

"Candice," Sophia interrupted gently but firmly. "I know this all sounds insane, but I'm more certain of this than I've been sure of anything." Her eyes started to water as she choked up. "I'm turning into a wolf because that's what I'm supposed to be. Deep down - that's what I've always been." She smiled happily, "I love Shadow with all my heart, and he loves me. We're meant to be together; I know it."

"You really mean it all, don't you?" Candice gaped at her.

"I do," Sophia confirmed. "I know it's not what you want to hear, and I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner... But please understand..."

Candice shook her head and then rasped, "I... I think I need some time alone." Without waiting for Sophia to reply, she turned and walked up the street, leaving Sophia standing there alone.

Sophia shivered, her stomach twisting into knots.

I've... I've lost her... again.