

## CHAPTER 31

### Winter POV

It's my eighteenth birthday next week, which falls neatly into my plan. I doubt Damien even remembers, he's not celebrated any of my birthdays before and it's not like Johnathon's going to know. All I have to do is hold on until then. Because then I can shift, I'll finally have my wolf and that is the most important aspect of my plan.

I'm leaving this place. I have no ties to my home, except for Damien, and I don't want to be a burden to him. In my condition, unable to talk to him, I'm not much of a sister or someone he can talk to. I also know that he's planning on getting a job to look after us both and, while I would do the same, who would hire someone who was mute? I'm not stupid, it was easy enough to see the expression on the doctor's and Damien's faces. My vocal cords have been damaged beyond repair, it was only going to be more painful to have hope.

I can't bear to go downstairs and see Damien because if I spend too much time with him, in the next few days, then I might change my mind. I'm in so much agony because of my decision, that my chest hurts and it feels tight, tears welling up in the corner of my eyes. Would I hurt my brother for doing this? Or would he be relieved to no longer have me, a burden, to contend with? As for Johnathon? He confused me. It's like he couldn't bear to be too far from me, or maybe it was guilt for rejecting me. I'd felt the mate bond sever, even if I hadn't really made a big deal of it. So, he should move on with his life, just like I want to move on from mine. I refuse to feel bad about it. He'll find another mate. Hell, Jessica

desperately wanted him and she always gets what she wants eventually. I'd be surprised if he refused her advances a second time.

I can't stay up here forever though. Damien's already suspicious and so I force myself to come out of my room and go downstairs where I can hear Damien on the phone, presumably to some friend of his. I'm about to walk forward and let him know I'm there when I hear his conversation and realize he's talking about me. But to who?

"Yes sir, I really appreciate you taking the time to call. So, you're of the opinion that she won't ever be able to talk again" Damien sounds frustrated but I jolt, realizing he's talking to the doctor.

"What am I going to do? I can't be with her every hour of the day", Damien says, exasperated, and I flinch. He sounds so defeated, so broken as his voice cracks.

"Surely there's something you can do? Winter needs to be able to talk, I don't think you understand. I can't protect her if she can't tell me anything or scream out."

I inched closer, seeing tears flowing down my brother's cheeks. I'm absolutely heartbroken. This is what I've turned my brother into. His concern is touching, but he's so afraid for me. Am I that much of a weakling that he feels this way? That he needs to protect me while I'm at school?

"No surgery will correct it" he whispers and he hangs his head. I so badly want to move forward and comfort him, but I'm frantically blinking my own tears back. I was right that I was never going to speak again then. Somehow, it still hurts even though I was prepared for it. Damien hangs up the phone and rests his head against the wall. I waited a minute and then made a huge noise as I walked into the kitchen, Damien springing back and hastily wiping tears from his face.

"Winter," he says thickly as I pretend not to notice, "I was just about to organize dinner. What do you want to order?" he asks and I shrug. I don't really care; it makes no difference to me. To his credit though, he tries.

"Pizza again". I shook my head adamantly. I've never been a real fan of it.  
"Chinese?"

Another shake of my head. Guess I care after all.

"Indian" I nodded excitedly. It's been forever since we had Indian food and I loved spicy food. He gives me a small smile and then sits at the dining table, motioning for me to sit as well, looking extremely pale and biting his lip.

"Winter" he begins, "I have to tell you something and it's not good news."

I already know what he's going to tell me but I don't interrupt, waiting for him to speak and watching as he wrestles with his conscience.

Finally, he clears his throat and looks away, unable to meet my eyes.

"The doctor called while you were still upstairs" he whispers, "and I'm really sorry but he says there's no chance of your vocal cords repairing themselves, they were too shredded in the attack."

I know this but my body slumps anyway. He reaches over and takes my hand and I let him, not used to this contact from him so often. I love him and it's killing me that he's feeling so wretched over it. Even when he beat me, with my father, I loved him as a big brother. It might seem weak of me, but I'd always hoped one day he'd realize I wasn't responsible for my mother's death and treat me like a little sister. Now my wish had come true and I was planning on abandoning him. God, I sucked as a person.

"We'll get through this" he was saying, squeezing my hand, and I nodded, my eyes shiny with tears. He sucks in a breath.

"I swear we'll look into another opinion, maybe another doctor can fix it" he suggested, and I gave him a small smile. Whatever made him feel better.

No doctor is fixing this. I'm not broken, I think to myself. There were plenty of people who were mute and who led perfectly happy lives. I could do the same. I don't need to be fixed. I hear my stomach growl and pat it as my brother gives a sniffle and a smile.

"I guess I had better order that Indian" he laughs, teasing me, and my heart fills with joy to hear him laughing again instead of looking so morose.

He gets on the phone and I lean back in the chair and listen, content to look out the window. One more week, I thought to myself. I could hide from Damien, I think, or I could spend as much time with him as I could before I left. Even though it stings, I decide the latter. I want to get to know my big brother but I wouldn't change my mind about leaving. I was doing what was best for both of us and getting away from Johnathon's overbearing attitude as well. I would be severing the mate bond permanently and possibly becoming a rogue, but it was my life and my choice. I need freedom, and I wasn't going to get it here.