

ANIMA

THE BIRD HOUSE



ERIC MALVES

Anima

Anima: The Bird House

Eric Malves

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DEDICATION

Caleb, you taught me to be myself and were a greater friend than anyone could have dreamed of. I'll never forget the day I was told of your passing.
Thank you, Caleb, for being unapologetically you.

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ANIMA SYMPTOM LOG

DATE: August 27th

NAME: LYALL WILLIAMS

AGE: 20

SEX: Male

HYBRID: Unknown assumed B.O.P.

SYMPTOMS: Golden iris, increased vision perception, corners of eyes have small rust colored feathers. Feathers have since disappeared, vision has improved but iris remains gold in color.

SPECIAL NOTES: Patient was unaware of the condition until today. Has no family record of condition

RECOMMENDATIONS: Patients should have blood testing and samples(if able) of hybrid materials to test for proper species. Recommended to local support group. Depending on results of testing, patients may be chipped for wildlife tracking.

END OF REPORT

CHAPTER 1

Beep! Beep! Beep!

I woke up to my alarm screaming and quickly shut it off.

It's Thursday morning, and my classes at Silvermen college start in about forty five minutes. It's a clear and sunny day, and this year has been hot for late August. I grabbed my bag and laptop and head out toward the college. It's only about a fifteen-minute ride, but I like to get there early and talk with my friend Kole.

Many family members tell me to keep my distance from Kole as he is a deer hybrid. By that, I mean he is an average human. But he also happens to have the ears and tail of a whitetail deer. He has this new condition that first appeared around five years ago that everyone calls Anima. A few people started changing and getting features of different animals out of nowhere. Kole started about a year ago when he woke up with a sore spine, and over the day, he grew a small white tail. His doctor had tests and photos sent to a research lab, where he was identified as a White Tail deer hybrid. Nothing really can be done about it, and no one really knows why it happens. It just seems to happen one day to a few people. Like some in my family, some people think it's contagious and that being around someone with the condition can pass it on to you like the flu. But so far, all research seems to point away from this. It is believed that the cause isn't passing but possibly something environmental. Research is ongoing, and they seem to make new discoveries almost weekly.

Since middle school, I've hung out with Kole, and neither of us were really close to any hybrids. But sure enough, Kole was one of the unlucky. I only

say that because research has shown there is no way to entirely stop changes, let alone revert them. Once your changes begin, you eventually will lose yourself. It's unknown whether any of you will remain once you entirely change. Some people hold onto the hope that their loved one is still in the animal's mind and that someday a way to revert the changes will come around. I think it is just people who cannot cope that their loved one is gone.

While on my way to class, I passed a couple walking down the street. The man was a youngish twenty-something, and his, what I'm assuming, significant other was walking alongside him. They were holding hands, or well if you can call it that. The female was very clearly a bear hybrid and pretty far along. She was almost entirely covered in black fur except for her face, which was that of a mid-twenties caucasian lady. She wore no pants, which did not matter as her legs didn't look human. She had shorter legs met with clawed feet. Her gait was much shorter than the man beside her. She had an almost stumble or waddle as she walked. Her hands were still human-like, but she had claws on her fingertips. Her arms and hands still had black fur covering them.

I turned and looked back to see her back. You would almost think it was a black bear standing on its hind legs from behind. Looking, I thought, *how long had she been like that?* But she seemed happy even in the face of such an unfortunate circumstance.

I kept riding only a few hundred yards from the college now. I pulled up and locked my bike to a lamp post outside the front doors. Making my way down the street, the hot August sun was beating down heavily. The humidity was relatively high, especially for the morning. Kole was standing just inside the doorway to the college.

"Kole!" I shouted louder than intended.

Kole's ears lifted, turning towards me, and his head followed shortly afterward. Kole was an engineering major, vastly different from my computer sciences major. Although we primarily had different classes, we still shared general education classes.

"Hey Lyall," Kole responded, "here a bit early, no? Usually I don't see you until after your first class."

"I decided to get here a bit early today. You know, maybe it's living life last minute like usual," I joked back. But in reality, my morning was a rush to get to class on time.

We spoke briefly about Kole's family and how awkward it would be at his mother's family reunion next weekend. His parents supported Kole in continuing his goal of becoming an engineer, even with his diagnosis. Most people who find themselves affected quit their current jobs or responsibilities as it's almost like being told you only have so many years to live. Some people change entirely quickly, and some of the first people affected are still just mild. It affects everyone in vastly different ways. Kole has been changing for close to a year now, and so far, only two noticeable changes which is pretty usual. He can control himself well enough that you would never be able to tell had he not had ears that moved independently.

We made our way to our classes. Kole had a research study class about architectural failures, and my first class was on computer networking. Our next class is a shared algebra, one of the few we are in together.

Sitting in my usual place in the second row, I reached into my bag to grab my contact solution, and it felt like something caught between my eye and the contact. Removing the problematic contact and placing it back into its case to clean it. While washing it with the bottle of saline kept in my bag, my other eye contact began bothering me. Once I finished rinsing it, I placed it back and cleaned my other contact. Even after having cleaned both, my eyes were still irritated. My sight was blurred, with my eyes watering like they were. I promptly removed both contacts, put them in the case, and began searching my bag for my backup glasses case. Having found the case, it opened to reveal that my glasses were nowhere to be found.

Last using them when working on my research paper Monday night; they must still be on my desk at home. I tried the contacts again, but they were still irritating my eyes and, frankly, making my sight worse than if I just went without. So, I spent the class half struggling to see what was on the projector screen. This went on for the entirety of the class. Thanks to my closer seat, it was not too much of an issue. After the class ended, I made my way to the student lounge.

The lounge was more of a room in the basement no one used. Inside are a few couches and some recliner-style chairs with small flip-out desktops. A row of vending machines hummed away to the left side, keeping their contents cold. No one seemed to use the lounge, as most would leave the building between classes. It made a great place to go if you wanted somewhere quiet to sleep or study. Although the motion-tracked lights were off most of the time.

I took a seat on one of the recliners and waited for Kole's class to end in about half an hour. While leaning back, slowly falling asleep in the chair.

I was walking in the woods behind the college. It was getting dark, which was odd because either I missed my class, or the rain was finally coming. Looking up at the sky, I could not get a clear image but could only see the thick branches of the trees. I kept walking, wondering where the path led. A small bridge runs over the creek and thinking about it, I haven't ever explored the woods yet. I know many of the students who live in the dorms use them as a walking path between the dorms and the main building. On the bridge, I saw someone staring down into the creek. As I walked past, I couldn't see the details of his face, but it seemed almost like he was hiding it. I kept walking past when I heard someone say, "Hey!"

I turned around to look at the figure on the bridge. It was standing about fifteen feet away, looking directly at me. Something about it just didn't seem right. Suddenly it said, "Lyall! Wake up, dude."

I woke up in the student lounge, and Kole was staring me down.

"You good, dude? You look like you've seen a ghost of something," Kole questioned me.

"Nah, I'm good just dreamt some weird stuff. What time is it exactly?"

Kole looked at his phone, "About two-thirty, we have fifteen minutes till algebra, and I was helping my professor move some things, and I lost track of time."

I started to get up and grab my bag, "It's all good, dude, and I also lost track of time."

We started our way upstairs. I turned to Kole, "Hey dude do you mind if I get a copy of your algebra notes today after class? I left my glasses at home, and my contacts have been bothering me today."

"No problem, my dude! I can send you a photo after class if you want."

We walked into the classroom. We sat in the last row, a good twenty-five feet away from the projector screen. As we sat down, I could not clearly make out much on the board, and my vision was just barely farsighted enough to read the board. As the class started, I tried my best to take notes based on what the professor said and what little I could make out on the board. I wasn't

writing a lot down, and the professor noticed.

"Mr. Williams, I hope you are getting this as this is foundational to the next four classes. Without it, you will struggle," The professor said to me.

"Sorry, Professor, just trying to get situated," I responded.

He kept teaching, and I tried to write more down. I squinted to try and see the board better. It seemed to help a bit, and I just kept trying to concentrate and make out what was being written. Suddenly I could see the board. By see, I mean really see it without any effort. I started jotting notes down, and this was the clearest I'd ever seen, even compared to my glasses. Taken aback, I looked around a bit. I looked out the window at the end of our row.

The window was facing the woods, and I could see every leaf of the trees. I could see every small creature in the woods. It seemed almost like my eyes were attracted to any movement. I could see squirrels running around the ground and birds going branch to branch in the trees. As quickly as I would see one thing, my eyes would become distracted by another.

"Mr. Williams, If I have to remind you to pay attention again, I will have to ask you to leave."

"Sorry, professor! I've been getting my notes down, sir."

"Very well, please keep your eyes..... uh, please keep your eyes up here," He stumbled.

Odd, usually, he is very formal sounding. I kept taking notes, and eventually, we were dismissed. I started gathering my things, and I looked over to Kole. And he was trying to take photos of his notes.

"Don't worry about sending me a copy. I was able to see the work pretty easily. In fact, I could see very well! Wondering if maybe I already had contacts in."

As I said that, I thought about my bike ride to class. I could see clearly then, so how would I see clearly if I had contacts doubled up? I followed Kole down to the student lounge. We didn't really talk on the way there. Once we arrived, Kole went to the middle machine of the three vending machines. He put in some coins, and the machine spits out a can of soda. He picked it up and turned to look at me.

"So did you have the wrong contacts in or wha..." Kole stopped.

"I don't know. It's weird because I can see just fine now," I looked up at Kole, and his face was shocked.

"Your...your eyes are..." Kole stuttered, looking with wide eyes at me.

"My eyes are what?" I responded a bit more worriedly.

Kole pulled out his phone and opened the front-facing camera. He turned it so I could see myself. I looked at the face on the screen, but it wasn't entirely what I expected. I blinked, and the image blinked along. I closed one eye, and it did the same.

The face was my face, but the whites of my eyes were a golden brown. The pupil was jet black, and the skin on the side of my head around my eyes had brown feathers peeking from it. I reached up with my finger and rubbed the feathers, and they pulled and moved with my finger. But as soon as I moved my finger away, they snapped back into place.

"No, no, no, no! This can't be happening dude! What should I do? How do I stop it, Kole!" I yelled, looking at him.

"Uh, how long has it been like this? You said your vision got better during class, right?"

"Yeah, about halfway through, it cleared up for me. Is that bad?"

Kole stood there thinking. "Well, that means you've had them for about forty minutes, and we gotta get you back to normal before it's too late."

"How do you go back? This has to be just a little fluke, and there is no way I'm changing!"

"Relax, Lyall, just close your eyes and think about what your face normally looks like," Kole said soothingly, "Take a deep breath and imagine yourself."

I closed my eyes. I took a deep breath and tried to think of how my face looked, what I see every morning in the mirror. I could see my face, and it looked as plain as possible. I kept thinking of putting my contacts in, but then I saw it change. I saw those golden eyes and brown feathers. They were multiplying! My face was surrounded by brown feathers, and my lips began

to push out, harden and turn yellow. It pushed out, and the very tip turned black and took on a hooked shape. I started to hyperventilate.

Suddenly I heard Kole say, "STOP! Think of you! Not what you could be! You need to think of the normal you. Stop thinking about the changes."

My eyes darted open, and I could see something in the middle of my vision. I reached up my hands to push it away but instead, they landed on a beak sticking from my face. My thumb went under the hooked beak, and without hesitation, I tried to open my mouth and scream. What happened next was the single more terrifying thing I have ever experienced. I opened my mouth and expected an "AHHH!" But instead, I let out an almost raspy, high-pitched sound somewhere between a yell and a squeak. It was certainly not human, and it sounded alien to me. My heart is racing and feels like it could burst through my chest anytime!

Kole yelled to me, "You need to stop! Stop thinking and look me in the eyes."

I looked him dead in the eyes. His eyes were normal human eyes. I thought about his eyes and face and focused on his plain-looking face.

"Keep looking at me and think about drinking a nice glass of water. Your smooth lips on the rim of the glass."

I looked right at him and thought of a nice cool glass of water. The sounds of my breathing sounded similar to the raspy noises I had made earlier. But I ignored it and kept thinking. Eventually, the thing I now know was a hooked, sharp beak that started disappearing from my vision. My face went from feeling very warm to feeling much cooler.

Kole grabbed his phone and started typing. As he did, he looked back up at me. "Now, hold that thought."

He pulled up a photo of me from my Instagram profile and turned it so I could see it.

"Now look at this. This is you. Just concentrate on the photo. Nothing else matters right now. Just you and this photo."

I stared at the photo. I saw myself about three months ago. The clear skin and blue eyes looked right back at me. I kept thinking that I would see this if I looked in a mirror.

"Great, you're almost done! Think about your eyes, your white and blue eyes."

I kept thinking about them. Nothing else was on my mind. "I can't think any harder, Kole."

Kole looked at me with a mix of relief and defeat. "Well, the beak and feathers are gone, bird boy. Gave me quite a scare! Any more, and I think you would have taken flight. Well, good thing you're back to mostly normal."

"Mostly normal?" I thought. Those words echoed in my head. What could he mean by "mostly normal?" I wasn't a hybrid. I was an everyday human living a normal life. I reached for my pocket and grabbed my phone. I opened up the camera and looked at myself.

I saw myself. My lips were perfectly human, and my nose was typical. The skin around my face was clear of anything. But my eyes, a set of golden brown and black eyes, looked right back at me. I looked up and down. Left and right, there wasn't a lick of white to be seen.

"This can't be happening, and this isn't happening," I shouted, clearly in denial.

"Lyall, it's real, and it's happening now. You need to just relax a moment, dude. I think you may want to get checked out. Maybe give your mom and call and see about talking to her."

"Kole, I can't go out like this, and I can't look like some frea...." stopping myself as Kole's ears perked up.

"You can be seen like that? I think you're exaggerating a bit" Kole turned a 180. His white deer's tail sticking straight up from the waist of his pants. "Just think, you don't have to worry about sitting on it, Mr. Mile Eyes!" He said jokingly.

I looked at him. "Well, I need to get out of here without anyone seeing my eyes, and I need to find the best way to go about this."

Kole reached into his bag and produced a set of sunglasses. "Maybe these can help you out? I don't need them. Frankly, I can't even wear them with my ears moving."

I took them in my hands and put them on. The already dim room was now a bit darker. "Well, I guess I should make sure nothing else has changed, right? Do I go to a clinic or something? I really don't know where to start here. This is all too quick."

"Well, I'm no expert, but I know my Doc wants me checked out anytime something changes and does not go back. Some concerns with internal structure and stuff. Now I could be remembering wrong, but I think going from a mammal to a bird might be more extreme, right?" Kole said with a bit of sarcasm.

He's right. What if something in me is changed that could be dangerous? What if I somehow poisoned myself because my digestive system changed? As if worrying about feathers sprouting out of my face wasn't enough!

"Where should I go? Is there a special doctor or something?" I asked Kole. At this point, he's pretty much the expert between us.

"I can give you my Doc's address. She's really nice and does allow walk-ins, and she's been dealing with changed people for quite some time now."

"Maybe I should wait till tomorrow. I think I need to sleep this off. I can't go from normal to growing a beak and making bird sounds to a doctor in less than two hours. Plus, it's getting late, and I can see about going tomorrow."

"If you say so, my guy. I'm both nervous and excited for you. Nervous about how it's going to go down with your family," Kole said

"And how exactly are you excited?" I asked Kole in a bit of a rhetorical sense.

"Well, maybe now I won't be so alone, changing and all," Kole said more quietly.

Thinking about it, Kole is pretty much alone. He lives at home and, other than me, does not really have anyone else. Come to think of it, what is my mom gonna say? I was always told to keep my distance from hybrids, but now...

Kole wished me luck tomorrow. He started his way through the woods and back to the dorms. I hopped on my bike and began pedaling home. Sunglasses were on even though the sun was starting to set. After riding a bit,

I made it to the house. I went in and saw my mom cooking dinner. I tried to sneak up the stairs without her noticing.

"Lyall! When did you get home?" My mom said

"Oh, I got in a bit ago. Just finished my class, and it went over a bit."

"That sounds exciting! Any word on that Kole friend of yours? Also, what's with the sunglasses?"

I was dead. She had to know! Why would I be wearing sunglasses this late?

"He's doing fine. He gave these to me to wear home. Trying to keep bugs and stuff out of my eyes...." I tried to say casually.

"Well, dinner will be ready soon. I'll call for you when it's all finished."

"Do you know how long?" I ask, trying to not seem suspicious.

"Oh, about twenty minutes or so. You hungry?" She asked

"Not too hungry, really. I had a bite at the college."

I went upstairs to my room and locked the door. Looking at the mirror on the door, I took inventory. Everything seemed perfectly normal except for my eyes. The black pupils were much more prominent, and the orange ring was so large that you could not even see the whites of my eyes. I needed to find a way to hide the changes quickly.

I opened my laptop and searched *Colored eye contacts*. The search found a site selling eye contacts that changed the look of your eyes. Most seemed to change just the standard colored parts, but I found a set that fully blacks the user's eyes. After a bit more searching, I found what I was looking for. They looked to be made more for stoners than for changing people, but these would make my eyes appear the typical blue and white again. Putting in my info and paid for overnighting them to my house. Everything should be okay if I'm able to make it tomorrow.

"Dinner is ready, Lyall!" My mother called me, and I could not go downstairs there like this! I pretended I didn't hear her, but I heard my door open a few minutes later. Instinctively my head started to turn toward her but then turned my face to the monitor.

"Are you hungry? It's getting cold," Mom said.

"I'm not hungry right now. I'll just heat something up later. Thanks, though," I replied back quietly.

"Is everything ok?" She asked

I didn't know what I could say that wouldn't raise suspicion. "Everything is going good. Just stressed about school" I was not wholly lying to her.

"Ok, but if you need to talk or vent, just let me know," she assured me. She then closed the door and walked down the stairs. I felt like I dodged a massive bullet with that one.

I decided to just go to bed early. Everything should be easier once that package gets here in the morning. Today has been just too much for one day.

I slowly wake up. I never set my alarm. But I didn't really have any plans for today. I started my way downstairs and out to the front room of the house. It seemed that my mom had already left for work along with my dad. I checked the porch, and there sat a small brown box. I brought it inside and opened it to find the contacts.

Putting them in was quite the fiasco. It was weird, though, once they were in. I'm not sure if it was just bad quality or the fact they were not made with my eyes in mind, but everything was slightly blurry. But looking at my reflection, I looked at least a bit more normal than before.

Last night Kole sent me a text with his Doc's info. That would be my first stop today, but it was a bit of a distance away looking at the map. I started off on my bike and the total ride time was about twenty minutes. I locked the bike to a nearby pole and walked up to the door.

"DR. LESLIE MICHAEL - PHYSICAL ANIMA SPECIALIST"

This had to be the right place. I walked in and made my way to the front counter window.

"Do you have an appointment with Dr. Michael today?" The lady at the desk asked.

"Uh, no, I heard she accepts walk-ins?" I stammered

"No problem! She should be able to fit you in. What species?" She asked

Confused by the question, I asked back, "Species?"

She seemed a bit confused. "What species are your changes? Equine, bovine, rodent?"

"Oh... is bird an option?"

"Avian got it. And what kind of avian?"

"I'm not sure exactly. All I know is my eyes are different, and at one point, I had a uh, beak and feathers."

"Well, your eyes look pretty normal to me. Are there any changes that stuck with you?" She asked, looking me up and down with slight confusion.

I reached up and removed the contacts, revealing my golden-brown eyes.

"Ahh, I see what you mean, honey. I put you down as unknown, and the Doc can see if she can't tell. Go ahead and talk a seat over there, and she will be out for you," She said in a friendly voice.

As I started to put the contacts back in, but she quickly stopped me, "No need, honey, no reason to hide anything here."

I sat down and waited. Gazing around the room, looking at the other people. Three others were sitting around in different sections. One was a lady with a dark-furred outline around her face. Beside her was a mother with a younger teen next to her. She looked normal, but he had a feathered tail hanging behind him. Black feathers with white on top and a little bit of red underneath.

The lady poked out from behind a door. "Benji?" The mother and son stood up. To my surprise, he was wearing only a sweatshirt and hat. His legs were covered in black feathers down to where his knees would be. Below that were light blue feet. By feet, I mean like a bird's clawed feet of some sort. The claws clicked on the hard tile floor as he walked. His walking had a bit of a rhythmic hop to it.

About twenty minutes later, they exited, and the voice called out again, "Lyall?" I stood up and walked to the door.

"You must be Lyall. Penny said she thinks you may be new to all of this," She said to me.

"Yeah, Up until yesterday, everything seemed normal. Then apparently, I now have the eyes of something feathered."

She laughed a little, "Yeah, your first changes can be a little surprising. But to let you know, we will do a few things that may seem out of the ordinary compared to your normal doctor's visit. All of this is just standard stuff to document your progress."

We walked up to a room with a sign that read *Imaging room*.

"We will start with some photos. I'll need you to strip down once we are here and stand on the square next to the wall. Each visit, we will take the same photos to look for changes you may not have noticed."

"So just strip down to my boxers?"

"No, if you can just take everything off, it's only for a moment, and I promise, I'm not seeing anything different than I see every day."

Reluctantly I took everything off, turning to face her but using my hands to cover myself.

"I will need you to hold your hands out to your sides. In a T shape, if that makes sense."

Slowly moving my arms up, revealing my stripped body, never feeling this embarrassed before. Standing in a room getting naked photos taken by some lady I had just met. After a few turns and poses, we were done. I put everything back on, and she led me to another room.

"Ok, I'm Dr. Michael, but you can call me Leslie. I'm going to have you start from the beginning for me. What happened yesterday?"

