

## Chapter 18

### ABBIE

I stare at the forest surrounding the castle, wishing I could shift and feel the air in my fur and the dirt beneath my paws. Though, I was actually never able to shift. Mrs. Daley forbade it. The only time I did was in our room back at the orphanage, and Ivy would keep a lookout. Not that Mrs. Daley came up to our room much, so I used to laze by the window where I could see the moon and feel its rays on my fur. I guess that is where the legend came from for humans about the moon and werewolves, etc. I've always felt drawn to the moon and night in general. I used to imagine what it would be like to roam freely and explore the woods, but instead, my paws only knew the floorboards of our tiny room, except for that one time.

Yet so close to the forest, the urge to run free is overwhelming. I take a step toward the forest, feeling my body tense with the urge to change and realign so I can take my werewolf form. There is nothing more freeing than the shift, yet it is also painful because I hardly did it.

"Abbie!" Clarice calls out to me, and I rush back to hang out the towels I was sent out to hang.

"Yes," I call back, looking toward the laundry door. Clarice emerges and peers over at me.

"Once done, come help me prepare for dinner."

I nod to her quickly and rush to finish hanging the washing out, wondering if maybe I could sneak out while everyone is asleep to shift. Clarice did say I could leave if I wanted. But I quickly dismiss the thought. The guards may stumble across me and think I am trespassing. It makes me shudder at the damage they could cause to my tiny wolf form.

After dinner and wandering back to my room, I find myself drawn to look out the window. So I give up avoiding it and sit on the windowsill looking at the castle grounds below. My skin itches with the need to shift. It is a clear night yet as I watch from the window I see the guards walking the forest edge and sigh.

Despite the promise of the forest, I realize that once again, my only place of solace with my wolf will be this room. So, I strip my clothes off, I get to my hands and knees, and a violent shudder ripples up my spine. I feel the first snap and clench my teeth as my bones start breaking and realigning into position.

My hands become paws and skin turns to fur and my nose and face elongate. I am careful not to let my claws scratch the floor as I stand on my hind legs and jump onto the sitting nook of the window ledge. I press my nose to the glass and lay down along the window, wishing I could run through the forest, wishing to know what it truly means to be a werewolf.

My mother used to tell me how freeing it was to run on four legs, zip through the trees, and feel the air and heat blow through her fur. I guess I will never know what that truly feels like. It is foolish to miss something I have never experienced, and probably won't ever experience again.

I end up falling asleep on the window ledge. It isn't until I hear a knock on the door that I wake up and crash to the ground with a thud. My entire body shakes when I hear the door handle twist, and I know I am going to be caught. Lowering my body to the ground, I try to fit under the bed, yet my furry body is much too big. Stupid Abbie, how could you fall asleep?

"Abbie?" Clarice's voice reaches my ears, and I peer around the edge of the bed. She gasps, and I quickly shift back, reaching for the sheet on my bed to tuck around me.

"I'm sorry, I promise I was careful and didn't scratch the floor." Tears burn my eyes and I peer down at the mess on the floor. "I promise I will clean up the fur," I quickly tell her, covering myself. Clarice stares at me, and my cheeks burn with embarrassment. I wonder how many lashes I will get for my selfishness.

"You're not in trouble, Abbie. I noticed you didn't come down for supper," she says, placing a food tray with a slice of pie on the bed.

"Sorry, I will get changed and come down," I tell her. She stares at me for a second before nodding and heading toward the door. She pauses just as Gannon and Dustin walk past my door.

"You know, Abbie, if you want to shift, you can go into the woods. Just let the guards know you're out there so they don't think you're a stranger." Clarice says, and I tug the blanket tighter when I notice Gannon has stopped and is staring past Clarice at me. I drop my gaze, unable to meet his gaze.

"It's okay, it won't happen again," I assure her.

"Abbie?" she speaks softly, and I lift my gaze to hers. Her brows furrow, and she looks at Gannon behind her.

"I'll take her for a run," Gannon offers, but I shake my head.

"No, it's fine. I think I will just take a shower and clean up the mess I made," I tell them. Gannon goes to say something but closes his mouth. With a swift nod, he walks off. I let out a breath and Clarice watches him leave. Clearly, my shifting inside has angered him.

"Try to get some rest, but if you want to shift, you can go to the woods to do so. I have told you, Abbie. You aren't a prisoner here," Clarice says kindly before leaving me. Yet she says that, but I cannot see Ivy, or even go to that floor. I don't much feel like tempting the Lycans by doing something, even if allowed.

Mrs. Daley used to like to play those games, get our hopes up and say we could have a break. The moment we did, she beat us bloody. Or like the time she said we could eat with the children at the dining table, only

to humiliate us when we sat down with them. She tossed our food on the floor and made us eat like dogs. After that, when the children begged for us to sit with them, we never asked again. We were only twelve at the time.

We had finally given in to the children and thought for once we would ask; it sucked because the kids always asked. We only asked once because it was Mrs. Daley's birthday. We spent all day preparing the cake and making sure we had a delicious meal prepared for her. We thought if we worked extra hard and made her happy, she would let us join her and the other children. She had promised us that if we baked her favorite chocolate mud cake, and cooked a roast we could celebrate with her and try the cake we painstakingly created for her.

We were so excited, and when the other kids sat down, we served them food. Then we gathered our own plates. Usually, Mrs. Daley gave us whatever scraps the kids didn't eat or sometimes if she thought we were being lazy, she gave the scraps to the pigs and we went without. We were on our best behavior, she promised. Even Katrina was excited for us and helped us bake the cake. Yet as we plated our food and went to take our seats, she snapped at us.

"What are you doing?" she snarled, and we both froze and looked at Katrina who stared at her in confusion.

"They're going to join," Katrina says before she is interrupted by Mrs. Daley.

"Dogs don't sit at the table," she said, getting up.

"I said you could join us because I was feeling generous, but filthy rogues eat like filthy rogues," she said, snatching our plates. She emptied the plates onto the floor.

"Now sit and enjoy your meal," she ordered us. The humiliation and sadness at the broken promise nearly made me cry, but I held it back, knowing what tears earned us. With one last glance at Katrina, we saw her lips quiver, and she tossed her napkin before storming out.

I nudged Ivy as I went to sit on the floor. Ivy, I could tell, didn't want to eat it, though the floors were clean, we would know. We clean them daily. She had just glared at Mrs. Daley, and I had to nudge her, giving her a look to remind her we hadn't eaten in two days and she had fainted the day prior. Who cares if it was ruined? We still needed to eat, Ivy especially. She always got less than everyone. Mrs. Daley was exceptionally cruel to her. I would always sneak her food scraps when I could, knowing she wouldn't receive half of what I got or anything at all.

"Please," I whispered to her, nudging her with my elbow. Ivy looked at me and dropped her gaze to the floor. She then sank down beside me and scooped up a roasted potato from the floor and nibbled on it.

Looking at the slice of pie on the tray, makes me wonder if Ivy has eaten. Maybe I can sneak it over to her. Ivy is always too shy to ask for food. She has copped one too many beatings for it, so my conscience gnaws at me about how much I have eaten since being here, realizing

she may not be eating at all. I quickly change, scoop up the plate and peer out the door, trying to sneak into the King's quarters. Yet it doesn't take long before Trey, one of the guards stationed there, spots me and sends me away.