

CHAPTER 27

Winter POV

We pull up into the driveway and I shudder looking at the house. Had it always looked this intimidating and imposing or was my imagination going into overdrive? I'm reluctant to get out of the car and I watch as Damien gets out, part of me wanting to cower against the seat and stay in the car. I know he's told me that father is gone forever, but a small part of me thinks he could be lying, that this could be a trap and that's what keeps me from getting out. My brother looks exasperated, but I don't care.

"Winter," he says softly, knocking on my window, "it's safe to come out, I promise he's not here."

I just looked at him and then slowly, quietly, got out, closing the car door behind me. To my surprise, Damien took hold of my hand and gave it a squeeze, I guess his way of trying to reassure me as we walked up the driveway and to the front door together.

Damien reaches out and opens the door, turning the light on and going inside, while I clutch his hand with a death grip. The lounge room is completely littered with beer bottles and there's father's odor still drifting in the air. I gag, putting a hand over my mouth and taking deep breaths. I'm aware I'm still in a hospital gown but I'm too scared to go upstairs by myself.

"Are you hungry?" Damien asks and I shake my head, tugging at my hospital gown and looking at him with wide eyes in an effort to get him to understand what I want.

"You want to get changed," he says, and I nod.

"Go on then" he urges, and I shake my head, pulling on his hand while he stares at me confused.

"You want me to come with you?" he asks gently and I nod, staring down at the ground. He uses a finger to lift my chin, staring deeply into my eyes as I blink at him.

"I can come with you," he says gently and I pull him behind me as I try, very awkwardly, to get around on the crutches. Damien gets impatient though and scoops me up, carrying me the rest of the way and placing me on my bed.

My room remains unchanged and I gesture toward my dresser. My brother nods and rifles through the drawers and throws a shirt and pants at me, which I catch, but I continue to look at him. He's clearly perplexed by my expression, but I need underwear, vehemently aware that I'm not wearing any at the moment. I watch as he turns bright red.

"Panties," he says weakly, and I point to the top drawer. He acts as though his hand is burned and flings me a pair immediately as I fight the urge to laugh. He pointedly looked away from me.

"Can you get dressed on your own?" he asks and I nod. There's no way I'm about to ask my brother for help getting dressed. I don't care how long it takes; I'll do it myself.

"I'll wait in the hallway," he says, then frowns. "Knock on the wall or something when you are finished. I forgot you can't talk" he says apologetically, and I wait impatiently until he's left the room.

I curse silently in my mind as I begin to wriggle into my underwear and pants, every movement excruciating. The shirt was the easiest part and I was panting heavily by the time I was done. The clothes hung on me but so did the rest of them and it's not like I had anyone I was trying to impress. I use my fist to knock on my bedroom wall loudly.

He came rushing in. "Anything else you need?"

I shook my head and then stopped him before he could pick me up. I mime a pen and paper, pretending to write, and thankfully he gets the message.

"Pen and paper" he muttered, and I pointed to my desk where a notepad and pen sat. He grabs it and then hands it to me, before swiftly picking me up and taking me downstairs.

Damien goes to place me on the couch and I flinch, looking at him in horror. "You need to rest" he whispers, "dad usually used the recliner anyway", he points out, and I relax, letting him put me down.

"Now, how about some food or a drink?" he suggests, looking a little lost. This is all new to him, but it is for me too. I'm not used to anyone caring for me like this.

I mime drinking and he brings me water before sitting next to me, carefully placing my bad foot and leg on top of his lap.

"Winter, I understand if you don't want to go to school tomorrow and I'm happy to stay with you for as long as you need," he says, and I frown. I don't want to go back to school, not ever, but I couldn't stay away forever, could I? But I feel fragile, broken inside and I can't stand the thought of being bullied while I'm like this. I just want to curl up under my bed and stay there where it's safe.

Damien's waiting for me to answer though, and I reluctantly grab the notebook, scribbling my answer inside and showing it to him.

I'll go to school but I really don't want to. How do I know you've really changed?

"I'll stick by your side Winter, I won't let anyone near you" he promised, and I stare him down, fidgeting with my hands. I had no choice but to trust him, but I still remember every harsh word he uttered towards me and every hit and slap he gave me. I give a small nod, feeling tired and exhausted as well as in pain. With any luck, my foot will heal overnight, or at least part of it, so that I can walk on my own instead of relying on

Damien to help me. I pointed towards his pocket. The pain is so bad that I'm desperate for something that will help with it and I remember the doctor handing the pain pills to Damien in the hospital. He pats his pocket.

"Here's the painkiller and antibiotics. If you need a strong one, point it out again."

I shake my head. Normal painkillers would do for now, but I wouldn't mind having the strong ones close by tonight. I scribble that in my little notepad and he agrees, promising to leave them and the other pills by my bedside. My stomach gives a loud growl and it's then that I finally notice that I'm hungry. My brother gives a grin. "Food" he teases and springs into action while I settle back on the couch and ponder what going to school is going to be like tomorrow. I haven't even thought about Thomas or his parents and I feel a sense of dread. Had Johnathon dealt with that or was I going to be facing the police tomorrow? This was a shifter town, so I didn't have to worry about human cops, but that didn't stop the nervousness or the trembling. I hadn't been at fault, I'd defended myself, but would everyone else believe that?