I explained the whole story to her. She asked some questions about family history and who knew about the changes. Afterward, she reached into a drawer and took some papers out, holding them out to me.

"Ok, Lyall, it appears you may be a hawk of some sort. This is great, but it also brings some other challenges for us to work on. Hawks, as you know,

are birds, and you may remember from high school biology that birds are pretty different from humans and mammals. I have some paperwork for you to read over and some resources," She handed me a few packets of info.

"Ok, so what's the good news?"

"Good news is you will share features with a fierce bird of prey, which can be seen as a positive. Plus, avians have quite a network of support groups compared to other species. There is a local group I think you may want to visit at least once to give it a try."

She handed me a card that read *Avian Associates!* It also had an address and a meeting time written on it.

"I have one of the members as my patient, and he loves the group. It can help you overcome new challenges to have others who can truly understand. By the way, will you let your mother know anytime soon? It might be best to start rather than her seeing your eyes being the way they are."

Knowing I needed to talk to her sooner rather than later, she was going to find out at some point. "I'll try and find a way to break the news to her."

"Don't view this as a curse. It's honestly an experience that is as good as you make it. Be proud of it!" Leslie said excitedly, giving a smile.

She had me fill out a few more forms, and I was on my way. I started my way back to the house.

While I was making my way home, I looked at the card she had given me.

Avian Associates it read. It had an address and meeting times. Honestly, it sounded like a glorified Alcoholics Anonymous thing, and the whole idea just seemed cheesy to me.

Looking over the times, it seemed that tomorrow evening was the next meeting for the group. I guess it's worth a shot, and I can always just decide out of it afterward.

Pulling into the driveway, storing my bike next to the garage, and climbing the stairs to my room. *Maybe Kole could give some input on this.* So I gave him a call.

"Hello?" Answered Kole.

"Hey!" I replied as I made sure my bedroom door was good and shut. "I was wanting to ask you a few questions."

"Shoot."

"So I talked to the doctor today, and she recommended me to a support group? Is that like a normal thing?"

"I don't know of any. I think that's more of an exotic change thing. You know, I'm a mammal turning into a mammal. Mammal to bird or reptile is kind of a bigger deal."

"What do you mean bigger deal? It's just a change like yours, right?"

"Well, my biggest thing is becoming an herbivore. Other than that, the general idea is the same when it comes to body parts. Birds, though, have different anatomy, right? So the changes you have may differ from those I would have."

"I get that, but how different can it really be? Feathers instead of fur, beak instead of antlers," My questions seemed to bounce off Kole.

"Well, you remember high school biology, right? You know reproduction in animals...." Kole's voice sounded reluctant to speak.

"Well, that is different, but if you mean like laying eggs, that is a female thing, and I really don't think that's too much to worry about."

"Well, just know it's different, and because of that, it can be hard to wrap your mind around," he laughed, "If you don't know now, you will later."

Kole was audibly getting uncomfortable, so maybe now was the time to end that bit. We ended up talking in general about the appointment, trying to avoid going deeper into anatomy.

"So taking nude photos of my body is normal?"

"Yeah, I get them whenever I have a change between visits. You get used to it."

"I guess I don't get how that helps me any. It's not like I'd love to have an album of me losing my humanity."

"I think they are still trying to find why it happens. I mean, I wish I knew why."

We finished up shortly after. I decided to work on some assignments for class tomorrow.

RIIIIIIIIIIING

My alarm clock scared the hell out of me as usual. I got up and started getting my stuff for class. I started putting on some shorts and a T-shirt, but when I pulled up my shorts, I felt a pressure where my short's elastic landed on my back. I pulled them a little high, and it went away.

I hopped on my bike and made my way to the college. Upon entering, I noticed Kole was nowhere to be seen. He must have gone to class early. I'll just catch him in between classes.

Walking into my "Basics of programming" class, sitting down, and tried my best to pay attention. Unfortunately, my contacts were just annoying my eyes something terrible. Glad I'm not struggling in this class because my mind could not stay on topic.

The class was over, and in between classes, I could not find Kole anywhere. Knowing he's probably taking today off, I decided to skip my next class. My grades were doing well in it, so one day shouldn't hurt. Leaving the college on my bike and made my way down the street.

Glancing down at the card in my hand, the printed text read out the place's location.

*Avian Associates
1765 Grayson Street*

The building was actually a house in the middle of the college neighborhood. Walking up to the door, multiple voices were talking inside. *Should I really be here? Is this all just too cheesy?* I quickly knocked before having a chance to rethink it anymore.

The door opened. Out looked a man with feathers covering the majority of his head. Feathers of black, white, and red. As he looked at me, I could

see red feathers on the top of his head lifted up, almost looking intrigued.

"Can I help you?" He asked

I didn't know quite what to say to him as I just stood there, mouth agape.

"Wrong address, maybe? Are you sure you're not looking for AKO?" He asked, the feathers atop his head raised.

I slowly shook my head no.

"Here for the meeting, maybe?"

I slowly nodded my head up and down.

"Ok then, are you able to speak? Because I'm sorry, but twenty questions isn't my game tonight," He laughed as he stretched out his hand. It was pretty standard looking, other than his arm covered in feathers with a few longer feathers hanging about a foot and a half down from it. The skin of his hand was dark grey and looked utterly wrong on his arm(wing?)

"Names Damien, yours?" the feathered Damien asked

"Lyll..... I'm kind of...."

"New to this? He interrupted, "It's cool everyone has to start somewhere. Come on in, and I'll introduce you to the crew."

Not knowing for sure what to do, I just followed him in. Once we were in the house's great room, I saw a few others standing around chatting. In the corner, I saw a red bird talking to what looked like an almost entirely changed crow of some sort. I saw the bird kid from the doctors yesterday sitting on a chair sideways at the bar top. Clearly making room for his tail feathers to hang unobstructed. On the other side of the bartop was one with black feathers. Standing next to them was another person who had dark gray feathers around her face.

"So this is the crew. Say what you want, but it's a pretty fun bunch."

Everyone was starting to take notice that I was now in the room.

"Guys, I'd like to introduce you all to Linus....I mean Lyll. He is here for our meeting," Damien said, almost seeming like he was trying to give a

hint to everyone.

The red bird spoke up, "So what are you then?" He approached me. "Are you another damned crow or an auditor?"

I didn't know what to say to that, really. Standing dumbfounded, staring at the short man adorned in red feathers.

"I'm sure he is here with nothing but good intentions," Damien said to the red bird, then turned to me.

"Don't let him get to ya. Nash just can't come to terms with the fact that he will be the prettiest one here," This got a chuckle out of a few of the others.

"Let's get names out of the way then," Damien pointed to the partially changed black bird. "This is Barclay, and he is our resident crow," Next, he looked at the other black bird.

"This is Mathew, he may look like a crow, but he's actually a Raven. Truly I don't care what he is, but He and Barclay seem to care a bit too much about it."

"Same family, different species," said Barclay.

"This is Benji and Rylie. They are our Toucan and Peregrine," Damien said, pointing to the other two.

"And as you know, I'm Damien, the woodpecker, and this is Nash, our little hot-headed cardinal," Damien said sarcastically.

"Whatever, Mr. One-of-a-kind," Nash joked back.

"So why don't you tell us about yourself? Maybe a name and how you found us," Damien said shuffling his arms.

"I'm... uhh, Lyall. I just found out two days ago that I'm a hawk of some kind and was referred here by my doctor."

"Hawk, you say?" Nash replied questioningly, "What makes you think that?" Nash's eyes squinted as he panned his head down.

"Well, I guess my eyes and something that happened to me," Reaching

up, and I removed my contacts. Everything was just crystal clear to me now. Now that I could see some detail, I could see that everyone had a mishmash of clothing, and some had very little.

"Those are definitely not human, that's for sure," Nash remarked, "Is that your only change so far?"

"Well, as far as I can tell. At least the Doc didn't notice anything else."

An arm wrapped around my neck and onto my shoulder, the feathers scratching my skin. The black feathers hanging from it bent and led to the arm lifting up slightly. I looked over to see it was Damien.

"Well, welcome to the club, Lyall," Damien shouted, "You have a long way to go, but now you're here. Do you need a room, or what can we do ya for?"

"A room? I thought this was a support group?"

"Well, I guess since we know you are legit, we can spill the beans. You could say the whole Avian Associates thing is kind of a front. It's really just a way for us to fund space to hang out or live. The original guy to start it just needed a way to fund a place for him and some friends to stay after they were kicked out for changing. So make up a group that sounds like an Alcoholics Anonymous rip-off, and they were set," Damien explained, unsure of the explanation's quality.

I tried to wrap my head around it. *Everything was fake? Did I somehow get wrapped up in a bird-themed frat house?*

"So, what exactly do you guys do here?"

"I and two of the others live here full time. Rylie and Matthew live here with me," Damien looked over at the two. "Matthew lived alone anyways and used to work as a store clerk. It's hard to keep working when a beak slowly emerges from your face."

Matthew looked over at us after overhearing Damien. "It's a bit distracting! But hey, life is short, right?"

Damien continued, "Rylie lived in dormitory-style living, but she was forced out a few months after her changes started. She's a bit upset over the whole situation."

Rylie started, "Well, apparently, changes are fine if you're a dog who reeks of heat every few weeks. But as soon as springtime rolls around, apparently, birds take it too far."

Both Matthew and Rylie were pretty far into their changes. Rylie had a lower half that looked more falcon than human. She wore no pants as every bit of her skin was covered in scaly skin or feathers from the chest down. Matthew wore pants, but the rear had a divot, making room for his tail feathers. He sported a black beak that was curved at the top and had feathers going down his neck and chest, which had no clothing covering it. Small feathers peppered his arms.

"By the way," Damien interrupted, "You may see some things here that could be a bit uncomfortable. Spring can be a.... Rough time for some of us more advanced people. If you ever feel uncomfortable, just say something. We all understand."

I had heard of some folks having issues with their changes during different seasons. Some mammals can find their bodies trying to hibernate. Not a huge deal for most, but still a pain to go through.

Benji walked over to us. "Don't worry, bro. At least you're not someone from the tropics. When I finish, I don't have too many options like-"

He was quickly cut off by Damien "yeah, uhh, Benji, let's not discuss that right now," He gave Benji a bit of a half-serious and half-joking glare.

I looked at Benji a bit better now that he was in front of us. Black feathers covered the back of his head, neck, and back. A few were starting to grow on his chest, but it mainly had bare human skin still. His feet were bird's feet, light blue in color. When he walked, he tended to make a skipping motion. The underside of his tail had white and red feathers covering what I assume are his pride areas.

While talking with Damien and Benji, my phone began to ring. Looking at the caller ID, I saw it was my mother; a lone text message was displayed.

"Get home soon we need to talk about some mail here"

Could it be a letter from the college? I missed a few registration papers deadlines, but they got turned in.

"Looks like I need to head out."

Everyone said their goodbyes, and Damien walked me to the door.

"Remember, you can swing by anytime for as long as you want. See this as your second home. We have all been through it."

It cooled off some while riding my bike home. On the way, I put on the fake contacts to hide my golden-brown eyes. I know I will have to tell my mom, but not sure when would be a great time to break that news.

Walking into the house, Mom sat at the table with some folded-up letter in front of her, and she looked beyond pissed. The low light made it hard to make out the logo on the letter, but there was some sort of eagle and a few letters.

"Hey, mom, how has your day been?" attempting to break the silence, she slowly looked up and turned her head.

"Quite. Eventful."

"Well, mine was a bit of a day. I went-"

She interrupted me, "A bit of a day? Sounds like it has been a few."

Did she somehow know? What could I have done to set her off this bad?

"I knew that Kole was a bad influence," her face turned bitter as she shook her head "I knew he was bad news since he started changing"

She knew. There was nothing else it could have been.

"Now I get letters from the CDC about someone who claims they live at this address being found to have the same thing he does! Are they really trying to scare a three person home into believing one of them is becoming a freak?"

Sweat started to soak my shirt, nervously trying to keep my hands from shaking. She doesn't seem to know that the letter is talking about me.

"I could never raise a child and not know they would be changing into some freak. What do they take me for?" She roared.

"I'm not sure, but I really don't think it has anything to do with Kole.

"They just got the wrong address, no big deal," trying to keep the image of confidence as I spoke.

"Well, I still think you should rethink spending time with that kid without knowing how this spreads. It's a death sentence if you ask me."

Warmth overcame the back of my neck like a hot rag. This whole situation had my nerves in a fit. I reached my hand back to try and cool my neck. But when my hand made contact, it was not with skin, but a soft padding before I felt the pressure. Trying not to react, I froze. I tried to relax but was unable. The more I thought about it, the worse it was. The warmth spread up my neck and down my back.

"..... If you hear anything in class, let me know," She was finally calming down.

I didn't realize she was still going on about it. I brought my hand down to my side. I could feel the feathers rubbing the wrong way on my shirt and into my hair. I tried to keep a calm face. But she could tell something was off.

"Well, I'm going to head to bed. Have an early day tomorrow," I said while backing towards the stairs.

She looked at me, almost puzzled. Once I made it out of view, I started up the stairs. Once in my room, I looked in the mirror. The feathers were falling out, and I tried to catch as many as possible as they fell. I had known before that certain things can trigger accidental and purposeful changes. If you can revert them quickly, they are not always permanent. The further the changes go and the longer they stay, the harder it is to return.

Collecting as many feathers as possible, I heard the thumping of the stairs. Someone was coming up!

I tried to think quickly. My options were either to have feathers falling from me or try to hide them as is. I closed my eyes and imagined the warmth again. It slowly became a reality as I did, and reaching back once again to feel the feathers. The doorknob jostled as it turned.

I turned to face the door, and it opened. It was again my mom; a rusty brown feather was in her hand. I looked into my own hand, cupping it away from her, and inside, there was an identical feather. She looked directly at me and asked a simple question.

The Bird House

"When were you going to tell me?"

CHAPTER 2

I tried to deny it at first. But it was too late at this point. The secret was out, and she put all the pieces together. I'm not sure if it was shock or something else, but she just gave me a blank stare when she saw me. Maybe as if waiting for the reveal that it's all a joke.

"I.... Just needed.... I....," I was just stumbling over my words. I didn't know what to say, but my brain told me I needed to say something. Finally, I got a single sentence out.

"I just found out."

It was all I could say. It's not like having your Mom catch you with drugs or even nasty stuff on the internet, and there's really no reasonable explanation.

She stared at me for a bit before responding with an equally short question.

"When did it start?"

I tried to be quick and get some conversation flowing, thinking it should help.

"Uhh, two days ago, in class. Kole helped me get it under control."

Her facial expression changed from blank to more of an irritated look.

"So that's a good enough reason to not tell me? What do you mean under

control? Did you do this?" She quickly snarked back.

"I was terrified! What do you think I want this? You think I want to become some kind of monster?"

From there, the conversation switched gears. Mom tried to blame it on Kole, but I made the mistake of mentioning the doctor and how she was a human but worked with hybrids. She left my room, probably for the better.

My Mom and her family are part of the population who believes it's contagious. Anima has only been a thing for a few years and is still new territory for research. Only recently have specialists like Leslie come around. And even still, it is too broad for one person to handle everything. Because of the still ongoing research, there are many myths about it.

Mentally exhausted, I raised my hands to cup my face. Expecting to feel smooth skin, I instead felt soft bristles. I slid my hands back behind my neck, down to where they met my shoulders and feathers. I tried to relax and imagine my skin against my hands. Dragging my hands back towards my face, I could feel the number of feathers dwindle.

I stepped into the hallway, then the bathroom, and locked the door. I pulled my shirt off and tossed it aside. Stepping in front of the mirror, I checked for any changes. A few feathers were still on the back of my neck and were a dull orange-brown color. Just reaching up, I was able to lightly brush them off. They must have just been some that fell off and stuck to my skin earlier.

I left the bathroom and started my way to my bedroom. As I walked past my Mom's room, I could hear something. I stopped and listened. She was crying to herself. Although I wanted to step in, I think it wouldn't help right now. I entered my room and laid down on the bed.

I was in the woods behind the college. I walked away from the building onto the bridge. There was a figure standing at the end of the bridge, looking out over the dried-up creek that ran under the bridge. Everything was perfectly clear, but the figure looked almost out of focus. The longer I looked, I could tell something was hanging off the front of their face. As I stepped closer, I tripped on one of the boards of the bridge. Just as I started falling forward, my view changed. I was lying face-up, staring at the ceiling in my bed.

Turning to get out of bed and I saw the feathers from last night lying on

the floor. *It wasn't a nightmare.* I stood up and then bent down to collect the feathers. After collecting all I could find, I stuffed them into my pocket. I grabbed my phone off the nightstand and saw a text from Kole.

"How's it going, mile eyes?"

"It's going. Not great but at least now Mom knows. What about you?" I sent back.

I got dressed for the day and made my way downstairs. Mom was nowhere to be found, and her car was missing from the driveway. *She must have already left for work or out doing errands.* I made something quick for breakfast and knew where I needed to go. I got on my bike and rode to the AA group house. Upon arriving, I could see a small Honda pulling into the driveway just before me. I rode up to the side of the house and dropped my bike. I turned to look and saw Nash stepping out of the car.

"I guess we didn't scare you off!" Nash yelled over to me.

"Well, you guys are pretty much the most normal-seeming thing right now."

I saw Rylie and Matthew sitting on the couch watching TV as I walked in the door. Matthew's head turned to face me, and his jet-black beak opened in surprise.

"Hey! You came back sooner than I expected."

"I told him the same thing," Nash said as he stepped around me.

"Lyall! Great to see you, buddy!" Damien said from around the corner, "Aren't you supposed to be in class, though?"

"I didn't elect for Saturday classes this semester. But I do want to talk with you if you have a moment."

"Shoot! I don't mind everyone hearing if you don't," Damien said, walking into view with the rest of the group.

"Well, last night, my Mom put some things together and figured me out. She found CDC papers and a feather."

"That's good news, right?" Matthew asked, "relieved, right?"

"Not really. It did not go down well at all. Ended up being a fight, and haven't spoken to her today. I was going to talk to her this morning, but I missed her."

"She will come around to it. It's usually a surprise to everyone," Damien said back.

I took a seat on the couch and watched TV with Rylie and Matthew. They were watching a Netflix show about some kids in a survival competition. I tried to figure out what was happening, but the audio was in Portuguese, and the captions seemed complicated to focus on.

After a bit of that, I went to the kitchen where Damien was. He was packing groceries into their cabinets and struggling with his wing arms reaching into the deep parts of the cabinets. The feathers hanging from his arms would get stuck in the cabinet openings. Most of the time, he put his hand in as far as he could and would flick them the rest of the way.

"Need any help?" I asked.

"If you want to put some stuff in the cabinets, I won't say no to a little help."

I started taking things out of bags and lining them into the cabinets.

"So, uh, how long have you been here?"

"A little over two years now. Like you, I started coming around here when I first had changed, and some folks haven't come around until they were a bit further."

"Oh, so you didn't start this place?"

"Nah, I just started hanging out here and eventually moved in after a few months. Took the lead role after Antony, who came after Darren. Darren was the one who started the house. Met him in his last days when he was more Osprey than human. Not too unlike myself, really," Damien held his arms out slightly and gestured to his body.

How can he be so nonchalant about this? How many people has he seen come and go from here? As I was about to ask, Damien's phone started to ring, and he pulled it to his head and began to speak.

"Dame here.... Yes, missus Vann.....I can have Nash pick him up if you're ok with it.... Alright, he will be over shortly" Damien ended the call and poked his head around the corner to the main room.

"Nash, you in there?" Damien called out.

"Yeah, what's up?" Nash yelled across the room.

"Can you go pick up Benji? His Mom's getting admitted again. He should be at home."

"Again? That's like twice this month," I heard Matthew say.

"Well, don't say anything to him, but she's not doing so great. Need to keep his mind off of it," Damien yelled back, "Expect him to stay a few nights."

After a bit, we finished putting things away. I sat back in the main room, pulled out my phone, and had a message from Kole.

"Hey, come over if you get a chance," It read.

"Now?"

A swift response popped up "Yeah."

I put my phone away and looked around. Matthew and Rylie were still watching the TV, and Damien was sitting on a recliner, running his hand through his red-head feathers while browsing on his phone.

"I gotta get going. Got a slightly concerning text from a friend," I said aloud.

"Like bad or real bad?" Matthew asked.

"I mean, it's just a few words, but he asked me to swing by," I stood up, "So, not sure, but I think if it was too bad, he would call me."

"Oh, real quick, let me get your number before you leave," Damien got up and walked toward me.

He handed me his phone, and I gave him mine, and I typed in my name

and number, and we swapped back phones. Looked at the contact to see "*Damien Brooks*," followed by a phone number.

"Let us know if you need anything!" Damien said, walking back to the recliner.

I walked out the front door, got on my bike, and rode to Kole's. I dropped the bike, walked up to his door, and rang the doorbell upon arriving. The door opened after a bit of time, and I saw Kole.

"Hey dude, thanks for being quick," Kole said, ushering me in.

"No problem," I said, walking past the doorway, "So, what's up?"

The door shut, and I turned to see Kole following me. Every step had a clicking sound, and I looked down at his feet to see where it was coming from. His foot looked almost like he was standing on his toes. Except instead of five toes, he had two black pointed toes. Watching him walk, I could tell he struggled to keep his balance.

"Your feet, dude! When did that happen?"

He stood leaned against the wall slightly with both hands in his pockets.

"Well, the night after we talked at the college, I woke up to use the restroom and found walking hard. Looked down to find these beauties," He said, lifting one hoof off the ground. As he set it back, you could hear its sound against the tile floor.

"So that happened in your sleep? Like no weird dreams or anything?"

"Well, it wasn't all that changed," Kole said, pulling his hands from his pockets.

He held his hands out to me. His hands had changed not entirely to hoofs but to a mixture of hand and hoof. His hands were slimmer, and instead of five fingers, he had two black toes in place of his four main fingers and one smaller one where his thumb would be. He went to wiggle his fingers, but the hooves only slightly moved away from each other. His thumb still moved how you would expect but without as much dexterity, missing two joints.

"What are you gonna do about it?"

"Nothing really to do. Can't change them back now," Kole said with his voice cracking a bit at the end.

I looked up to his face to see he was holding back some emotions, practically crying.

"I don't know what to do, man. I can't work on a computer now. Just texting you was a struggle. I can't drive, play video games, or even use round door knobs. How am I supposed to be an engineer when I can't hold anything?" Kole said with his face turning red.

All I could think of was the things Kole and I would do that he wouldn't be able to do now. In one night, almost all use of his hands was taken away. Any dreams of finishing his degree are done. Even Damien's arms and his struggles with just putting boxes away. This was the future for all of us at some point.

"I wanna sit down if you don't mind. Standing is kinda hard now for me," Kole said, defeated.

He walked or rather stumbled towards his living room. Every step clicked until he reached the carpet. He sat down and propped his legs up on the table in front of the couch.

We talked for a bit, and he asked how I was doing. I told him about my Mom and her reaction. I did leave out the parts about him, though. The last thing he needed was more stress. I told him about Damien and the house.

"So it's a house that has AA meetings?" Kole asked, confused.

"No, it's called Avian Associates, but it's not what you think it would be. It is more like a dorm with a few people living there."

"So, is there like meetings or something?"

"No, I mean when I left, most everyone was chilling on the couches," I replied.

'Oh, that's a bit different from the Wilds group I visited a few weeks back," Kole said, surprised, "They had meetings twice a week and would help with any life planning or questions. It was held at a rec center downtown,"

Just then, we heard the door open. It was Kole's mother with a plastic

shopping bag. She saw me sitting on the couch and smiled.

"Lyall! It's been a while. How have you been?" She asked.

"Holding on, I think."

"Kole told me about your changes," She walked closer, staring into my eyes. "Wow, your eyes are a gorgeous color!"

"Oh...I uh... thanks," embarrassed as I never expected someone to think of my eyes as good-looking.

"How's your mom doing?"

"She's... doing, I guess," I replied back, trying to play off the question.

"His mom is pissed at him," Kole said bluntly.

Kole's Mom had a look of shock. "Is she mad at you over it?"

"A bit. I think it's just a bit of shock,"

"I'll have to chat with her" Kole's Mom was now a bit upset.

"No, no, don't worry about it. I appreciate the offer, but she will be fine."

"If there's anything we can do for you, don't hesitate!" Kole's Mom said as she started to dig in the bag.

She reached in and pulled out a small plastic package. In it were four small tubes, and she handed them to Kole.

"What am I supposed to do with these?"

"I called the doctor and told her about your feet. She said to put these on your toes if you slip on smooth surfaces. They are like shoes for hooves."

Kole was embarrassed himself. He reluctantly put two of them on one of his hooves and then the other. Standing up with his legs shaking slightly. He walked out on the tile floor, and the clicking was more of a tacky thump now. Still, he was wobbly and unsteady with every step, although he had more traction against the tile floor. He sat back down and pulled all four off his hooves.

"They work, I guess. But they feel weird, like I'm stepping in mush," Kole said to his mother.

"Maybe try them some more later before you give up on them. You wouldn't believe where all I had to go to find them!" His Mom said, half laughing.

"Did she say anything about my hands?"

"She didn't know anything off the top of her head. She said it's pretty uncommon for them to change this soon. Have you tried to change them back?"

"I've tried, and every time it's the same result. I don't think they can change back," Kole said quietly. "Do you think I should drop out?"

"You don't know what could happen. I think you might regret it if you do, Kole," She replied.

"Mom, let's be real. My hands are not coming back. How long until I can't stand upright? I don't think finishing my three semesters would be worth it for only maybe a few more years of work after. That's if I can even finish classes. Then imagine trying to get someone to hire me!" He said again, holding back tears.

"Hon, I think you are selling yourself short. You have potential. You really do! This is just a little setback, and you have been doing great in school."

There was silence. It seemed like an eternity, and I was pretty uncomfortable, I felt like I shouldn't be sitting here during this conversation. But I had to agree with Kole's point, and his words were a bit of a slap in the face for me. What he said was hard but ultimately right. How long would he have after college? How long would I have after college? I felt frozen at that moment. How long do I have?

"Lyll? You ok?" Kole was looking right at me.

"I, uh yeah, I'm good. But I really should be going, and I need to check up with my Mom and see how she is doing," I said, trying to make an excuse to leave.

"Want me to give you a ride home, Lyll?" Kole's Mom asked me, "It

would be a lot quicker."

"If you don't mind, I would appreciate it."

We walked to her car. Kole stayed on the couch, and you could tell he had a lot going through his head. He didn't say any goodbyes, which is very unusual for him.

I loaded my bike on Kole's Mom's bike rack. I had plans to get an older car as I already have my driver's license. But I decided to wait until after I was done with classes. The college was close enough that a car was unnecessary, and Kole said he would pick me up in the winter months. Now I'm not so sure about anything.

The car ride was pretty quiet. I tried to make small talk but found difficulty finding anything to talk about. Or at least things unrelated to Kole and I's situation. When we reached the end of the drive, Kole's Mom reiterated that if I needed anything, to let her know. We said our goodbyes and I was left on my front porch. I really didn't want to go inside. My Mom's car was parked in the driveway, so there was no avoiding it. I could delay it all I wanted, but eventually, I would have to talk to her.

I opened the door and stepped in. My Mom was in the kitchen on a video call on her laptop, and she looked up and saw me. Immediately she started to wrap up the call.

"Lyll's here, so I'm going to see how his day has been. I'll call you back in a bit!" She was cheerful. But she was serious once the call was over and the laptop closed.

"Lyll, we need to talk... About last night."

This was how it would start? I guess there is no delaying the inevitable.

"I'm sorry," She said, "I overreacted, and I'm sorry. I just can't stand the thought of you going through this."

Shock and surprise. Only things that could describe it. I had to say something back, but I never expected that response.

"I'm sorry," After a short delay, "I should have told you sooner. I just didn't know how to tell you."

"The feathers worked. But maybe next time, let's try something more-"

"Face to face?" I interrupted.

She laughed a little.

"So I do have a few questions, you know. But you need to be honest with me, and I don't need any more secrets," She said with a more laid-back tone.

We talked for a few hours. We talked about the day in class when I had the first change. I told her about Kole's help in the lounge and the trip to the doctor. I told her (a little) about the group house. It was a pretty good conversation /compared to last night, and I was able to vent a little about my concerns and worries.

I eventually decided it was time to turn in and head to bed. The sun had set, and it was getting late. I made my way upstairs and into the small bathroom, where I spent the next twenty minutes just looking at my reflection, thinking about the day. After seeing Kole, I can't help but feel the same thing he is. *Is there any reason to keep going to my classes? Really for what I'll get out of it, I'm just wasting my time. Should I just focus on accomplishing what I can while I can?*

I made my way to my bedroom, changed into sleepwear, and laid down. I tried to clear my head and go to sleep, but the same thoughts kept rushing through my head. *How long do I really have? Do I have years? Maybe even just a few months? How much of that time will I be able to do the things I love? How long will I be able to be myself during that time? Kole hasn't been dealing with his changes long, but already he has lost his ability to do many of the things he liked to do overnight. Damien struggles to use his hands because of the bulk of his arms. How long before I have the same problems?*

I'm unsure if I was getting worked up or if the furnace was on. But it was feeling hot in my room. I decided to get out of bed, walk to the kitchen and get a drink of water. Hoping this would help, I walked back up to my room, and once reaching my room, It still felt way too hot to sleep. My pajamas were relatively thick, and maybe sleeping without them would help. So I stripped down to just my boxers and got back in bed. It wasn't perfect, but it was at least a bit better. I tried to ignore those thoughts and just focus on sleeping. Tomorrow will be a new day and a new start.

I'm sitting in one of my classes. The professor is lecturing about database backup plans. I look around to see all my usual classmates. They are all typing

on the keyboards before them, taking notes. I could swear we already went over this in a previous session. I hear the professor say to me,

"Lyll, are you going to just sit around, or will you be taking notes with us?"

I look down to see an open document on the computer in front of me. It's blank with a flashing dash indicating it's ready to use. I reach for the keyboard, and my hands are stopped by something. I look down to see what's in the way, but I don't see my hands. I see feathers engulfing wings where my arms should be. I see one side covered in light cream-colored feathers, and the other side is covered in brown ones.

I pull my arms closer, and they fold to my side. Doing this feels both comfortable and completely unnatural. Quickly I extend out my right arm in surprise, and it unfolds to a length much longer than my arm should be. It is fully extended out and forms a long and wide wing, almost six feet long and three feet wide. I bring it back in and have it partially folded with what could be considered the "wrist" of my wing. I try reaching across with my other hand to instinctively touch the alien appendage. Instead, it just hits the desk in front of me and cannot reach any further across my chest.

I heard a voice from next to me. It was a familiar voice, and I turned to see who it was.

"Lyll, are you ok?"

The voice was Kole's, but the thing sitting next to me had the head of a deer. Looking down, it was a complete deer sitting in the chair next to me. My mind is racing, and my breathing is fast. *I have to get out of here! I have to undo the changes to my arms! I have to do something. Is it already too late?*

Suddenly I'm in my bed, drenched in sweat, wearing nothing but my boxers. I take a deep breath and go to lift my arms to get out of bed. But they are caught under the blanket I somehow wrapped around myself while asleep. I roll onto my side, trying to become untangled from the blanket and free myself from the burning cocoon. I manage to free one arm, which aids in releasing the rest of me. I look at my arm in the morning light from the window. It seems normal, nothing unusual, and everything is as it should be. It all was just a dream and a terrifying one at that. I finished uncovering myself and pulled myself upright to sit on the side of the bed. I feel an unusual feeling in my lower back, almost like I've been sitting too long, and my butt has gone numb. I stand up, and the feeling is gone almost immediately.

I must have slept on my back wrong, or maybe how I managed to wrap myself up had to do with it. I slip my shirt back on and walk out of my bedroom, not overthinking it. I make my way to the bathroom and start doing my usual morning routine. While looking into the mirror to brush my teeth, I noticed something poking out behind me. I turned slightly to the left, and it moved with the rest of my body.

I continued turning to the point I was almost facing backward. Whatever was hanging off me made contact with the door into the bathroom. As I turned, I could feel the resistance of it pressing against the door, but the feeling came from my lower back. I quickly flip my head around to see what it could be.

Looking down, I saw that hanging from my rear and just blocking the back of my boxers was a grouping of long, rusty, reddish-brown feathers. As the realization hit of what was going on, my mind started racing, and my heart was thumping. My vision was frozen by the feathers now hanging from me. Now a part of me.

And as if there couldn't be any worse timing.

"LYALL?" My mother shouted as she stepped into my view from the door.

Taking me off guard, I jumped, and my tail feathers fanned out at the same time I jumped. They fully fanned out and formed a large semi-circle that covered my rear in red-brown feathers and extended well beyond my body's width. Stumbling from the scare, they flipped forwards, backward, and to each side. Trying to assist in balancing my body. After a bit of stumbling around and the tail flailing around. I turned my head to face my Mom and then turned my body in a vain attempt to hide the changes from her view. In doing so, I knocked a bunch of body wash bottles and shampoo into the tub and onto the floor with a quick swipe from my tail. The bottles hitting the tile made loud banging sounds, and they hit, and one bottle's cap broke and spilled onto the floor.

"I'm scared" Was all I could say as the emotions came rushing in and the initial shock wore off. "I don't know what to do."

She just stared at me in disbelief. Neither of us said a word, and no one did anything or made any movements. We just stood in that bathroom, floor covered in shampoo and lit by the early morning sun.

Today is a new day.

CHAPTER 3

The morning was lukewarm, and there was just a light hazing of fog. I tried to keep myself calm but riding in the car was not the most comfortable activity now with a tail of stiff feathers hanging behind me. I had to sit in the front passenger seat with my body turned to face more towards the car door than the front of the car. The seatbelt rubbed on my arm, and any bumps would force the tail upwards or sideways.

If I knew my day would be like this, I would have just stayed in bed, and it's not exactly how I would choose to start any day.

"You ok hon?" My mom asked me

"I uhh, I'm doing.... I think."

"Do you need the AC turned on? Is it too warm?"

"I'm good, I just.... Just need to get out of the car soon-" I said but was interrupted by a bump in the road, shoving my tail up as it pressed against the seat.

"Aaah!" I shouted, wincing at the sudden jolt of pain.

We pulled into the Doctor's office. My mom pulled up to the door, and I tried to step out of the car as gracefully as possible. Which isn't too easy when you're stumbling around trying to stay upright. Not the most complex thing, but my pants were the most significant issue. My tail started just below my waist, and my jeans had to sag halfway down my butt to allow my tail to freely move. The problem isn't that my butt isn't covered; that part is taken care of

by my feathers. It is a problem that my pants keep wanting to slide down as there is nothing around for them to grip around. The elastic of my boxers does a decent enough job of keeping them tight against me, but sometimes the pants would want to drag my boxers down as well.

I held my pants up with one hand as I made my way into the office. I walked in the door and saw someone already talking to the receptionist. I waited behind them as the door came to a close. I could see long gray ears hanging from the side of their head. Looking somewhat like the ears of a donkey or mule. They finished up and walked to the waiting room. Just as I went to step forward, I felt a painful pulling from my back. I turned my head to see that a few feathers had gotten caught in the door. I pushed it open to free the feathers and reached down to rub the sore spot.

“Watch the door! It wouldn’t be the first time someone got a little stuck,” the receptionist said, giggling a bit.

“It’s got a bit of bite to it.”

“No blood that you can see? Don’t want you breaking a bloody one on us now,” She joked.

A bloody one? I don’t think feathers have blood; at least, I don’t think I’ve ever seen blood on bird feathers.

“Do you have an appointment?”

“I called in a little bit ago. Had a change last night and was told to come in as soon as possible last time.”

“Oh, you must be Lyall then. If you don’t mind, I’ll just need you to fill this out for me” She handed me a clipboard with a few questions and a drawing of a person standing in a T formation from a few angles. I started with the questions, and most were pretty simple.

WHEN WAS THIS CHANGE FOUND?

HOW LONG AGO WAS YOUR LAST CHANGE?

ANY KNOWN TRIGGER EVENTS?

IS THE CHANGE PHYSICAL OR MENTAL?

WAS THE CHANGE CAUSED BY AN ENCOUNTER WITH ANOTHER LIVING BEING? HUMAN, ANIMAL, ETC.

WILL YOUR CHANGE AFFECT YOUR DAILY LIFE IN ANY MAJOR WAY?

HAVE YOU BEEN DNA TESTED?

PLEASE CIRCLE THE AFFECTED AREAS BELOW:

Below that was the drawing of the man with his arms held out. I circled the butt of the picture and the face. I handed the clipboard back and was asked to take a seat. While sitting, I looked over at the small table next to me. It had small pamphlets about specific changes and others about support groups. One of the pamphlets had a man with a face covered in grey feathers. Some of them went upwards, sticking straight up with colors fading to black. The front had text that read:

“Raw meat and carrion. A guide for predators and scavengers”.

I picked up the pamphlet, and the inside was pretty nasty. It spoke of eating raw meat and had photos of what to watch for. It also taught me that carrion is just another way of saying roadkill or things that have been dead for a while. It had information on finding sources for purposefully “aged” meat, as the pamphlet kept referring to it.

“Lyall?”

I heard a voice coming from the room, and I looked up to see the nurse holding the door open. I followed her in, and we began with a few questions as we walked. They were almost all just repeats of what I filled out on the papers in the waiting room. We reached a small examination room, and I was ushered in. Once inside, she closed the door and sat at the small counter. I jumped onto the exam table but was quickly met with a smashed tail and jumped back up. I sat on the table sideways this next attempt and let my feathers hang off the table.

“So what’s new today, Lyall?” She asked with a pen, ready to start writing.

“This morning, I woke up and found this” I put my hand on my tail, almost doing a petting motion. The downward motion felt great, and without thinking, I pressed my fingers in between the feathers and made a combing motion. I did this twice before realizing the nurse was just staring at me. I pulled my hand back and sat it on my lap.

“I see. Is this the first time it has appeared for you?”

“First time. Only this and my eyes, as far as I can tell,” I answered back

“Well, I’ll need you to go ahead and strip down for me. Just leave all of

your clothes on the exam table for me.”

I stood up and began taking my pants off. Once I was now standing fully naked with my hands covering my privates. The nurse took some notes and then walked out of the room. I was just left standing naked in a small white room. After a few moments, I dropped my hands to my side. Growing tired of covering myself up for no reason. The Doctor walked in. After a few moments of surprise, I quickly covered myself again.

“Lyal! How have you been this week? I see you had a new change,” Doctor Leslie said while taking quick glances at the papers in her hand.

“Yeah, it has me worried. I thought it would take a while until the next one.”

“Normally, the first few can be quicker than the rest. The first week or so is usually the quickest for natural changes. You shouldn’t see too many big changes this quick from now on. By the way, you don’t have to cover yourself in front of me. You wouldn’t imagine the things I see every day,” She started to put on gloves and had a small metal stick roughly the size of an ink pen.

She reached down and put a hand around my tail. Running the feathers through her hands. I’m not sure what she was checking for, but it was super relaxing. Feeling almost like a massage. After running a few feathers through her hand, she stopped and took some notes.

“I’m going to need to check under your tail. Believe me when I say it will be a bit uncomfortable, but we need to know if your digestive tract has started changing. It will feel cold for just a moment. But I will need you to stand up for me.”

I hesitated. As if I wasn’t uncomfortable enough just being in this room naked. I stood up, and she gave a hand motion signaling me to turn around. She hunched low, and I felt her lift my tail slightly. I could see a small amount of light being shown up at my rear.

“It will be cold for just a second. Just bear with me Lyall.”

She used her small metal pen-looking stick to inspect something. I’m unsure what she was looking for, nor would I dare ask. She stood back up and started writing notes again. I wasn’t sure if I should turn to face her or if I should just stay where I was.

“Oh, you can take a seat now. I promise we are done with the awkward stuff,” She said in a straight tone. “But I will need a few X-rays to confirm a few things. I’ll have them bring the portable unit.”

She walked out of the room, leaving her documents behind. After a few minutes, she returned and took X-rays of my chest and lower abdomen from a few angles. She told me to go ahead and get dressed back up. She reviewed the images on the screen and wrote more notes.

“Ok, so it looks like you had a bit more change than we originally thought. The lower parts of your digestive system have partially changed along with the start of a cloaca. Nothing huge, but just something we will need to keep an eye on,” She turned to face me as she spoke.

“Digestive system changed?” I asked, completely confused about what this all meant.

“Hawks don't really eat cooked food. Your digestive system will eventually change to accommodate raw meats. It’s normal, but you will just keep eating like normal until it's further changed. Not unusual really.”

“And that other thing?” I asked her

“Hawks, like other birds and even reptiles, have a different....way of expelling waste. Nothing really looks different, but it may work a bit differently. Just get seated no matter what you think you need to do.”

“So, pee sitting down? That’s no problem, I guess,” I said, not really understanding what she was saying.

She handed me a document holder plum full of stuff. I peeked inside, and it was filled with various forms and pamphlets. Easily over fifty sheets of paper.

“As you have some free time, look at some of the stuff inside. It will have info about lifestyle changes and future planning. It’s easier to start thinking about the future now than to wait,” She explained, “But other than that, unless you have any questions for me, you are free to go.”

“No, I’m alright,” I said when really I had a million questions for her.

She walked me up front and gave some papers to the receptionist. I checked out and made my way outside. Where my mom was waiting for me.

She pulled the car up, and I climbed in.

“Any news?” My mom started

“No, just a few extra feathers” I know I promised my mom I wouldn’t lie, but frankly I am a bit embarrassed to talk about all the inspection work the doctor had to do.

Trying to position myself in the car where my tail was free while also fighting my pants falling down made for a bear of a time. Eventually, I got situated in a way only describable as good enough. We made our way out.

“Do you want me to drop you at the other house to talk with David?” Mom asked.

“You mean Damien?”

“That’s the one. I can drop you off, and you can let me know if you need a ride home.”

My mom has herself convinced it is no longer safe to use my road bike for everything. I can’t blame her, as the thought of getting my tail feathers caught in the wheel did not sound like a great time. But at the same time, I didn’t want her to have to drive me everywhere.

“If you don't mind dropping me off. I think I should talk to the guys.”

As much as Damien and the crew say, they are not a support group. I really feel they are the only ones who will really understand. My mom went from not wanting to associate with hybrids to living with one quick. I just feel like the crew would understand a bit more.

We pulled up to the address, and I saw two cars parked out front. The Honda minivan Nash was driving and a small Ford car I had not seen prior. I got out of the van and said my goodbyes to mom as she left. I walked up to the door and could hear some talking. I opened the front door and leaned in to see six heads turning to face me.

I saw the usual Nash, Damien, Matthew, Benji, and Rylie. But I didn’t recognize the sixth. He was a bird hybrid of some kind. He had a long black beak and deep blue and white feathers covering his head and neck. His arms were covered in the same dark blue feathers, looking almost as if his arms were painted with fuzz.

“Lyall! Great to see you yet again. We have a new guest for you to meet,” Damien ushered his wing-arms to the other bird. “This is Jeremy. He’s new to us and maybe stopping by occasionally.”

I expected a bit of silence, but immediately I saw his beak hinge open.

“Hey, Lyall! The guys were telling me about you! I hear you started changing a few days ago, right? I’ve been going for about three weeks now and just found out about you guys!” His voice was going a hundred miles per hour, and I was still trying to process the first thing when he started on the second.

“I’m gonna be a Kingfisher and have already started my plans for when I fully go. Found a nice creek on a golf course with plenty of fish and nice water,” Not skipping a beat, his voice was full of excitement and joy.

I was still trying to put what he was saying together. I think Rylie picked up on my confusion and jumped in.

“Yes, that’s nice, Jeremy. But remember what we talked about earlier,” Rylie was giving him a glare.

“Right, right. Don’t talk about fully changing in front of the kid with hawk eyes.”

Nash brought his hand to his face in embarrassment.

Matthew said quietly, “Hawk eyes Jerm. Hawk's eyes.”

Jeremy stared a bit confused at me. Before realizing what Matthew was saying.

Damien stopped towards me. “Lyall, do you need to talk? I see a little something extra there,” He glanced down at my body.

“Want to go upstairs?” He asked, but he was already starting up the steps.

I followed him up, and we walked past a few doors in the short hallway. Each one had a name written on it. Each name corresponds to someone who lived here, starting with Benji, whose name was just written in pencil. Followed by Nash, Rylie, Matthew, and finally, Damien. We walked into his room, where he guided me to a chair. It was a rounded saucer chair, but it

had a cutout circle with a zipper. I sat down, and my tail poked through the zipper hole.

Damien took a seat on the bed. He let out a large sigh, and he then took a deep breath, and started.

“First things first. What happened, dude? I know you didn’t have that yesterday,” He was pointing below the chair.

“I don’t know man. I just woke up to this. It wasn’t there last night,” I said back to him, leaning back into the chair. “It’s been more painful to deal with than I thought it would be.”

“You’ll get used to it. We all have to deal with it at some point” He was raising his arms up to show his feathers growing down them. “You learn how to manage and keep on going. But it won’t be easy at first.”

“Yeah, at least my feet and hands are still normal,” I said, thinking of Kole’s hands and feet.

“Feet, I could lose those pretty easily. But my hands? I’m good,” Damien joked while wiggling his gray hands.

“Heh, I guess that’s all that changed. I know there was some concern about digestive stuff. They said not to worry about it yet.”

“Food is where it gets amusing. Wait till you get to try raw for the first time! But be glad you are not stuck with insects. Nothing like being afraid of your meals,” Damien said while looking up, laughing a bit.

“Are you... eating bugs?” I was wondering if he was joking or serious.

“Not yet, but that’s pretty much the majority of meals for Ivory’s. Bugs, and worms all day. But maybe I’ll keep the headaches at bay.”

“Ivory? I thought you were some kind of crow?”

“Nah, crows are all black and gray. I’m a bit of a special case, you could say,” He had a bit of a funny look as he said it. “Ivory-billed woodpeckers haven’t been seen since the 1950s. Or at least not any non-hybrids.”

“What does that mean then?”

“Well, once I fully change, I could be the last male specimen of the species,” He said, looking up to the ceiling. “Pretty much my future is planned for me.”

“You mean you’ll be researched? Or like what?”

“Well, I’m not the only person to become an Ivory hybrid. Their thoughts are that the species could possibly be reintroduced. Technically I have a say, but once I go fully, it’s not like I’d be able to stop ‘em,” Damien sighed.

“They keep telling me I’ll be remembered as a key to saving an entire species thought to be lost,” He said in a sarcastic tone.

“That’s harsh, dude. But if you don’t want to, why don’t you tell them you don’t want to?”

“It’s a gray area right now. Technically it’s me. But I’ll also be completely indiscernible from a natural woodpecker. So they argue if my mind is really still there, and if it’s not, what would keep me from doing what the woodpecker wanted?”

We sat in silence for a moment after that downer of a conversation. I looked at Damien as he tried to find the next thing to say.

“I think maybe I should embrace it. Maybe I should be happy to be able to help. But is that really me? They take samples and tell me I personally would be saving the ole Ivory. But am I really doing that?” Damien had a look of realization, “Well, enough about me. I didn’t mean to get on a tangent there. I just needed to get some time away from Jeremy.”

“You mean the new guy?”

“Yeah, he seems fine, but I worry about Benji being around him. Don’t want Benji getting any ideas he may regret.”

“Regret as in...?”

“Jeremy doesn’t seem concerned. Honestly, it’s borderline like he wants to finish changing. With all this going on with Benji, he doesn’t need to make any rash decisions.”

“How long has he been changing? Jeremy?”

"Two weeks. Only two weeks, and he's let himself go this far. I get I'm supposed to help him, but he's not even trying to prevent it. Sometimes, people give in later, but he is just sprinting like a race!"

"Have you tried talking to him? Maybe he is just confused?"

"Yeah, he has himself planned out already. He even went as far as to get permission to live at the Lake Bend golf course once he is fully changed, and he really seems to be sure of it."

"Maybe he is just excited. Does he have a home life or anything?"

"I don't know. Even if he didn't with Benji's mom dying, I don't know how Benji would handle it. The last thing I want is him speeding through thinking it will fix things."

"Benji's mom?"

"Yeah, he doesn't know, but realistically his mom is not coming home" Damien dropped his head and closed his eyes. "She specifically asked us to look after him as she is all he has. He doesn't know, but his room will be permanent here. It's just gonna crush him to find out."

"I...I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry. I brought you up here to talk about you and just derailed it. So let's try this one more time. I swear I'll stay on topic!" Damien said, looking me in the eye. "So, about your new addition, I think we might be able to finally know what you are now. So I guess that's a good thing, right?"

"Perspective is everything, Ivory," I said jokingly.

"If you say so, Red," Damien snarked back, "Nash guessed it right when you first came in, and I think Rylie was thinking Red Shouldered."

"Sorry, but I still don't know what you mean."

"Red-tailed my man. Nothing has an orange tail like it," Damien stood up, pointing at the tail hanging below the chair.

"The orange eyes and orange tail tell it all. Luckily it's a local species which makes everything a bit easier," Damien said, "You have any questions that I could help you with?"

“Not really. I might later, though” Looking towards the door, as there was commotion downstairs, “We should probably head downstairs. Before anyone gets too worried.”

He stood up and offered me his gray hand. I grabbed it, and he pulled me to my feet. Stumbling a little, the tail flared out and bounced back and forth.

“I guess it's functional, too” Damien chuckled a bit.

We walked back down the stairs into the main room. There was the entire group, including Jeremy. He was talking to Matthew, but I could not hear what about. The way his body language looked....wrong was getting to me. His head turned in quick, purposeful movements with no motion wasted. The top of his head was covered in dark blue feathers, with white ones extending down to the bottom of his neck. Past that point, I could see the start of more dark blue feathers with the same ones also covering his arms up to his hands. They only had feathers on the back side, and each finger was normal.

Rylie was sitting with her clawed feet propped up on the table in front of her. Each of her yellow toes ended in a long, curved claw. Her legs were covered in white striped feathers at what would be about her knee. Her tail extended down and was tucked in a small gap in the couch. The hole led out to behind the sofa, where I could see dark gray/black feathers hanging out. Up to her waist was covered with the striped feathers. She sat and browsed something on her phone. Every once in a while, she would move one of her clawed talons in a closing motion.

I sat down on the barstool near her chair. She put her phone down and looked toward me.

“Spin that around once for me, would ya?” She said, motioning with her head.

I swung the chair around once, spinning around on top of it.

“Damn, looks like Nash was right,” She then turned to face the other side of the room. “Nash, you were right. He is a redbill. Never thought you would get it right.”

“We can't just ever believe what little Nash says!” Nash called out.

“Sometimes you gotta let things go to his head. A broken clock is right twice a day,” She shouted.

“Yeah, just because you were wrong,” Nash yelled a bit louder.

“I shouldn’t work him up. But it’s just too much fun to see his little temper,” Rylie giggled. “You’ve just gotta try it sometime. Even when he’s right, you can get him going.”

I chuckled. I saw Rylie adjust herself in the chair. Shifting left and right, sinking further into the seat.

“Does it...your tail... give you any issues?” I asked.

“What, my tail? All the time! It was the breaking point for me to leave my dorm. You wouldn’t think much, but we really can’t flex them like other shifters can. They are just long sticks that hurt to sit on.”

“Do you mind me asking, how did you keep your pants from falling? I know it’s an odd question, but it’s a pain for me.”

“Well, I didn’t have to worry about that for long. At the same time, my tail came in, the plumbing changed, and feathers grew in. Instant invitation to no pants twenty four, seven anywhere. Did take a while to get used to not wearing anything I could feel. But no one really cares as long as you are covered up. Think of it as nature’s pants.”

“Oh, so you went from no tail to tail simultaneously with your legs?” I asked her

“Yeah, then the feet and legs finished up. I seem to be just changing in big chunks. Heck, you have just eyes and a tail. Imagine if both of those happened in one day. Unless something else changes, it’s not too far off from me.”

“No, everything else is just fine,” I quickly answered “Well, those and a start of a clo-something.”

Rylie tried to hold in a huge laugh. “You mean cloaca? That’s a pretty big one to miss.”

“Is that a bad thing to have?” I asked, confused at what was funny.

“That would be the plumbing changes. I wouldn’t talk too loud about it in public. Did they tell you anything about it?” Rylie said, still laughing.

I was embarrassed, still not knowing what that really meant.

“You ever take biology in high school?” Rylie asked, “Birds and lizards are a bit different.”

“I guess I didn’t pay enough attention, haha” I tried to laugh it off, but I was still slightly embarrassed.

“Don’t worry, dude. You’ll be an expert on feathered things before you know it,” Rylie chuckled, looking somewhat sarcastic. “So you still living at home?”

“Yeah, I originally planned to live at home until college was finished.”

“But things changed, right?”

“More than I would have guessed,” I said, looking down at myself.

“You could always move in here. Dame’s always trying to get more folks to move in. I think it keeps him sane, new personality and stuff,” Rylie said in a quieter voice.

“I don’t know. Even more lifestyle changes would be so quick.”

“It is, but it also can help you cope. I refused to move in, no matter what Dame said. Then once the tail came in, it just became so much easier here. Everything is already set up to... accommodate,” Rylie said, looking around the room. “I couldn’t imagine trying to open doorknobs with wings for hands. It’s the little things.”

I looked around the room. I never really thought of it, but every door had French door handles. Most chairs were either stools or had the backs opened up. Everything was with hybrids in mind.

“Maybe,” I said

“Maybe what? Maybe move in?” Rylie responded with slight excitement in her voice.

“I just... would need to think about it. Was that really the reason you

moved out of your dorm though? Is the tail really that bad?" I asked

"It was part of it. Other... things changed too," Rylie sighed, "We shared a dorm with a Labrador hybrid as well. When that time of the month came around, she would cover herself up, and it didn't really seem like a big deal. I myself couldn't, and living in shared spaces, there was no real privacy."

Rylie took her legs off the table and planted them on the floor the best she could.

"Like I said before, birds do things differently. Instead of the usual stuff, I would.... Well.... Lay an egg," Her face turned a light red. "I couldn't help it; it was just what my body did. The others felt... Uncomfortable and had walked in on it happening on a few occasions. They told me I had to quit as it was disgusting to see. But I had no way to stop it. It just kind of happens."

"So they kicked you out?" I asked.

"No, but I didn't want it to come to that. I talked to Damien about it, and he again offered for me to move in here. It was really my only other option," Rylie said sadly. "But I like it here. Damien, Matthew, Nash, and I all try to stay sane. Talking to the same three people as your only social interactions can make you a little crazy."

"Don't you have any friends outside here? Any family?" I asked.

"Not really. My parents quit contacting me a few months after my changes started. My friends just kind of fell out when I stopped going out in public. Hard to stay in contact when you never see them," Rylie said with sadness. "But hey, I do get you guys to hang out with."

Just as she finished that sentence, I heard someone shout across the room.

"Jeremy! You can't be doing that here!" Damien shouted.

I turned to see Jeremy with a complete bird's head talking to Matthew. As he heard Damien, he turned to look at him and let out a sound. It was like a rapid clicking sound, and the feathers on his head rose up as he made the sound.

"You can't be forcing yourself to change like that, Jeremy. One of these times, you won't be able to go back!" Damien said. To say he was pissed would be an understatement.

“Erhrhrhrhrh,” Jeremy said as his face began to reappear.

When it finally stopped changing, his face was almost identical to how it was earlier. Long black beak, deep blue and white feathers. This time though, his eyes were jet black. Looking almost blank at a glance.

“See I’m all good! You guys can’t be afraid to try it. As long as you’re quick, it’s no problem!” Jeremy snickered.

“All good? Go check out your eyes, bird brain,” Matthew laughed.

Jeremy pulled out his phone and looked at it. He turned his head from side to side, getting a good view from it.

“I think they look pretty good! Really helps to have the eyes to match the beak,” Jeremy said, happy as can be.

“None of this concerns you? Each time to go, you get closer and closer to finishing,” Damien said, not looking for an answer.

“You guys worry too much. You need to just embrace it and let it happen,” still playing off like no big deal.

Damien just shook his head at him and walked back to the other side of the room with Nash. I turned to look at Rylie, and she sighed with her eyes shut.

Quietly, she said, “We are gonna have our hands full with this kid. I’ve never seen Dame this angry at someone. And Jeremy just keeps pushing his buttons.”

She pulled out her phone and browsed again.

I looked around the room, and Benji was off to the side alone. Sitting up on a barstool messing with a Rubik’s cube. I walked over to him to see if I could talk to him.

“Yo, Benji” I said to him.

“Hey dude. Have you ever solved one of these?”

“I can’t say I’ve tried. Yourself?”

“Not on my own. But I’ve always wanted to solve one without a guide. Gotta get it done soon,” Benji said, continuing to rotate sections of the cube.

“Why soon? It’s not going anywhere,” I said back to him

“It’s not. But I won’t have these babies for long” He held up his fingers and wiggled them.

I felt dumb for not realizing what he meant. I didn’t say anything back to him until, after a few moments, he handed it to me.

“Here, you give it a shot. But if you solve it, don’t tell me how!”

I gripped the cube in two hands and rotated it. It clicked into place, but as I went to rotate the top in a different direction, it bound up and would not turn. I pushed harder, but the cube slipped out of my hands and onto the floor. I started to reach down before I was interrupted by Benji.

“Oh, I got it!” He said as he reached his blue foot down to it. The clawed feet wrapped around the foot and lifted it up. Once it was higher, he reached down and grabbed it from his foot. He then tried to hand it back to me. “It’s not the greatest quality one. All the parts have to be lined up just right, or it gets stuck.”

“Nah, you’ve got this, dude,” I said to him. “You have a better chance at it than I do.”

“It’s not really that hard, and it’s all just about finding patterns,” He said as he turned it. There was a white plus shape on the bottom.

“I can get the one side all white using the same little pattern. But the other sides I can’t seem to figure out” He continued to rotate the sides. “Each time I progress, I mess it up and start over. But each time, I’ll make it closer to solving it.”

I sat and watched Benji work more of the cube before starting over with the white cross when he made a wrong move. Each time he either got a little closer or messed it up and started over.

“So you’re not in school right now?” I asked him, trying to make small talk.

“Supposed to be. Mom pulled me and has me doing online classes. She was worried about what other kids would say,” Benji said as he kept spinning the cube.

“Were you in school when you started changing?”

“First change happened at home while I was sleeping. I woke up with feathers on my butt. Mom was worried and had me start Christmas break early.”

“So what about your feet?”

“They came around during a camping trip. Mom thought going outdoors would be helpful for me. I was walking to a shower house, and they started having a burning feeling. I pulled my shoes off, and after a few minutes, they were like this!” He held up a light blue bird's foot.

“Which is harder, the tail or the feet?”

“The feet. The tail I got used to after a few days. The feet are just always in the way. Walking just feels weird now,” He said, looking at me, then down at my legs.

“Hey! When did that happen!” He was pointing at my tail.

“Last night. It's been quite a day.”

“It gets easier. Mom thought my life was over when my tail showed up. But we kept going, and she does everything she can to make it easier,” Benji said, getting quieter while twisting the cube.

“She sounds great,” I said back to him.

He turned to look at me and leaned in.

“I know she isn't doing well. I'm young but not dumb,” He whispered to me, “I'm not sure what Damien has told you, but I know she isn't going to be around much longer” He sat down the cube and looked at it on the table.

“Nash gets me. He understands,” He turned to look at me again. “You understand, right?”

“I understand. But I think they are just trying to help you,” I said.

“Yeah, but I don't need it,” He said, shrugging.

Just then, there was a yell. I looked over to see Matthew's stool he was sitting on falling back. He reached for Nash's stool and grabbed onto it. Nash quickly jumped down from it as Matthew, and his stools fell to the floor.

He hit the ground with a loud *THUD*.

“So much for being there to catch me,” Matthew said, laughing at Nash.

He started getting back up off the floor.

“The difference is I know when to stop leaning the chair on its back legs!” Nash quipped back.

Jeremy, Rylie, and Damien were all laughing at the altercation.

“Crisis averted y'all! Maybe Nash will finally get me to stop leaning on the stools,” Matthew said, picking the stool up, “Or maybe I never learn?”

Just as he let go of the stool, one of the legs fell off, making it fall over again. It hit the ground with a heavy *THUNK*. He stood there staring at it.

“Never mind, it decided for me. No more stools for this guy!” He said, laughing.

This, of course, made the whole situation funnier, and everyone was having a good laugh when an odd but familiar sound came from Jeremy.

“Erhrhrhrh!”

It became instantly silent. After a few moments of silence, Nash finally broke it.

“Was that you?” He asked, looking at Jeremy.

Jeremy looked as shocked as everyone else. He opened his black beak and attempted to speak.

“Erhrhrh”

He quickly reached his hands to his face, then to his neck. With his hands

feeling his throat he tried to talk again but was only met with the same sounds.

“Erhrhrhrh”

He pulled his hands off his throat and was moving them quickly, pointing at his throat and making the same sounds.

“ErhrhrhRHhrhrhrhRH!”

He frantically started moving towards a framed mirror on the wall. He started squeezing his throat as if he was feeling for something. He closed his eyes and stood in silence. His crest bobbed up and down with his breathing. After a moment of that, he opened his eyes and tried again.

“Erhrhrhrh!”

“Woah, Jeremy! Calm down, dude! Take a seat before you get yourself too worked up,” Damien said.

He stumbled over to the couch where Rylie was now standing. He sat down and slowly leaned over onto his side with his arms in front of his face. His long black beak poked between them. His chest was moving in rapid jerks. Rylie ran to his side and said something to him quietly. She said something else, and we could see his head nod after each thing she said.

Rylie stood up and looked at us with a serious and shocked look.

“He lost his voice,” She said plainly as she walked closer.

“He’ll be fine. Just a bit stressed right now over it,” she whispered as she walked by.

It was shocking to see him go from seemingly enjoying the changes to crying to himself on the couch over them. Damien walked over and talked to him a bit. By talking, it was really a one-sided affair. Damien would ask a question, and Jeremy would either nod yes or no.

After a bit, Jeremy stood up and walked upstairs with Damien. Everyone else was silent until we heard Damien’s door close.

“I guess that’s what happens if you play it loose,” Nash said, “You hate to see it, but you can’t play those games. We all tried to warn him.”

“Play with the kingfisher and get the belt,” Matthew said.

“Damn, that’s a horrible thing to say” Nash said while also finding it funny.

“Yeaah, don’t say that in front of him,” Rylie also found it a bit funny.

“What was that sound?” Benji asked, “I’ve never heard that before. Almost like a squirrel or something.”

Matthew turned to Benji “A kingfisher, according to him. I’m going to be honest I have never heard of such a thing before now.”

Benji then looked forward. Before turning back to Matthew.

“What do toucans sound like?” Benji asked.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Matthew said.

We all stood around for a bit, discussing if any of us actually knew what a toucan sounded like. Rylie searched on the internet and found sounds for a belted kingfisher and a toco toucan. The kingfisher sure sounded just like Jeremy, and the toucans made a much different, almost croaking sound. She also found that belted kingfishers exist in our area, and they just are not as common. We then looked for info about Benji and where toucans are found.

After a while, Damien came downstairs alone and stopped by the couches where we were all sitting and talking.

“Jeremy is going to stay here tonight. He isn’t really in any state to go out alone. I think he will just crash on the couch, and he may need a ride home tomorrow if you don't mind, Nash,” Damien said, looking over at the cardinal.

“No problem. I have to run out tomorrow anyways, and picking him up is along the way,” Nash replied.

“Great,” Damien said, turning to Benji. “Benji, I think we may want to go out tomorrow.”

“You want to go out? What for?” Benji was confused.

“I think you may want to visit your mom soon. I’ll come with you though”

Damien sounded like something was wrong.

“I can take him. It's no problem to make two runs,” Nash said to Damien.

“No, I need to go with him. His mom asked that I do,” Damien said with a bit more force.

Everyone could tell it was pretty serious based on his voice.

My phone vibrated. I pulled it out while adjusting my pants and keeping them on my waist.

“Should I swing by soon?” A text from my mom read.

“Anytime, just let me know when ur here” I sent back.

I tucked my phone away. I looked around, and everyone was getting ready to split and go about their ways. It was getting dark, and I think everyone was ready to sleep.

“My mom is on her way. It was great seeing y'all again. I'll probably be over tomorrow if that's alright,” I generally said to everyone.

“You're welcome here any time of day, rust butt!” Nash said back.

“Remember what we talked about, Lyall. You can come here whenever you want. Think of it as your second home,” Damien said.

“Thanks guys. I'll be over tomorrow then,” I said as I started to turn for the door.

I walked out the door and into the night. I never really noticed it, but I could not see for the life of me in the dark. It is a stark contrast to the day when it feels like I could see forever. At night it was all just an empty black void. I could see headlights coming down the street. The car pulled up, and I could see the cabin lights on. I tried to make my way toward it, but was having trouble seeing the ground in front of me. Instead of a graceful walk to the car, it was a slow, unsure, stumbling mess.

I opened the car door and started to try and situate my tail along the side of the seat.

“How did it go tonight? Anything interesting?” Mom asked.

Still trying to get comfortable, I replied “Interesting? Yeah. But it was a pretty nice night”

“Interesting? You’ll have to tell me about it,” She said in a curious tone.

“I will, I promise”

I was finally getting myself in the seat. I thought about what Rylie said. Maybe moving into the house wouldn’t be the worst thing. But I don’t know if I could really have that conversation with my mom. I know life at home is going to be a bit difficult. But with skipping classes and the thought of just dropping out, maybe it would be best for both of us. But I’d need to have that conversation sooner rather than later.

CHAPTER 4

They were right. Living with the tail was a pain, but eventually, you got used to it. I spent a few days getting it caught on and in everything. From doors to knick-knacks on tables, nothing was safe from me. Add the irritation of knocking everything over to the itchiness of the feathers in my pants, and it was not a fun time. I ditch the pants and wear my boxers around when I am the only one in the house. This made it quite a bit more comfortable and easy. However, I try to avoid windows.

So that's standing solved. But sitting is a new game for me. There is not a single chair in my house that I can sit with my back against. I can sit on chairs sideways or sit on the armrest of the recliner/couch. But nothing that I can lean my back against. Nothing we have has anything close to a design that would accommodate me.

Even laying down is a multi-step process. First, I have to sit with a slight lean forward. Then I lay onto my side and rolled into place on the bed. This is the only way I can find that gets my tail feathers to lay flat and straight against the bed. But it is what works and my only real option now. At least the weird dreams have stopped. Honestly, I don't seem to have any dreams now, and it's just eyes closed at night to eyes open in the morning.

I visited the AA crew the day after Jeremy arrived. Everyone was going about their typical day. Jeremy was quiet, though, which is different from how he was in the short time I knew him before the recent changes. It seemed his mouth never stopped moving. Now, he never would even try to say a word. Instead, he would only answer yes or no questions with a nod and point his hands to anything else. Anything beyond that required either texting or pen and paper. It's just odd to see someone trying to ask for something

when they have no words. Sometimes it seems like he gets left out of conversations without anyone realizing it.

Sometimes when he was having difficulty getting his point across. He would repeat whatever motion or gesture again and again. When someone would finally guess right, you could hear him make those same odd sounds. It was his only way of making his excitement known when he was finally understood. Like a game of charades but never-ending. Everyone was trying their best to accommodate him. But at times, it could be twenty minutes before you realize the simple thing he was trying to say.

After talking with Nash, I learned he is essentially the designated person to go out in public. Matthew, Damien, and Rylie just stay put in the house. Nash almost thought that maybe Jeremy could assist with errands. But then, of course, what happened, happened. He thought that perhaps it would be OK to ask Jeremy to help with a task that wouldn't require communication like that, especially in public. I offered to help him do running, and he didn't hesitate a moment on that offer.

It's been a week since the changes started. Nothing else has changed, and everything seems to get into a groove. Nash picked me up from my house the following day, and we made our way to the local supermarket. Nash was an odd case when it came to his changes. Most people seemed to have had their modifications spread across their bodies. Not Nash, though. He was short, for sure, but he still looked like an average human. That is if a normal human had the bright red and black head of a cardinal. Down to the bottom of his neck were feathers, up his face, and to the top of his head. In the dead center of his face was a bright orange beak. His voice was slightly affected by it, not having lips and all, but his speech was surprisingly clear considering.

"Maybe I can leave the talking to you," he said with a chuckle. "They see me often enough as it is. Maybe a new face with me will help a bit."

"Is there anything special you have to do to go out? Or do you have to do anything differently?" I asked him.

"Eh, not really. Some people just like to treat you a bit differently. Nothing awful, but they are not good at hiding it," He said with a laugh.

"Well, I haven't been out really since.... This," I said, looking back at my tail.

"Yeah, it's not as bad as people make it out to be. You'll have people who

stare, but not many will say anything," Nash said.

"Do people... ever say anything?" I asked him

"Sometimes you'll get the fella who decides that letting you know they don't like your kind is better than whatever else they gotta do,"

"Does that happen often?"

"No, usually I pretend I can't speak, and it makes it easier than saying anything back. Just ignore them and keep on your way," Nash said, looking over at me.

"Sounds like you have a bit of experience," I said.

He chuckled to himself.

We pulled into the parking lot of the store. Nash and I got out and made our way to the doors. Once inside, we walked to the grocery section. I couldn't help but feel like something was off. Everywhere I looked, it felt like people were watching us. I could see everyone's motions in super clear vision. They would look toward us; as soon as I would look at them, they would quickly turn away. If we walked into the same aisle, folks would move to a different aisle. Maybe they couldn't help but look. Not many hybrids go out in public.

"Are people avoiding us, or is it just me?" I whispered to Nash.

"Maybe they are avoiding you. I haven't been paying attention," Nash quipped.

"No, I mean people are staring and actively avoiding us."

"Well yeah, I told you that's how'd they be. Just don't pay them any attention, and you'll be fine," Nash kept walking and grabbing things as he went.

We kept navigating the store. Nash grabbed everything from cereal to fruit to sirloin. I still could feel people staring. I've never been one for attention, but this was just creepy. We made it to the self-checkout lanes and walked toward one of the open terminals.

"Wait!" Nash said.

"I forgot the damn nuts. Ehh...Lyall, can you go get a thing of unsalted peanuts?" Nash asked me.

"Oh, sure. Unsalted nuts," I said as I walked back toward the grocery section.

I made my way to aisle fourteen, which was a snack aisle. I found a large tube of peanuts, but they were salted. I searched the shelf until I found a large tin of unsalted nuts. I started to walk back when I heard a voice yell out.

"Find what you need?" The voice asked.

I turned to face him and replied. But I saw his face, and it was not exactly a friendly expression. He had a slight smirk and was looking me dead in the eyes.

"Getting some nuts shift?" He said in a heavily sarcastic tone.

I froze. With no clue how to react, my body did the first thing that came to mind.

"What?" I said blankly.

"You heard me, shift."

"Nuts? Yeah," I said, stumbling over my words.

I felt a warmth rising up my back. I was getting worried. *What if he was to do something? Do I run away? Do I fight him?*

He had an odd look overcome his face. He just stopped suddenly and turned around, and walked away quickly. He rounded the corner and was gone. I turned around and started walking back to the register, still feeling hot. I saw Nash's redhead as I got closer, and I handed him the container without saying a word.

"Oh, your back, have trouble finding 'em?" He said, looking at the can.

He looked up at me, and after just a moment, the feathers on his head stood up.

"Dude, you feeling ok? Did something happen?" Nash asked worriedly.

"I'm good. Just a thing. It's nothing," I said back, trying to calm myself.

"It ain't nothing, dude. You got feathers all up your cheeks, man,"

I reached my hands up to my face. I could feel them. Soft, tiny feathers sticking out of my skin and laying back towards my ears. They ran off my face and down the sides and back of my neck. They continued going down my shoulders to my biceps and down my back to meet my tail. My legs were burning and itching.

Nash hurried along and finished ringing out. He grabbed me by the arm and practically dragged me to the car. He opened the side sliding door and sat me down inside.

"Dude, you need to try changing back NOW. No time to waste," He was basically yelling at this point.

I tried to concentrate on myself. I tried to think about how I looked before. My smooth skin on my back. I could feel the feathers on my face slowly fall out. But they were not making haste as they ever so slowly fell. I felt my arms cool off, followed by my shoulders. The inside of Nash's van was covered in small brown and white feathers. But he didn't seem to care, or at least didn't right now. He lifted the back of my shirt and was looking at my back, brushing feathers off.

"I think you got 'em, buddy. Maybe a little bit of growth upwards, but nothing terrible or really noticeable," Nash said, relieved.

"Ok, that's fine. I can deal with a tiny bit more," I said back.

But I could tell something still wasn't right. My pants were irritating my legs like crazy, and it felt like sand in my pants was irritating my skin. I wanted so bad to just pull them off and get all the loose feathers out. But in public, that's not really an option.

We drove back to the AA house. The drive had the irritation from my tail feathers and the loose feathers in my pants together. Once we got parked, Nash told me to go ahead and get myself cleaned up. He worked on unloading the few things we picked up, and I made my way to the upstairs bathroom.

Once inside, I pulled my pants off and stood in my boxers. My legs and

pants were full of loose feathers. I tried brushing the feathers off my pants as best as possible. But they just clung to the fabric. Once they were decently clear, I started on my legs. Brushing and picking feathers off was easy but tedious. Once I got to the tops of my legs, I dropped my boxers to my ankles. And brushed all the feathers free, well, except for some. Light cream-colored feathers replaced any hair in my groin region. These feathers also extended around my thighs to my rear, where they met with my tail.

All of my body parts seemed intact, just surrounded by feathers. I reached up and felt above my tail, and I had feathers below, above, and around where my tail hung from my back. While feeling for the extent of the feathers, I did notice my butt was seemingly slimmer.

I pulled my hand out from beneath my tail as the whole idea of what was going on there weirded me out. I tried to pick up all the small feathers off the ground and put them into the trash can. But while doing so, there was a quick knock on the door.

"Lyal? You almost done?" Rylie was asking through the door.

"In a minute! Trying to...do a thing," I quickly replied, trying to think of something to say on the fly.

"Is everything ok? Do you need Damien?" She asked

"Yeah, no. I'm ok. I'm fine," I shouted.

I tried to pick them up quicker. But with the small size and the vast number of them, it was not easy. It felt like as soon as I got a decent number, they would fall out of my hand as I picked more up. I started just shoving them in the little trash can. But they quickly took up too much space.

There was another knocking on the door.

"I'll be done in a sec!" I yelled out.

"Lyal, is everything fine?" Damien asked.

The last thing I need is him worrying about me right now.

"Nash told me about what happened. Did anything stick?" Damien asked.

Well, the cat is out of the bag now. I dropped the small number of feathers

in my hand. I got up and walked to the door. I unlocked the door and swung it open to see Damien standing against it. Behind him were Rylie, Jeremy, and Benji.

"Anything stick, dude?" Damien asked.

I saw Rylie turn around to face away from me.

"Not his pants, apparently," Rylie said loudly.

I looked down and realized I was standing nude in front of them. I reached my hand to cover myself. As I did, I felt Damien grab my shoulder and lightly push me into the bathroom. As the door was shutting, I heard a sound from the hallway from Jeremy.

The door slammed shut. Damien turned, locked the door, and flipped a switch on the wall. The droning sound of the exhaust fan started.

"Anyways, did anything stick?" Damien asked, looking down at me.

"A little bit could have been much worse, though," I said, looking down at my hand and covering myself.

"Looks like a little on the legs and crotch. Did your body change anymore?" He asked, gesturing down.

"Uh.. yeah, it's all still fine. I think," I said back to him.

"Well, that's up to you to find out. I really don't want to know any specifics," He laughed as he looked away.

"It's up my back a little too. It was way worse in the store, like to my face and stuff," I said, trying to remember.

"Not a big deal. Get dressed, and we can get back out there," He said with a pat on my back.

I turned around and started pulling my boxers up.

"My advice, though, is you may want to skip the boxers. They may feel uncomfortable with your pants, and I won't tell anyone," Damien said while looking away.

I took the boxers off my legs and pulled my stretchy jeans up. I turned around, and Damien picked up the last feathers. And throwing them in a bag. We stepped out to find no one at the stairs, and everyone in the main room was sitting and talking or at least trying to.

I sat down, but Damien stayed standing and walked over to Nash.

"Nash, you mind driving Benji and me? We are already a little late," Damien asked, looking at Nash.

"Sure thing, D," He quickly stood up and walked towards the door.

Benji stood up and started making his way to the door slowly, and Damien walked beside him and put his arm around his shoulder.

"We will be back later. If we don't make it back before y'all sleep. G'night," Damien said as they walked out the door.

The door shut with a click, and it was silent in the house for the moment.

"So it's just us tonight, then? Does anyone have any ideas?" Matthew asked the little group of us on the couches.

"Kind of burned out of movies," Rylie said.

"I'm just along for the ride," I said to him.

We looked at Jeremy, who, of course, didn't say a word and just stared.

"Great idea, Jerm! Let's order food and go from there," Matthew said with a wink to Jeremy.

Jeremy looked at Rylie and me with a confused look. Matthew flipped out a phone and started typing on it.

"Usual for you, Ry?" He asked Rylie.

"What about you?" He asked, looking at me.

"I guess whatever you're getting," I said back.

"And you?" He looked over to Jeremy, who just looked at him.

Jeremy reached out a hand and was handed Matthews phone, and he typed something in and handed it back. Matthew typed on his cell phone before telling us it would be here soon.

We all sat around for a bit and tried to make small talk. I knew the elephant in the room was what happened at the store. Rylie tried her best to ask about it without just asking about it. After a few questions, I just told her.

"I can just tell you what happened if that's easier."

"Sure, why not," She asked while chuckling.

I told them everything I could remember. About the nuts, the guy, the warmth, and the feathers. I did leave out how far the feathers stuck but told them the extent of the initial changes.

"Sounds like he didn't like what he saw. Probably better for you anyways," Matthew said.

"Same reason I stay at home. I don't understand how Nash can deal with it," Rylie added.

"Nash doesn't seem to notice anything, and he just goes without paying anyone any attention," I said.

We decided to try and at least make an attempt to involve Jeremy. We tried pen and paper, which is tricky as conversations can move too quickly. Eventually, he quit trying and just continued to sit quietly.

The doorbell rang. Matthew looked around at the group. Before pointing at me.

"You get to answer the door this time," He said, looking at me.

"Why do you say that?" I asked him.

"You are the most human and dressed," He said with a smile.

I got up and answered the door. The delivery driver handed me a large bag. He seemed a little surprised at first, maybe a little hesitant. But I thanked him, and he was on his way.

Matthew opened the bag and started distributing the food. I'm not entirely

sure what it was or where he ordered it from, but it smelled strongly of spice. Mine and Matthew's was some kind of pork or chicken in a thick orange sauce. Matthew ate a piece, so I figured I should at least try it.

I put a piece in my mouth, which was about the hottest thing I had eaten. My mouth was burning from the spice, and I felt my eyes tearing up. Matthew ate a second piece before looking at me with a funny look.

"Lyal? You ok there, dude?" He asked me.

The heat was more of a painful sting than any flavor. I tried to drink some water, but nothing helped. The heat was burning my entire mouth and throat.

"It's HOT!" I yelled to Matthew.

"It's got spice, but it's not hot to me," Matthew said, shrugging.

Rylie reached over with a fork and grabbed a piece. As soon as she put it in her mouth, she started saying the same thing.

"Damn, dude! That's really hot!" Rylie said, trying to spit it out.

"Jerm, want to try a piece?" Matthew said, laughing at Jeremy.

Jeremy shrugged and ate a piece. After a few moments, he did not react. He just tilted his head and gave another shrug.

"So either you guys can't handle anything spicy, or Jeremy and I are just the gods of spicy food?" Matthew was laughing, and Jeremy started giggling as well.

"Whatever, freak," Rylie said, still trying to get rid of the burning in her mouth.

I could feel my phone vibrate. I pulled it out to check the notification, which was a text from Kole.

"Need to talk soon. Let me know when you can," it read.

"Everything cool?" I replied.

"No," The reply said, followed by a quick "More changes."

I'm not sure what seemed off, but his texts seemed different from the usual ones. Not like how he would typically text, and something must be wrong.

"I'll be over," I sent back.

"You guys know when Nash is getting back? I need to get to my friend's place," I asked the group. "Seems like it may be urgent."

"No, but neither of us can drive," Matthew said, looking over to Rylie. "Can your Mom give you a ride?"

"She's working, so I don't think she will for a while," I said to Matthew.

"Erhrhrh?" Jeremy said, looking at me while pointing at himself.

"Are you able to drive?" I asked him.

"Erh," He said back while nodding.

Jeremy drove me to Kole's, and I told him I would find a way home. He grabbed my phone and pulled up the passcode screen. I unlocked it, and he opened up the notes on it. He put down his number and a short message.

"Let me know if you need a ride. Just text, don't call :)" it read.

I walked up to Kole's door and knocked, and no response. After waiting a bit, I hit harder. This time I got a text from Kole.

"Come in," It said.

I opened the door and looked inside. I could see Kole's head sticking out from the couch. The couch was sitting with the back facing the door—the couch's backrest blocking my view of his body.

"You alright?" I asked him.

"I'm trying my best!" He said in a half-joking tone.

I walked around the couch to look at him. The sight was shocking. Kole was wearing no pants; his lower half was covered in white and brown fur. His hands and feet were now fully hooves. His nose had turned black, and a black fur ring went down and around his chin.

Kole looked up at me with a face full of worry.

"It went quick, dude. It started and just wouldn't stop," He said.

"How much changed?"

"Well, all you can see. I haven't looked too far, though. Been both too tired and just can't bring myself to look," He said, looking at his hooves.

I sat down on the arm of his couch.

"I get ya, man. I had a scare at the store earlier. Luckily I had Nash with me,"

"Nash is the.... Crow?" Kole asked.

"Cardinal. He's the cardinal. The crow is Matthew."

"You know, one day I gotta meet these guys. Maybe if I'm around them, I can turn into a sparrow or something," Kole said, laughing. "Would take that any day over this"

"I'm sure you'll meet them at some point. Any day there seems to be a trip,"

We talked for the next few hours and watched TV. I told Kole about Jeremy, the incident at the store, and my new minor changes. Kole spoke about a few things that had happened at home. Him getting stuck in the bathroom because hooves and doorknobs don't pair well. Falling down the wooden stairs because hooves don't grip well. Mostly it was just him venting about his hooves. I just listened as it seemed he just needed to let it out.

"I dropped out. Mom wasn't happy, but I can't do the classes," Kole said with a change of tone.

"Yea, I quit going. I haven't dropped yet, but I'm pretty sure I'm done," I said.

Following was a period of silence until we heard the door open. Kole's mom stepped in the door, and her eyes went straight to me.

"Lyall! Great to see you!" She said as she walked in front of the couch.

She looked at my tail and gasped.

"Oh my! When did that happen?" She asked, stepping around for a better look.

"A few days ago. It's been a royal pain, though," I said, looking over my shoulder at her.

"It's gorgeous. Such a nice brown color!" She said.

Kole's mom seemed super chill about the changes. She almost seemed excited to see mine. Don't take it the wrong way, but it's different than most. Most see them as horrific things. It's refreshing to hear her excitement over others who always pity you over changing.

I tried to feel for the one muscle I wanted. I could feel my tail swaying, then I found it. The tail flared out to a large semi-circle, then came back into place. Involuntarily it shook, getting all the feathers to sit in the right spot. Learning how to control the new parts of my body has been a fun side activity. Doing so has helped keep my tail's weird balancing motions to a minimum, or at least know how to keep them from kicking things over.

"Fancy tail work!" She said in a dramatic voice.

Kole laughed and rolled his eyes. He laid down on the couch, trying to get comfortable. His legs hang off the end, and his arms pull in close to his body. Crossing his hooves, he just laid there watching his mom and me. I looked outside to see the sun was starting to set.

"I think I may need to head home. It is getting a bit dark out. It turns out these eyes are sharp, but I can't see hardly anything at night," I said, standing up.

"Do you need me to give you a ride home?" Kole's mom asked.

"I wouldn't say no to it."

The drive home was pretty relaxed. Kole's mom asked questions about how my mom was doing and how I was dealing with the changes. I told her that my mom had come around to what was happening, and I was trying to keep moving. She dropped me off, and I made my way into the house.

"Lyall, is that you?" I heard my mom yell out.

"Yeah," I yelled back. "I'll be upstairs if you need me."

" Sounds good! I have dinner in the fridge if you want to reheat some of it," she said back.

I made my way upstairs and into my room. I closed the door and sat down at the end of my bed. I rolled over onto my side, then onto my back. I laid there looking up at the ceiling. I couldn't use any furniture at the house because the tail and laying on the bed was the best option other than standing. I did have a plastic folding chair that I could sit in, but hard plastic started to make me sore after a while.

My pants had been rubbing on my feathers all day. Now that I was in the privacy of my room, maybe I could get away without them. I pulled them off and threw them to the floor. It felt wrong to lay there with no pants on, but it felt good. This was the first time today I have been able to actually relax. I closed my eyes for a moment and let out a sigh.

"Lyall, I'm going out. Is there anything you need?" I heard my mom through the door.

"No, I'm good."

It was weird that she was going out this late. Usually, when she's home for the night, she never leaves. I opened my eyes and looked at the ceiling. The room was lit brightly, much brighter than just a moment ago. I looked out the window, and it was sunny and clear outside. I must have fallen asleep and not realized it. I got out of bed and made my way to the bathroom.

Looking over myself, I didn't see anything that wasn't there before—a small number of feathers on my lower body but no more than yesterday. My face looked the same with just my golden eyes. Everything was fine, and nothing new this time.

I changed my shirt and made my way downstairs. I poured out some cereal and unfolded my plastic chair. Right before I sat down, I heard the kitchen door open. My mom walked in hurriedly and grabbed her bag off the counter. She turned to look at me, looked down at my lower body, and quickly turned around.

"Oh my. Maybe warn me next time!" She said.

"Sorry! I thought you had left already," I said, embarrassed and covering myself.

"Not to be nosey, but are those feathers new?" She asked, still looking away.

"I'll have to tell you about it later. It's really nothing new," I said, turning around.

She left and shut the door. In a way, I wish the feathers would finish covering my privates. It would solve the pants not fitting right, along with the boxers rubbing the feathers. The more I thought about it, maybe that wouldn't be such a bad idea. No pants, no discomfort, and perhaps easier walking.

I SHOULD be able to control it, right? Jeremy was able to. Sure he had issues, but that was from trying to revert it. I just want to go a little bit further in one area.

I looked down at myself. I just need a little more, right? If I revert by thinking of what I usually look like. Then if I think about what I would look like with the feathers, they should come? Sounded like a solid idea. I walked to the dining room, where there was a tall mirror. I looked at my reflection and thought, what could go wrong? It's just a little change. It's not like I'm changing my whole head or something crazy.

I closed my eyes and imagined myself with feathers covering my lower body. I didn't feel anything. So I tried to concentrate as hard as possible, seeing them grow in my mind. I started to feel a warm sensation. My crotch area and rear felt extremely warm for a bit, then the feeling stopped, and the warmth faded. I opened my eyes and saw exactly what I expected.

Cream-colored feathers covered my lower body from my hips to just above my knees. They laid down, forming a flat, smooth-looking surface broken up only by the edges. I turned around, and my rump was covered in the same feathers. The pants issue was now solved, or at least it was less of a problem.

I walked around, looking at my reflection as I did. Showing off my handiwork to myself. I was able to control it and make myself change for the better. Proud, I went and finished my now soggy cereal and went to the restroom to get ready for the day. I brushed my teeth, brushed my hair, and put on my socks. Almost ready to head for the AA house, I thought maybe

I should try and revert the changes. You know to make sure I am able to. *What would Damien and the others think If they saw me like this? Did I think this through? Did this shorten the amount of time I had left?*

Possibly I could revert the changes, but enough would stick to cover myself up. That way, I'm covered, but it's not as obvious. But then again, not wearing pants is pretty obvious already. I closed my eyes and thought of my body before. Nothing happened. I tried to clear my head, the only thing I could think of was my featherless body. Again nothing happened. I tried over and over, but nothing changed back. The changes were stuck, burned in now.

Now I've begun to worry. *What story can I make up for what happened?* My mom knows I didn't wake up like this. *Will Damien figure me out?* Now I have to go partially naked everywhere! My anxiety was going rampant. My stomach started to feel tight and rumbled. I felt a little sick. I tried pacing around, but it did not help. At first. After walking around the bathroom a bit and finally getting myself calmed down, a very quick and sudden urge came about me. I NEEDED to use the bathroom. Not a slight feeling of it, but a feeling like it had to happen NOW!

I sat down on the seat sideways to make room for the tail, ensuring I was positioned right as usual. I'm not sure how to explain this without sounding gross. But when my head gave the signal, my tail lifted slightly, and then in one rapid act, I went. It felt incredibly alien to me. It was a quick push then it was over. The time from the feeling to going was only moments. It was a particularly shocking and surprising feeling.

I stood up quickly, and my tail instinctively shook. Still shocked by what happened. Without looking down, I flushed and looked at myself in the mirror. I started to think about it. Using the restroom before was just like any other time. *Did I change more than I initially thought? What could have changed to do this?*

Looking down at the perfectly smooth feathers covering my groin. Not a single ripple in them, which shouldn't be possible. Reaching my hand down and I laid my hand on the feathers. They were soft and moved easily with just an easy nudge from my hand. I dug my fingers into the feathers as they pushed away and in between my fingers. My hand touched my skin, which was smooth apart from the quills going into it. I ran my fingers further down and expected them to contact my genitals eventually.

But there was nothing there to find.

CHAPTER 5

Nothing. When I reached between my legs, I found nothing. Just skin covered in light creamy white feathers. I searched further, trying to find something, anything down below. As I reached back, I found it got even weirder. Instead of my hand going past my legs and curving up, it went back further. Almost sloping back instead of curving up my butt.

I kept softly running my fingers against the skin until I found something. As soon as I made contact with it, I pulled my hand away. The feeling was a combination of many things I've felt before, but my mind could not think of exactly what it was. I walked back to the mirror on the wall; from my view, nothing looked different. Maybe a few extra feathers here and there. But I knew way more changed than I originally bargained for.

I tried turning around and lifting my tail. While I couldn't raise it high enough from my standing position, it moved further and became more agile in all directions. Moving it felt...more natural? I didn't have to think as much to get it to sway to the side or flare. It just kind of happened as soon as I put the slightest effort into it, similar to how moving your arm requires zero thought. But the furthest I could move it upwards was to just above level with my butt, and I leaned forward and found that that also lifted the tail further.

So I leaned forward until my eyes looked at my mirror reflection. I was able to see this view only by looking between my knees. Once I was in this position, I tried lifting my tail again.

Feathers. That was all I saw; there was a slight divot in the middle but nothing visible in this sea of contour feathers. I reached back and felt the

feathers, trying to find whatever was hiding underneath. I pushed the feathers aside and was able to get a glimpse of what it was. Just a hole. Not perfectly round and indeed not human.

I stood up and lowered my tail. I turned around and stared at myself. I really had taken it too far. I allowed myself to change for convenience, but now I know this was much worse. But at the same time, I couldn't hide it forever and had to leave today at some point.

I pulled out my phone and searched for *Hawk tail hole*, not knowing what to expect. But almost immediately, I saw the same word Rylie had mentioned. *Cloaca*. The page I found explained that it is a singular hole for the urinary, fecal, and reproductive systems. As Rylie put it, "The do everything hole," which made sense now.

I started getting myself ready to walk to the AA house. I knew biking would not be an option, and I could not bring myself to call for a ride. I put on a clean t-shirt and grabbed a pair of basketball shorts, thinking they would be easiest to wear. I attempted to put the shorts on, working until they reached the top of my legs. With my rear reconfiguring itself, there was nowhere for the shorts to hold onto. Imagine putting on your pants but leaving your butt hanging out.

I tried to take a few steps, but they would fall as soon as I let go. The reflection of myself looked just as ridiculous. A half man, half hawk, trying to put on pants. I gave up and decided today would also have to be my first pant's free day. The first of many, I don't think the chances of ever wearing pants again are very high.

The walk between my home to the AA house would take me around twenty minutes on foot. The sooner I left, the less busy it would be. Not to mention I already felt like I was doing something wrong and illegal just going out half dressed.

So I started walking. Well, maybe walking isn't the best way to describe it. I was jogging to get out of the public as soon as possible. I was halfway there, near Bryant park, when I heard a car horn honk. It was off in the distance, but with me already on edge, I picked up the pace and got further away. Even if the honk was not for me, I'd rather not have been seen, to begin with.

After a solid fifteen minutes of fast walking/jogging, I was finally at the house. Now would be the flood of questions. *You had just changed, so why would it have happened again?* That question and many more were all I expected. I took

a deep breath, closed my eyes, opened the door, and was ready for the reactions.

But I heard nothing of the sort. I opened my eyes to see everyone standing around the couch in the main room. On the sofa were Benji and Damien. Benji was crying, and everyone around the couch was standing quietly. I stepped inside and walked towards the sofa. Immediately I saw two things different about Benji and Damien. Damien's half-arm, half-wings were now just fully feathered, fingerless wings. He held one folded to his side, and the other reached around Benji, its black and white feathers almost like a blanket around him.

Benji's arms looked very similar to how Damien's looked previously. Black feathers hung from his arms, and his hands were covering his face as he cried to himself. The feathers form his arms, mainly covering any view of his torso. While Benji was still wearing a shirt, it was cut on the sides, making way for the feathers to hang.

Damien whispered something to him, and Benji nodded in response. Damien looked up and made eye contact with me. His eyes glanced down at my lower half, and I saw them go wide for a second before looking back up at me. He looked at Rylie and made a gesture with his wing as he stood up. Rylie took his place, and he started walking towards me.

Coming in close, he whispered, "You all good, dude?"

I nodded yes, and he started walking towards the kitchen. He gestured for me to come as well. We walked into the kitchen; Damien closed the door, pushing it shut with an outstretched wing. He then neatly folded it back to his side.

"Man, quite a bit is going on here right now," Damien said. "Benji, me and now you"

"Mine's nothing, just a few more feathers are all," I said back "is everything ok with.."

"Benji? No," Damien said before letting out a sigh. "Benji's Mom passed early this morning. We spent the night at the hospital and just got back here a little before you. He is pretty emotional right now, but that's to be expected."

"Damn. So his arms...?"

"They changed quite a bit. Extreme emotions can push things along if you're not careful," Damien said before holding his wings up slightly. "It got the best of me too. Kids like a brother, and it sucks to see him like this."

"Can you change them back?" I asked quietly.

"It would be a miracle. He changed a few hours ago, and I was just after him. The chances these are going anywhere are pretty much nil," Damien said, folding his wings tightly. "At least they are slightly more manageable now. No more knocking stuff over. Or picking things up in general"

"I'm sorry dude," I said, looking at his neatly folded wings.

"It's no one's fault. Benji needed me, and I got a little emotional. Just hate to see him like this," Damien said. "But let's talk about you for a second."

"About?"

"About what? You know, mister streaker," Damien said, chuckling a bit. "Did that happen this morning?"

"Yeah. It just sort of happened."

"Yeah? No pants can be nice; it makes you feel light and free, right?. Especially after yesterday," Damien said, trying his hardest to get the mood somewhere happier.

"Yeah, my tail moves more, and I'm missing something things. But that's totally worth no pants," I said sarcastically.

"Oh, you're missing your....uhh," Damien nodded his head down.

"It's gone. Everything is weird down under. Not a fan."

"Just wait til later. It gets weirder," Damien said, winking. "The restroom is a trip the first few times."

"Great, I'll think of you when I go next time," I said flatly.

"Usually, I skip most doctor trips, but you may want it this time. More may have changed than you think. The last thing you want is to get sick over eating the wrong stuff."

Great.

"I think I need to get back with Benji. Please let me know if you need anything, yeah?" Damien said as he started to turn to the door. He outstretched a wing and batted at the door handle before it rocked down and opened it.

I followed Damien to the main room, where he said something to Benji, and they both walked upstairs. Everyone just watched as they walked up the stairs. Damien holding a wing around Benji. Before he rounded the corner and was out of sight. Shortly after was a door closing.

"Fuck, what a thing to happen to 'em," Matthew said, shaking his head.

I looked from Matthew over to Rylie. She was peering down her shirt and had a slightly worried look.

"You ok, Ry?" Matthew asked.

She quickly stopped looking down and promptly responded. "Ya, I'm fine."

Matthew turned to me. "What about you?"

"I'm doing fine. Just a few little changes this morning," I said, trying to downplay it.

"Busy day, I guess. And we are just getting started," Matthew said.

Rylie turned and started up the stairs. She moved quickly, and I heard the door shut loudly.

Matthew and I hung out for a bit. We talked about whatever came to our heads. A little bit about movies, a little bit about the news. Nothing major, but I did learn a few things about Matthew. He hates musicals and loves stop-motion movies. But he is pretty quiet about his personal life.

"I used to do news graphics. Did most of the graphic work for the local stations and papers. Even a few big ones, if you can imagine that," Matthew said. Was the best job I had, and I can't even imagine trying it now."

"Your hands are good, right? Why did you quit?" I asked him.

"I didn't quit. But I did have to work with clients directly. They don't always like paying the company money for an animal to do the work," Matthew explained. "Tried remote, and it never worked right. So I was told I would be let go or leave. Leaving myself did grant me an exit bonus. So I did what I had to do."

"Could you do freelance?" I asked him.

"Yeah, but the same issue remains. No one wants to hire a guy with a beak to do expensive art, and they just don't like the idea of it," Matthew said.

We heard the thumping of feet going down the stairs. Around the corner stepped out Damien. His wings were tucked tight against his sides as he walked towards us. He walked to the couch, sat down hard, let his wings go limp, and sat with his head tilted back.

"What a day. Oh, what a day," He said quietly.

"Tell me about it," Matthew said back.

Damien's head flicked up. "Heh. You got any changes to share?" Damien said

"I think I'm the only one who missed out today," Matthew said as he crossed his leg.

"Consider yourself lucky then, mate. Haven't changed in four months, and now I have no hands. Maybe I need the matching feet, yeah? You guys seem to pick things up fine with them," Damien said jokingly.

"Picking things up? Yes. Doing anything that needs a lick of dexterity? No," Matthew replied.

"Where's Jeremy?" Damien asked.

Matthew looked around slowly. "Well, he was here a bit ago. He kinda just comes and goes at times, doesn't really say anything before he leaves" Matthew looked over to me. "Did you see him leave?"

"No, I think he left while Damien and I were talking." I think he didn't like seeing Benji right now.

“Sad to see Benji like this” Matthew looked towards the stairs. “Dame, you think Benji is alright?”

There was no response. Just silence as we waited for Damien to speak.

“Dame? Yo, Damien,” Matthew said again, waving his arm in Damien’s face.

I looked over to see Matthew sitting up, leaning toward Damien. Damien was just staring forward, unmoving, his eyes wide open, staring at nothing. Just a flat blank expression.

“You sleeping, dude?” Matthew said louder.

Damien flicked his head back a bit and looked around quickly and frantically. His breathing picked up, and his eyes dilated for a moment.

“Woah, sorry. I think I dozed off there for a second,” Damien said, looking at Matthew. “Anyway, you were saying?”

“Oh, it was nothing, dude. Maybe you should get some sleep, and you’ve been up all night and could probably use it,” Matthew said, sitting back in his chair.

“It’s one o’clock? I’ve gotten two hours of sleep in the last thirty-six hours,” Damien said, looking at the clock.

Damien got up and went upstairs. After a bit, Nash arrived, and Matthew and I got him up to speed. We watched TV for a bit before Jeremy came in the front door. We tried to ask Jeremy where he ran off but never could get an answer. Rylie came black down but seemed to keep her distance. After hanging out and sitting around until six, I decided it was time to head home.

Nash gave me a ride and asked me all sorts of questions about this morning. I tried to tell him all I knew about Benji and Matthew, which was pretty limited second-hand information. He asked about my changes and what caused them, and I could only be vague and act like I didn’t know what caused them. We made it to my place, and Nash said his goodbyes.

I stepped in the door and was immediately greeted by my Mom. Immediately the questions started. *When did it happen? How did it happen? Where did it happen?* She thought something was up ahead of time because of my discarded shorts in front of the living room mirror. I tried to give her some

details, but I also didn't want to say too much about what I found.

She, of course, looked at me from every angle she could. I kept my tail down and tried my hardest to hide the significant changes. But I quickly realized they would be evident if I sat down. Everything looked similar to before when I stood up, but sitting, I had less of a butt, and sitting, in general, looked a bit different. So the entire time I was downstairs, I was standing in hopes she wouldn't notice or become suspicious.

There were only two places I could relax; in my bed and the painful plastic folding chair. Day-to-day life at the AA House was much more manageable. For the most part, everything was built or modified for my body. I spent so much time there that maybe making the move wouldn't be so bad. It would solve my transportation issues, living accommodations, and everyone is there already.

I brought up the idea to Mom, it didn't go well, but I expected that from the start. She was upset that I wanted to move out, and I tried to explain that life would be easier for both of us. But nothing was helping, so I dropped it. I think eventually I'll get her onboard, but I don't want to push things too quickly with her. Although I may see it one way, there is no way I could know how much it would hurt her.

The next few days were pretty much event free. I officially dropped out of classes. Had video calls with Kole and was shuttled to the AA House almost daily. Only ever home to sleep. Sometimes I'd just crash on the couch at AA. Pretty much just getting into a routine.

I learned using the restroom with my new equipment was awful, albeit quick. Instead of having a one and a two, it was more of an all-at-once deal. Once I felt the need, I would just hold my tail end over the pot, lift my tail and let it go. It was fast but also didn't have as much warning. Usually, I had a forty-second or so notice that it would happen. If I didn't act in time, my body would do it involuntarily.

That led to a few very awkward accidents on the floor. Once happening while I was in the yard even. It was upsetting when it did happen, just feeling like another part of my human self was gone. But at least I still could speak and hold things. This was just an inconvenience compared to those.

Thursday rolled around, and I, of course, went to the AA house. Everyone was getting used to the new changes. Benji was still working through things but was starting to return to his usual self, at least on the outside. His hands

were still usable, but now a large wall of black feathers hung from his arms. Damien's wings were almost always kept folded to his sides. A white line of feathers ran from his cheek, down his neck, and to his folded wings. The line met with the white feathers on the bottom half of his wings when unfolded.

We were sitting at the table in the main room. Damien, Jeremy, Benji, Matthew, Nash, and I. We were attempting to play cards, but Nash and Damien were acting more like a team with Nash playing his own hand and helping him with his cards. The cards were held using a book placed behind a metal ruler. While Damien couldn't move them, he could tell Nash which to play.

"I pick green," Benji said after playing a black card.

Matthew drew a card from the pile. "Go yellow next time!" He said, looking at Benji.

Nash laid down a draw two card and reached for the draw pile.

"The one on the far right," Damien said. Nash looked at him, confused, so Damien repeated, "The card on the far right, play it."

Nash pulled the card from the right and looked at it. "So four to Jeremy then?" He said as he laid down another draw two on the pile.

Jeremy's head cocked back, then pointed to the card, shaking his head in disagreement. He looked at Damien and motioned to draw a card with his hand.

"Can I not stack cards?" Damien asked, and Jeremy shook his head. "No, I'm pretty sure I can stack draw two's" Damien looked around for us to give confirmation.

"I've always played where you can," Benji said. "But you can't stack draw twos on draw fours."

"I don't think that's a real rule," Matthew said as he looked for the box on the ground.

"I've always played where you have to draw two, but you can play a draw two right after," I said, shrugging.

"Like if you drew one?" Damien asked me, "Because that does not make

sense.”

“Is this the new spicy food thing?” Matthew asked jokingly. “It wasn’t spicy, by the way.”

“What are you going on about?” Nash asked.

Matthew pulled out a small paper rule book and started searching for it. “We ordered takeout. Lyall and Rylie thought the food was spicy, and it didn’t have any spice when we tried it.”

Nash laughed. “Who’s we? You know you probably can’t taste the spice bird boy. If you’ve got a beak, you probably have a different tongue. Birds can’t taste the spice.”

Matthew interrupted. “Ha! It says you can’t stack cards!”

Damien chuckled “Well, it’s wrong, Nash, pull two for me” Nash drew two cards and placed them in front of him.

Jeremy played his turn, and it was to me. I drew a card, and it was now to Benji. He went to draw a card and reached over the table. In doing so, his feathers pushed my drink onto the table, but luckily the can was empty. In a quick motion, Benji pulled his arm back, and the feathers once again caught the can and pushed it entirely off the table.

“Sorry! He said, pulling his arms close to his body. “The damn things”

“It’s no problem, dude. It was empty anyway,” I said to him.

The game kept going until it got to Nash. “Red,” He said, laying down a black card. We all looked at Damien, who was just staring forward at the deck. We all waited for his next move. But he just slightly turned his head to look sideways.

“You got a red?” Nash asked him. But Damien didn’t say anything. “You alright, Dame?” His head turned the other way, facing one eye to Nash. “Damien, you having an episode?”

His eyes dilated, then he flicked his head a bit. He looked at the table, confused. “What?” He said, looking at the cards.

“Red, the card is red, and it’s your turn,” Nash said. “You feeling ok?”

“Yeah, just got lost there for a second,” He looked down at the cards lined up. “Uhh, third from the left.”

“That’s the second time this week,” Nash said while pulling a card from the line and playing it for Damien. “You sure it isn’t something else?”

“I’m fine, just a bit tired, is all,” Damien said.

“You’ve been saying that for three days now. I’m sure you have slept enough. You should get checked out. Maybe its-” Nash said before Damien interrupted him.

“It’s nothing! Changing wouldn’t make me space out. I’m just tired and maybe a little stressed,” Damien looked at me. “Did you get checked out recently?”

“No, at least not yet,” I answered

“Damien, you shouldn’t be askin’ others to go if you won’t,” Nash laughed.

“What so they can say I have wings? I wish I’d known my hands were gone,” Damien said sarcastically.

There was a thud as Jeremy hit the table. Everyone turned quickly to look at him, and he held up a single finger with one hand and a single card in the other.

“Uno?” Benji asked. To which Jeremy quickly nodded.

The last turn played out with Jeremy winning. The cards were collected, and everyone split off. Damien walked up the stairs, and I followed him up.

“Damien, can we talk?” I asked as he was opening his door.

“Oh uhh yeah,” He said, closing his door.

“In private?”

Damien looked at the door. “Uh, sure.”

I followed him in and shut the door. Inside was his room like I had been

in before, but this time it was different. Before, his room wasn't perfectly clean, but it was quite a mess this time. Random things were strewn about, and his bed was stripped except for a haphazardly placed blanket.

"So, what's up?" He asked, sitting down.

I sat down on the rounded chair. "I wanted to ask about you, and something seems to be up with you recently," I said to him.

"Like what?" He said, his voice sounding slightly different.

"You keep spacing out, your room is like this, and you seem to be a bit more snappy," I said to him. "Something is different."

He closed his eyes and sighed. "Between you and me right now, right?"

"Sure, spill it," I said to him.

He spoke in a quieter voice. "I think I'm going crazy. I keep spacing out, and when I see things, I hear thoughts."

"Hear thoughts?" I asked him.

"I hear thoughts that are not me. I can't make them out, but it's always at the same time as me spacing out. I don't know if I'm narcoleptic or something," He said, rubbing his face with the joints of his wings.

"Do you feel like you're falling asleep?"

"No, when I come back, I don't feel tired. I just feel lost. When I sleep at night, I have these weird dreams and wake up to either me stripped or my bed stripped," Damien said, looking at the floor.

"Earlier, you were looking around at whoever spoke to you. Then you woke up confused. Could it be something with you cha-" I started to say before I was interrupted.

"It can't be my changes, and I'm not far enough for mental stuff. That's the last to happen. It has to be something else," Damien said quickly, almost defensively.

"It has to be something. This can't just be normal."

“Maybe it's just stress. Maybe I just need a nap or to relax or something. Life has been a bit stressful with everything happening,” He started trying to kick his shoes off using only his feet.

“Here, let me see them. I'll pull them off,” I said, holding my hand out.

“Don't touch the socks, though. I need them on,” Damien said, lifting a foot up.

I grabbed a shoe and pulled. Off came the shoe, and the sock partially came off. Damien quickly pulled his foot down and looked at me. His crest was standing tall as he looked at me.

“So, the other one?” I said, holding my hand out. Damien reached his foot up, and I pulled the shoe off. Again the sock came partially off with it. This time though, I saw a glimpse of something. I saw dark gray under the sock. This time before he could pull his foot down, I grabbed it with my free hand. I peered at the skin under his pant leg.

Black scaly skin covered his leg. I could tell by the look of it that it had a rough, dry texture. I saw his leg last week the morning he returned to the house with Benji. At that time, his skin was white and smooth with no signs of changes.

“That's new, right?” I asked him.

“What are you talking about?” He said, pulling his leg free and setting it down.

“Your legs Damien. When did that change? They looked fine a few days ago,” I said to him.

Damien reached down and pulled both the socks off, and his entire foot was covered in rough black skin. He then stood up and unbuttoned his pants, dropping them to reveal the skin was the same, about five inches above the knee. After that point, it was a smooth but darker color.

“Between us, man,” Damien said, looking dead in the eye. “two days ago. I had an episode, and when I came too, they were like this.”

“Episode as in spacing out?” I asked

“Yeah, it seems if someone isn't there to wake me..... this happens,”

Damien said, gesturing to his legs. "At least, that's all I can think of."

"Is your mind doing it? Why would your own head do it to you?"

"I think my mental changes are here," Damien started breathing quicker. "I think I'm sharing my mind with it."

With what? What do you mean?" I asked him as he stood up.

"Each time I space out, I have these thoughts. They aren't like words but rather feelings. Feelings that are not human, that I can tell," Damien said as he started pacing. "I think I'm changing because the bird's instinct influences it. The more I change, the more influence it has," He said, looking at me worried.

"It'll be fine, and we will find a way around it. Maybe we just need to find out what triggers it" I said, trying to reassure him.

Damien looked at me, shaking a bit. The first time I had ever seen Damien worried to this extent.

"I don't know if I can stop it. I'm losing myself."

CHAPTER 6

“Losing myself”

When I think of losing myself, I think of doing things I wouldn’t usually do. Maybe even just changing as a person over time. Losing control of yourself is not really what comes to my mind, but there is hardly a better way to explain it. One you’ve *lost* control of your mind, is the body still you?

Damien for the first time looked helpless. For the short time I’ve known him he always seemed to know what to do. Like he had it all figured out. Seeing him now talking about losing himself really put it in perspective for me. Although I made him out as the man with the answers, really he is just one of us changing. He is still marching the same line as everyone else.

“It’s only getting harder. Sometimes I don’t notice it and other times it’s like I’m taking the backseat. Like I can see what’s happening but can’t and won’t take control,” Damien said, looking at the ground. “This can’t go on forever like this”

“But you can’t just give up, everyone here can help keep you in control dude,” I replied.

“Lyall, I’m sorry but I’ve seen this before. Once your mind starts to go, your body is just behind it. I’m in the final stretch, it does not matter how long I drag it out for. I’m not going to be here much longer,” Damien said while looking up to me. “I expected this, I just wanted a little more time.”

“Does anyone else know? Nash? Benji?”

“Nash is picking up the signs I think. Benji doesn’t need to know, he has too much on his plate right now. I don’t know how much anyone else knows. I’ll tell everyone, at some point,” Damien said with a defeated tone.

Silence took the room for a while. Damien just looked at the floor and all I could do was stare at him. This was the quietest Damien had ever been with me. Normally he always has something to say, but this time neither of us knew what to say.

Damien took a deep breath and lifted his head up. He let the breath out and stood up. “No sense in wallowing in pity. I’m headed back down, wanna come?” Damien asked as he walked towards the door.

I stood up and walked out with him. We walked down the stairs and into the main room yet again. Matthew was on a laptop at the bar top, Jeremy and Benji were watching TV and Rylie was on the recliner reading. Everything was as normal as can be for everyone else.

Damien walked into the kitchen and I Sat down at the couch. The show on the TV had a bunch of random people trying to stack cardboard boxes. Confused, I asked Benji “What exactly is going on?”

“So they have to build the tallest tower with boxes. Whoever builds it the tallest wins the round,” Benji said while gesturing with his hands. When he was finished he pulled his arms close to his body with his wrist bent. The position looked uncomfortable.

“Is your wrist alright?” I asked him.

He held out his hand and spun it around. “Yeah it’s all good. How's your butt?” Benji said giggling to himself.

“Heh, ya got me there,” I said back before turning to watch the TV.

After that we watched for a bit and made it to the end of the episode. We turned the TV off and Benji walked upstairs. My phone started ringing. Looking down it was a call from Kole.

“Hello?” I said as I picked up.

“Yo! Bird man!” Kole said excitedly. “You have a way to pick me up? I wanna get out of the house.”

“Not really, I never ended up getting a car. Don’t you have a car?” I asked.

“I mean yeah. But I don't have hands or feet so there's a problem,” Kole said back jokingly. “Unless you wanna stop by and grab me and the car? You still have hands and feet right?”

“I mean I guess I can, Where are you wanting to go?”

“I don't know, maybe the lake or something? Just somewhere out of the house and not crowded,” Kole said.

“Yeah, sounds good. When do you want me to stop by” I asked, going somewhere other than home or the AA house sounded great.

“Whenever! Just be quick!” Kole said before hanging up.

I checked out the walking time between the AA house and Kole's. It's only about a thirteen minute walk so it's doable and I'm sure I could get a ride back. So I said my goodbyes to the group and started my walk.

This walk was quite a bit less stressful than the last time I walked on the street. I've gotten more comfortable with my current body and at this point it's just becoming normal to me. But with winter coming it is getting to be a bit cold to be wearing no pants. It's not like I feel a draft but more of my legs themselves are just getting cold.

I made it to Kole's and walked in. I was greeted by Kole who was pretty shocked by my state. This was the first time he had actually seen my changes since the last time I was over.

“I didn't mean for you to rush over and skip getting dressed my dude,” Kole said as he looked over my body with a smile.

“Save it Bambi, you'll get your time,” I said back with a chuckle. “So what did you want me over for exactly?”

“Man, I've just gotta get out of the house. I swear if I'm not here I am at the doc's. Getting cabin fever I swear!”

“And I'm needed because?” I asked sarcastically.

“You've got feet and fingers. I can't operate a door, much less a car. So you're gonna drive us to the west end reserve.... Right?” Kole said.

“Sure... I think? Why do you want to go there instead of something maybe a bit closer?” I asked, the west end is on the opposite side of the city and was just walking platforms over a swamp area and walking paths in a field.

“Haven’t been there for a while. Figured it would be different, you know?” He said, quickly.

I shrugged to him and we walked out to his car. It wasn’t anything special, a mid 2000s Chevy Cobalt. Blue in color with a little bit of rust. Based on the amount of dirt and leaves on it I could tell it had been sitting a while. Doors were unlocked and I tried to situate myself in the seat. Easier said than done as the seats sat much lower than the SUV.

Once I was sat down in a reasonable, albeit uncomfortable way I looked over the passenger door. Kole was standing outside still, gesturing his hoof to the door handle. I leaned across the car for the handle, putting an extremely uncomfortable amount of pressure on my tail. One pull followed by a shove and the door opened a few inches, enough for Kole to stick his arm in the door and pull it open.

Kole sat down and fought with the door, using the side pocket he was able to pull it shut with a loud thunk. I reached down to grab the keys from the center cup holder, started the engine after a little hesitation from the starter. I pulled the seat belt down and clicked it in place, looking to Kole as he struggled trying to maneuver the belt. I eventually reached across and grabbed the belt securing it for him.

After the fiasco that was getting in the car, we finally left the driveway and were off to the reserve. Kole sitting slumped in the passenger seat and I was sitting cocked to the left.

“Does your tail flex or do you have to sit like that?” Kole asked

“The ends can flex, but the base is pretty solid. If I didn’t sit this way there wouldn’t be anywhere for it to all fit,” I replied back “What about yours?”

“If it’s straight up I can just sit with my butt a little forward. A little pressure isn’t bad though,” Kole said, adjusting himself in the seat. “Can yours just go straight up?”

The thought of bending my tail up to follow my back sounded painful

and sent a shiver down my spine. “I think that might break something haha” I said back to him laughing. “Does it really not hurt for you?”

“I mean it’s not fun, but I’m not going to holler in pain from it” Kole said.

“I can’t say the same myself. I’d be screaming for sure” I said as we pulled into the gravel parking lot.

The Parking lot was mostly empty. A few cars were parked towards the front area. I pulled into a spot and killed the engine. I unbelted myself and climbed out of the door. Finally freeing my tail from its prison. I wasn’t able to see anyone around but I could see two trailheads near the other parked cars.

click click click

Looking back at the car I could see Kole knocking on the window. I had forgotten he can’t get out on his own! I ran to the other side and pulled the door open. He reached for the buckle and was pushing his hoof at it. After a bit of struggling he was able to push the button and release himself.

Kole climbed out of the car. His walking was improving but still not the same as before. He walked to the front of the car, pushing the door shut at the same time. He stumbled and threw his arm to grab the car. Doing so he scraped his hoof on the hood, catching himself as he did.

“Woah! Walking on loose rock is weird. It’s way different from the usual carpet and wood I’m used to,” Kole laughed.

Looking at his feet was odd. His hooves were basically like two toes, the damp ground leaving two curved impressions with every step. My shoes only left prints on very muddy ground. Come to think of it, everywhere Kole goes he is barefooted.

We walked towards the trailheads. As we got closer we could see the labels. One was for the bridge walk and the other the field trails. We decided to go the way of the field trails after some concerns over the damp wood and Kole’s less than excellent footing.

We walked through a small section of wooded trails. On the way we passed a couple who seemed to keep their distance, walking the far edge of the trail. Once passed the trees the trail opened up to a large field with tall

grass and very few trees throughout. The area was designated a preserve and is surrounded by miles of woods. The city did this after fear of expansion taking away the remaining green space around the city.

We walked the trails for quite some time. Not many words were exchanged and we did not see many people. It was relaxing and quiet other than the sounds of bugs and birds creating background sound. Kole stopped and turned to look at me.

“See that tree there?” He said pointing his arm about 200ft down the path. “Wanna race to it?”

“Race? As in run to it?” I asked.

“Yeah, or actually first past it,” He said looking back towards the tree.

“Alright, on my mark” I said, getting myself into a stance. “Aaaand GO!”

I took off as fast as I could. Putting my all into running. This reminded me of when Kole and I were younger. Constantly trying to see who was the quickest in a foot race. I had usually been quicker having been the more athletic in school. But this time not only was Kole quicker, he was quicker by a large margin. He was easily twice my speed! When I finally reached the tree, Kole had long finished.

“How slow are ya? You ain’t got talons yet and you’re still slow as molasses!” Kole teased.

“Dude....how fast...were you...going?” I said, trying to catch my breath.

Kole was excited beyond all belief. “I bet I could go faster! You wanna see me try?”

“You can try. I’m taking a breather, I haven’t run like that in a looong time,” I said as I sat down on the ground.

Kole took a jog to about 150ft away and turned around. From there he started sprinting towards me. He was easily running at ten to fifteen miles per hour leaning crazy far forward. He zoomed past me and ran for a bit longer. He slowed to a stop and yelled out.

“I’ve still got more! Just gotta keep pushing!”

He started to run towards me again. This time was different. He learned as far forward as he could, still speeding towards me. He stumbled slightly and his arms swung out in front of him. His arm hooves made contact with the ground and pushed down. He continued to run, but this now his body was parallel to the ground and running on his legs AND arms. Moving forward yet faster with a hopping motion.

He blew past me at his fastest speed yet by a huge margin. He slowed to a stop and turned to face me. With one hoof raised and three on the ground he was looking at me.

“Woah! How fast was that!” He said giddy.

“Your arms!” I yelled out.

He looked down to his arms and jumped a bit. Quickly he put all his hooves down, then jumped up onto his hind legs. He fell back down onto all four legs again. He let out a loud grunting sound as he jumped up onto his hind legs again. At this time I started running towards him. He fell back onto all fours again.

I reached my arms out. “Jump up and put your leg....arms on my shoulders!”

He did as I said and I was holding him up right at an angle. His head next to mine. I could feel the muscles in his legs jerking and him snorting in my ear. His rear legs stepped constantly trying to find a footing.

“Think of yourself Kole. Think of you,” I tried to speak calmly. “Take a deep breath and think”

He took a deep breath and the snorting quit. His legs and muscles make less movement. His breathing slowed and he pulled his arms tighter to my back. I felt him pulling me closer to him so I stepped forward. As I did there was a loud sound.

CRACK

I felt his body weight shift off of me. He lifted his arms up and off of my shoulders. In doing so I took a step back to give him room. Immediately looking at him I could see a change. His nose and mouth extended out further by a small amount and his nose was flatter and darker like a deer's.

“Oh my god! Dude that was so close, I was almost...almost stuck!” Kole said.

“Yeah, you were pretty far. But you're upright now,” I tried to say something to comfort him, but was distracted by his new nose.

“Thanks Lyall. If it weren't for you I'd have been stuck like that” Kole wrapped his arms around me. “But I think my pants are done for now,” He said as he ground his arms down to cover himself and turned around.

Although he was trying to block the view from his torn pants, I could see from behind that some other changes had stuck. From below his tail I could see his entire rear was covered in white fur. I could only imagine how far forward it went.

“Uhh, Lyall?” He asked. “What happened when you changed?”

“Changed when?” I asked back.

“Like down....below?” Kole said quietly.

“Oh, uhh, it was just..like gone...why?” I asked.

Kole turned around, his hooves still trying to cover himself. But I could see white fur coming up onto his belly.

“Promise to not freak out?” Kole asked

I nodded. Kole moved his arms and I saw a white flab of skin connected to the bottom of his belly. He quickly turned around to face away from me. I started to walk away but his pants fell causing him to trip. His arms stayed against his body and he hit the ground with a thud.

“Damn it!” He yelled. “I guess that's what I get for actually feeling happy!” He yelled laying on the ground.

“Ay dude, it's not as big of a deal as you think. It's just another little change,” I said, trying to calm him down again.

Kole stood up again, this time his pants staying on the ground. His hooves legs now completely covered in fur. He turned his head around to look at me.

"I can't be walking around like this! I'm just... hanging out all over the place!"

"You've got fur now dude. You can get away with it a bit easier. Plus no one is around, don't sweat it!" I said.

He turned around and I realized he was not as well concealed as I am. While he now has a sheath and everything is covered in white fur it's still obvious he isn't covering himself. I just started walking forward and past him.

"Where are you going?" He asked as I walked.

"Walking the trail like we planned. You can keep staring at yourself or we can walk," I tried to play it off as if I didn't care. But really I was just trying to change the subject. It seemed to work though as Kole started walking as well.

We eventually came to the edge of the woods. Cutting the field from the trees was a small creek. I sat down at the water's edge and Kole joined me. It had been awhile since the incident and I was worn from all the walking. Kole threw his torn pants onto the ground behind us.

"Thanks for dragging me out here Kole" I said watching the water ripple. "I needed some time away from everything."

"No dude, thanks for driving. I love this place, it's peaceful, quiet and safe," He said looking into the trees. "It'll make a great place to live."

At first I didn't really catch the last part. I just continued to sit there and watch the waving water.

"It is nice and quiet. Wait," I said looking at him "Did you say live here?"

Kole laughed "yeah, I did. I mean it too, look at how perfect it is out here!"

"It's a reserve, you can't live here" I said half laughing half confused.

"Not yet. But this is where I want to go once I'm finished," Kole said looking back to the woods.

Finished? Was that what he said?

“Finished? As in gone finished?” I asked.

“Gone? I don't know. I don't think anyone knows. But finished changing? Yes,” He said calmly.

I didn't say anything to that. I sat quietly thinking about Kole's real reason for coming out here. Did he bring me out here just to share his plans? Or worse yet, was he planning on going home?

“Was that why you brought me out here?” I asked

“One reason. I also need you to promise me something,” Kole said quietly. “Once I'm changed, I want you to visit me.”

“Visit...you?” I was confused by what he meant.

“What if they are wrong? What if I'm still in there when the changes finish? I don't want to be alone for the rest of my life,” Kole said. I could tell he was serious and he was actually wanting a response.

“I'll visit, I can promise you that you won't be alone,” I said back to him. “But if you are still in there I need you to give me a sign.”

“I'll find a way” Kole said as he stood up. “Well it's getting a bit late and you have to drive. Don't think driving at night would be the greatest idea we have had.”

I stood up, brushed myself off and my tail shook itself into place. “Sounds good. Which way is the car?” I said looking at the three paths in front of us.

“Just hug the edge of the trees and we will find it eventually” Kole said confidently.

What happened next was about two hours of walking the tree line. There wasn't a single path that just followed the tree line. A few paths would follow it for a bit then either dip into the trees or into the tall grass. Through the process of trial and error we reached what looked to be the trail out.

We reached the car and looking around, most of the other cars had left. Kole threw his torn pants into a trash can as he walked past. I assisted Kole in both opening the door and putting on his seat belt before climbing in myself.

We pulled out of the parking lot and onto the road. The sun was just about to begin setting so I was trying to move as quickly as possible to get home before dark.

“Remember when my changes first started and you tried to help me hide them at school? We tried to extend the straps on my bag so it would hang below my tail. But it instead just looked goofy” Kole said “Now look at us, just a bunch of animals trying to live a human life.”

“At graduation you tried to keep your tail from tent-polling your gown. You walked funny all day because you didn’t believe us, that you couldn’t tell anyways,” I laughed.

We enjoyed reminiscing about school days when I had a feeling come over me. Of all the bad times for it to come, I knew the clock started. There wasn’t a place to stop anywhere near. Just trees lining both sides of the road.

“Agh, Kole, we need to stop. Like right now,” I said pulling the car to the side of the road.

“Why? Do I need to call for help?” Kole asked worriedly.

At least ten seconds had already passed. I was struggling with the seatbelt. Hands slipping and frantically trying to push the button. Finally I freed myself and opened the door. I practically leapt out of the car when I started feeling the immediate need to lift my tail. I made it about eight feet from the car when time ran out and involuntarily lifted my tail and released. In less than a second it was done.

I turned around to see Kole watching me from the car. His eyes were wide. I walked back to the car and without a word I belted myself in and continued driving. Kole was quiet and I think he was even a bit embarrassed for me. It wouldn’t be so bad if I had just a bit more warning.

The little stop we had to make didn’t help with the waning daylight. When we reached Kole’s it was getting late. I helped Kole out of the car and into the house.

“Lyall, why don't you just drive the car home tonight. Just bring it back whenever, it's no big deal,” Kole said as he stepped in the door. “With Mom about to see this, the car is the least of the problems” He was gesturing at his face and body.

“Best of luck!” I said as Kole closed the door.

I got into the car and drove off. I was going to go home but had a feeling I should stop by the AA house. Maybe even just crash there for the night. I parked next to Nash’s van and stepped out into the cold fall air. I stepped in the door and saw Nash, Benji and Matthew. Nash looked over to me.

“Hey Lyall. We need to talk about something,” Nash said with a sad tone. “It’s about Damien. He uhh, had an episode earlier... alone and uhh, had another change.”

“His feet?” I said “Did they finish?”

“No, his head,” Nash said. “He was alone and came down from his room afterwards.”

“Where is he?” I asked.

“Upstairs, he went up after talking to us,” Nash said quietly.

Without thinking I started up the stairs. When I got to Damien’s room I knocked.

“Damien? You mind if I come in?” I said slowly opening the door.

With the door fully opened I saw him. His head wasn’t just changed. It was completely inhuman. He had yellowish-white beak, yellow eyes with a singular black dot in the middle. From his eyes extended red feathers to the back of his head. His head was lifted up by a long flexible neck.

He never made a sound and his new head was void of any emotion. He looked at me using a single eye on the side of his head. He just stared at me, no motion besides the occasional blink.

“You feeling alright Damien?” I asked.

He stared before slowly shaking his head *no*.

“You ok if I stay here for a while?”

He nodded *yes*.

“Did you have another episode?”

Yes

“Did you end it yourself?”

Yes

“Were there changes that did not stick?”

Yes

“Are you able to talk?”

No

“Were you alone?”

Yes

I had a sinking feeling in my stomach. I couldn't help but feel responsible for his change after I told him I'd be there. He was so close now, he resembled more of a bird than he did a human. He stood up and I saw two other changes. His feet were changed now. He had four clawed toes on each foot. Behind him hung a pure black tail.

As he stood he held both his wings out slightly. Not making a sound but pulling his head to the side. I did not understand what he was trying to say but after a few moments he walked towards me. Once his chest touched mine he extended his wings out and around me. I wrapped my arms around his body. His body was soft, while his wings were stiff.

“You don't have long do you?”

I could feel his head shake slowly.

“You told the others?”

He nodded his head.

“This is goodbye isn't it?”

As soon as I said it his wings pressed harder against me. After a moment he nodded again. His head pushed harder against mine and I could feel every

feather bending against my face.

“Are you letting yourself finish?”

Yes

“Are they coming to get you?”

Yes

“Do you want them to take you?”

He hesitated but nodded after a few moments, *yes*.

We released from our hug. Damien turned his head and started preening his wing feathers. All I could do was watch him. Not long ago he was mostly human, but now he was on the verge of losing his humanity. I could feel my vision blurring and my eyes watering.

I walked to the door, but before opening it I looked back at Damien.

“See you...See...I’ll see you again,” I stumbled on the words.

He looked at me, this time straight on and nodded. He then made a *churr* sound. I turned and walked out of the door and closed it behind me. I walked downstairs where now everyone was sitting quietly. I sat down and looked at the group.

“He told all of you?” I asked quietly.

“Yeah,” Nash replied. “He had me call the research folks to come get him. He wanted to go on his terms”

“That’s how I figured he wanted it,” Matthew said. “He wasn’t one for people to tell him what to do.”

Benji got up and hugged Nash.

“I know, I know,” Nash said something in response to Benji.

“Did he...wait for me?” I asked.

“He said he wanted to see you before. We didn’t know if we were going

to have to go get you or if you were stopping by,” Rylie said.

“He made sure to talk with all of us this evening,” Nash said.

We all sat for a while in silence. After a few hours and a few calls Nash made in the other room, there was a knock on the door.

Nash answered it and there was a man and a woman at the door, in the man's hand was a white box labeled “LIVE ANIMAL”. Nash directed them upstairs and to the last room on the left. They went upstairs and after a bit walked down with the box in hand. We could hear something in the box rustling. They thanked us for our time and left.

And as quick as that, they were gone. They got what they needed to start their program and save the Ivory's.

Damien was gone.

CHAPTER 7

Silence.

No one dared say a word. The group sat quietly and waited for someone to say something. All while not wanting to be the first to speak. After about an hour of silence, slowly everyone began to get up and head to bed. I laid down on the couch and tried my best to sleep.

The early morning sun lit the room. I walked around the bottom floor of the house, but I was seemingly the only person up so far. Reliving last night in my head over and over. Part of me could not believe it had happened, as if it was a dream. I waited for someone else to come down the stairs, but no one did after waiting half an hour.

It felt unreal, the events of last night. But they had to be real. The memories were vivid and detailed, unlike a dream that fades. I had to look. The curiosity and uncertainty were killing me.

I walked up the stairs and turned down the hall. His name was written across the door on a small rectangular sign. Opening the door and peered in. I don't know what I was expecting. Maybe Damien? Maybe a sign of what happened? But nothing seemed to be too different. The room was a bit messy but nothing worse than yesterday morning.

Looking around felt wrong, and I felt like I was invading Damien's personal space. I turned to leave when I saw a small white feather lying on the floor. I picked it up and looked at it carefully. It was bright white, still, and looking at the end, there appeared to be a small amount of dried blood on the tip. I left the room carrying the feather in my hand.

I closed the door, but I heard a voice as I did.

"You doing ok?" Rylie said, "Do you wanna talk about it?"

I turned to face her. "I don't know," I said.

She turned her head, gesturing for me to come downstairs. I followed her and took a seat on the couch, she sat on the loveseat.

"I think I know how you feel," She said. "It's a lot to take in, and you are probably a little confused, maybe a little scared."

I sighed. "It doesn't feel real. I was just talking to him yesterday, and everything was going to be alright."

"Everything is going to be alright. Things recently have been bleak, but sometimes life can be," Rylie said softly. "We just have to keep moving, and it's what Damien would have done."

"But what happens now?" I asked. "What happens after we finish changing? Do we just continue like nothing happened? Just pretend everything is fine?"

"You can't pretend it never happened, but you also can't let it keep you from living," Rylie said. "I know it sounds easy, but I've been through it four times now. I can tell you it isn't, but we have to do it."

"Do you think he's still in there?" I asked. "Is his mind still in his body?"

"Lyall," She said, "I wish I could tell you. Maybe he is still in control. Maybe he's gone. I don't know, and no one really knows."

"But do you think it's still him?" I asked again.

Rylie sighed. "Maybe. I just don't know."

We could hear a thudding down the stairs. We both looked over to see Benji at the foot of the stairs. He walked towards us, his feet tapping with every step. His face was void of any emotion. He sat down without a word on the couch next to me.

"You feeling ok, Benji?" Rylie asked.

Benji opened his mouth but hesitated to speak. "Yeah"

"Do you want to talk about it?" Rylie asked him.

"No, I'm good," Benji replied.

"Are you sure? You can tell me anything, Benji," Rylie said.

Benji turned to face her and said sternly, "No."

Matthew walked in and sat down.

"Nash is with Jeremy this morning," Matthew said, "Not sure when they will be back."

Rylie nodded.

I stood up to leave for home when Rylie stopped me.

"What's that in your hand?" Rylie asked.

I looked at my hand to see the white feather. "I found it this morning. Don't know why I picked it up. I just felt like I should."

"Is it Dame's?" Matthew said.

"I think it is. Maybe that's why I kept it?" I said back while still looking at it. "It's white, and he's the only one with white wing feathers, right?"

"Unless you haven't told us something, I would say it is his," Matthew said.

Just talking about him made me feel sick. My stomach churned, and I walked out of the room and towards the bathroom. I quickly stepped inside and locked the door behind me. I did my business, flushed, and went to wash my hands. While doing so, I looked into the mirror. I saw myself, but not my usual self. I saw the part man, part hawk creature I've become. Golden brown eyes, thighs, hips, all things that were less than human. My tail behind me, which until recently I could not control, but now was like second nature.

Damien wasn't a unique case. Everyone in this house would have to go through that. It isn't a matter of whether it would happen, but when. Damien

seemed to have his pretty under control, but just one small change led to him losing that control. Could I have stopped it if I was still at the house yesterday? Would Damien still be here if I had not left with Kole?

I left the bathroom and made my way to the front door. I had not had myself checked in a while. Not sure exactly if it was fear of learning what may have changed or just trying to pretend nothing was changing. I felt like I needed to get checked out. Maybe it could help in some way? Perhaps I could get some answers? Also, an excuse to leave the house?

Rylie stopped me as I went to walk out the door. She grabbed my arm and said, "Lyall, where are you going?"

I thought of lying to her and just saying I was going home. But what would that really do for me? So I told her the truth. "I'm going to get checked out, and I should be back later today,"

"Did something change?" She asked.

"Nothing changed. I just need to go. I haven't been looked at in a while and just think it may make me feel better if I did," I said back to her. She let go of my arm and looked at me. I walked out the door and headed to Kole's car.

I figured he would not mind if I used it today. It's not like he has much use for it, and I can just take the opportunity to return it. I situated myself in the seat, or as best as I could fit. I drove downtown to the doctor's office. The parking lot had a few cars, but it did not seem overly busy. I parked the car and wondered why I decided to come here. It wasn't going to change anything. I pretty much knew everything that had changed. I did want to ask questions, but did Leslie have any information I didn't know already?

I walked in and up to the receptionist's desk despite these questions.

"How can I help?" The receptionist asked.

"Hey, I uh, haven't been in for a while and figured I should get checked out," I said to her.

"What's your name, dear?"

"Lyall Williams," I said and turned my head to see who all could hear. In the waiting area, I saw a few people, but I did not see who they were in my

quick glance.

"Anything changed since your last visit?" She asked.

I looked down at myself. I looked back up and said, "A bit down at, uh... my waist?"

She looked at me, confused. "You're waist? As in your hips?"

"No, more like... lower?" I said again, quieter, hesitant to say it aloud.

She leaned up and looked over the short counter at me. "Is that all new?"

"For the most part," I said to her.

"Ok, well, take a seat, and we will call you up."

I walked to the waiting area. I felt their eyes looking at me, the others waiting. I could see three others in the room. One was a man who looked fine aside from brown fur running down his arms. His hands looked like a cross between human hands and paws. He looked to be in his late twenties or early thirties.

A few seats to his left was a girl who looked as if there were no changes to her. The first time someone looking so typical looked out of place. She was young, maybe early twenties? She sat on her phone, scrolling, eyes glued. Every once in a while, she would smirk or chuckle to herself.

At the end of the line of chairs, facing me, was another man. Similar age to the girl, but he was wearing a button-up shirt. The top half of the shirt was left undone, and on his chest were white feathers. There was a black line of feathers across his upper chest. He was like me, looking around the room and watching what others were doing. We made quick eye contact before he looked away.

The large metal door in the room crept open, and the nurse's face leaned out into the room. "Amber?" The nurse said from the door. The girl stood up and walked in the door, each step with a slight limp. The door closed with a loud thud after she entered.

I sat and looked at the covers of the magazines next to me. Mostly the typical doctor's office style magazines with stock photos and basic information on the cover. Just things to try and pass the time.

"Weston?" Another voice called out. The man with the white and black feathers stood up and walked through the door behind her.

The door shut, and there was silence again. I picked up one of the magazines and tried to thumb through it, at least something to do while I waited. All the pages were either watered-down medical advice or advertisements for medications.

"How long have you been going for?" A man's voice said. I looked up to see the guy a few seats down across from me looking my way. I looked behind and around myself, and the two of us two were the only ones in the room.

"You're asking me?" I said, pointing to myself.

"Yeah, how long have you been going through this?" He asked again.

"Oh, I don't know. A few weeks, I think?" I hadn't really kept track.

"I thought you would have been longer," He said again. He held up a paw in front of himself and turned it. "Got these babies two days ago. Makes getting around a pain,"

"You find a way through," I said, trying to sound optimistic.

"Yeah, the claws make opening bags easier. That makes up for scissors," he said, chuckling. "Getting them to come out when you want them is a battle. They always pick bad times to show up. Trying to reach for the car door? Best time for them to grab everything!"

"I had that with the tail. Eventually, you figure it out," I said back. "It's like a game, and you find ways of working around it. Then it's like second nature!"

"Control your tail, huh? I didn't know those moved. Figured they were just.. there," He said.

"Believe me, I've learned more about birds than I ever wanted to," I said, chuckling myself.

"Tell me about it! I didn't even know there was a thing called a *Marten* until a few months ago. Now here I sit!" He said, holding his paws out.

A voice came from the doorway again. "Devon?"

"Well, it seems it's my turn! Nice talking with you, uhh what was your name?" He said.

"Lyall," I said back.

"Yeah, Lyall the sparrow, right?" He said jokingly.

"Close enough," I said jokingly.

"The same difference," he said, winking.

After the door shut, it opened again. The girl from earlier walked out the door and out of the building. I was alone now, well, mostly. Small glass windows were separating the receptionist and me. I sat and waited in silence until I heard the door open.

"Lyall?" The nurse said into the room.

I got up and followed her through the door. I was taken to a scale and weighed. She was jotting down notes onto a clipboard as she walked. She took me to a room and started with a series of questions.

"Have you had any recent changes?"

"Any recent events to trigger changes?"

"Any changes to diet?"

"Any changes to daily activity?"

"Any drug or alcohol use?"

"Difficulty with thoughts or instincts?"

I answered them all as best as I could. She simply said the doctor would be in soon. I was again waiting alone in the room. There was a slight hissing from the air vents but no other sounds. Looked around and saw small posters with all sorts of information on changing. Most of the posters seemed to be related to birds. A small pile of clothes was on the counter, and they looked haphazardly placed without any care to try and fold them. The door swung open, and I looked up to greet Leslie but was met with the feathered guy

from the waiting room.

"Oh, someone is in here, sorry!" He said as he turned down the hallway. "Which room were we in?"

The nurse quickly came in and led me to another room. As I walked down the hall, I saw the man wearing a gown standing there with his hands behind his back, and he tried his best to not make eye contact.

"Sorry, Lyall! It's not often we have two avians in here at once," She said as she sat me down in the new room. This room was the same, except the posters ranged from canines to bears instead of birds. The posters were probably different from room to room, depending on the species. I did learn from these that some hybrids will sleep more in winter to satisfy the need for hibernation. Not sure that helps me any.

The door swung open again. This time it was Leslie.

"Sorry for the mix-up! The nurse thought he had checked out already," Leslie said as she took a seat, clipboard in hand. "So anyway, what's new with Lyall?"

I gestured my hands to my crotch. "A little more here and a lot less pants," I said. She nodded and started writing.

"That's certainly new! How long has it been like this?" She asked. "Go ahead and undress too if you don't mind."

I gave her the timeline of events as I took what little clothes I was still wearing off. She put on gloves and began poking and prodding the area with the small metal stick. It was cold, and I began to remember one of the reasons I wanted to avoid the doctor.

"Any changes in the bathroom?" She asked.

"Major changes," I said back.

I felt a cold poke under my tail, and without thinking, my tail pushed down, and I jumped forward. Reeling from the unexpected prod, I caught my balance, and my tail shook as it re-adjusted itself. Over the last few days, it seems like it will just do that. I believe it has something to do with how the feathers are laying. I meant to ask Damien about it before...

"Sorry," She said, putting the metal stick down on the counter. "Let's take some X-rays and see what we can,"

She guided me out of the room and down the hall. Eventually, reaching the room labeled "Imaging."

It felt odd walking around nude, without even a gown on. I guess the public sees it as ok since I have nothing visible, but it still feels weird, especially after seeing that other avian guy wearing one.

We walked into the imaging room, where I had a series of X-rays done. After that, I had three feathers plucked which hurt like hell. One tail feather and two from my legs, and the ones on my legs were not as painful as the tail feather. Blood was drawn, and my mouth swabbed. I was told I no longer had to pee in a cup, so that was one less demeaning thing.

Afterward, I was led back into the room and put my shirt and shoes back on. Leslie went over the X-rays and explained some things I already knew. I now had a cloaca, and my tail feathers were near complete. "Flight ready" is what she referred to them as. She did tell me that there were two other things she found. My hips were adjusting to be more like a hawk's, and my bones had begun to adapt to the composition of a bird's bones. None of this seemed to concern her, and she did recommend I try eating more meat in my diet.

"Slight pain in your legs is going to be expected soon. You may get lucky, and the shifting happens in your sleep. But you'll know when it's complete," She said, looking at the clipboard. "That pretty much takes care of everything. Do you have any questions for me?"

I don't know if she really knew what she was getting into with that question. Damien, the mental changes and my future. So I thought I would try to ease into my questions.

"When I had the changes recently, I have been better able to control my tail. Is that how it normally goes?" I asked.

"It depends. Usually, the instincts that come with a new limb or changed body part can take a little time. Depends on how behind your mental changes are," She said

"Mental changes?" I asked. Fearing talking about anything mental, it was such a fast change after Damien had his mental changes.

"I'm sure you've noticed that changes are hard at first but get easier, right?" She said, "It's because your mind changes too. Just little changes that come along with physical changes."

"But I don't notice them?" I asked.

"Think of it as an unconscious action. Things you don't realize are happening, and your body just does, like breathing," She explained. "Some you will use without even knowing, and some avian hybrids will find they have better balance with a tail."

I thought about how I should ask the real question without raising any questions. What I wanted to know is how mental changes like Damien's happen. But I don't want her to think anything is happening to me.

"What about changes to have.... a hawk mind? I mean, like my mind to the hawks?" I asked, and this got a bit of a surprised face from her.

"Lyall, I don't know if we should be talking about that. You have a long road ahead of you, and we really don't need to be worrying about that right now," She said back. "Is there a reason you're thinking about this?"

That did it.

"I was just doing some future planning," I said, trying to keep a confident sound when I was lying about my reasons.

"I can get you in touch with someone to help decide future options, but those questions are usually left out," She said back. "Normally, they would handle relocation or captive arrangements."

"Can you tell me what happens then?" I asked finally, and I figured getting to the point would be my next best move. "I just want to know how the changes end. Would you still be.... you?"

She was pretty surprised by that. She looked at her watch and took a note. "I don't have enough time to go over this right now. But I can give you some reading material on it," She reached into a drawer and shuffled through some little booklets. She found the one she was looking for and handed it to me.

'Shared Space: The Other You'

"Give this a read, but remember to not get too hung up on this Lyall.

"There are other things for you to work on right now," She said, "If you insist on talking about this, make an appointment ahead of time, and we can take a bit longer to talk about it."

I thanked her for the time and the booklet. I was led out to the checkout by her and finished signing the paperwork. I saw two other people sitting in the waiting room as I left. I walked out the door and to Kole's car. Opening the door, I sat in the car, looking at the cover of the little booklet. I put it in the passenger seat and started my drive.

I drove by my house to see the driveway was empty. I ran in and grabbed a bag of clothes, and saw a note on the counter. The message had my name written on it. Opening the letter, it was from my mother.

"Lyll,

I'm sure you're out spending time with your friends. But I have thought about your idea of moving in with your friends. I want to talk to you face to face when you can. I know you've been busy, but text me when you can.

Love Mom"

I'm surprised she didn't call me or text me but instead wrote it out on paper. I pulled out my phone to check when my last text was from her. We haven't sent messages for a couple days, so I didn't miss anything? I sent her a text.

"Got your note. Is everything ok?"

There was no immediate response. I grabbed my backpack and left. In the car, I tucked the booklet into the bag's side pocket and drove off to the AA house.

The temperatures were starting to get cooler as the year went. Being in a Midwest state, we had rough winters but usually only colder temperatures until January. After that was when the real snow came. Outside was starting to look dreary as most trees lost their leaves, and grass turned more brown than green. The heat in the car was trying its best to keep the cabin warm.

I reached the AA house and parked the car. Jeremy and Nash's cars were both parked out front. Grabbing my things, I climbed out of the vehicle. I walked up to and through the front door. Inside everyone was sitting around the main room talking. I walked up and sat down on the couch arm next to

Jeremy.

"Been a minute since I've seen ya!" Barclay said, looking me over. "Looks like it's been longer, though,"

I shrugged. "What brings you around?" I asked.

"Oh, you know, old friends turning into birds," He said sarcastically.

I felt dumb after hearing him say that. I didn't even think about the situation and his relationship with Damien.

"You get done what you needed to," Rylie asked.

"As much as I could," I answered, "How have you guys been holding up?"

"Fine, we think. Or as good as we can," Matthew said.

Jeremy shrugged, Nash gave a *meh* expression, and Benji didn't say or do anything. We all made small talk about anything and nothing.

"I guess it's time to make my little announcement," Barclay said as he stood up. "I've been planning it for a while, but I'm headed out west. I've always wanted to take a trip, but I think there has never been a better time than now,"

"You flying or driving out?" Rylie asked.

Barclay held his arms out. "Well, since these things aren't ready, I'd say driving."

"Oh, you know what I meant," Rylie said, "Avrill going with you?"

"Yep! We are stopping in Colorado to see the mountains before driving till we hit the Pacific," Barclay said excitedly. "You know you guys can visit if you want? I'll always have somewhere for you to sleep."

Benji got up and went upstairs without saying a word. I could hear his door shut upstairs. Rylie quickly got up and walked up the stairs.

"It's gotta be hard for the kid," Nash said, "Losing your mother and a friend that close together."

"It's his first experience with it, too," Matthew said. "It's the third for me, but I'll admit it's not much easier."

"Gabe was a fun guy. Loved him to death, but he was the first I saw go," Nash said, leaning back in the chair.

"You just liked having another cardinal," Matthew said, teasing.

Nash laughed. "If that's what you think, so be it! We'll see how you do it without your corvid bro."

"This is the first for both of you, then?" Matthew asked Jeremy and I. Jeremy nodded, as did I.

"I'll say Damien's was rougher than most," Matthew continued, "But I think once he knew his mind was going, he just wanted to be done with it."

"Could Damien have held out longer?" I asked

"Maybe," Matthew said, sounding unsure.

Nash quickly cut in, "He may have been able to, but the question is if it was worth holding out."

"I can't blame him. But I don't know if I could do it," Matthew said.

There was a pause after Matthew said that. Not sure if anyone knew what to say to that. No one tried to make eye contact, just looking about the room or at the floor.

THUMP *THUMP*

I looked over to the sound to see Jeremy hitting the coffee table. His feathered hand slightly damped the sound as he hit the table. Everyone was waiting to see what he would do. First, he pointed to the ceiling.

"Up?" Matthew asked.

Jeremy shook his head. He made an *OK* looking sign with his hand and pointed up. We were all a bit confused, so he held one arm up and pointed below it and then back to the ceiling.

"Benji?" Nash asked.

Jeremy nodded quickly. He then drew a circle in the air, holding both hands in a pinching shape. He brought both hands together, he then pulled both apart. We were all still pretty confused about what he was trying to say. He took one hand, pulled it away, and opened it up. He held up the single pinched hand and shook it slightly.

"Jeremy, I'm sorry, dude. But I don't get what you are trying to say," Matthew said, looking over to Nash and me. "Y'all know what he's saying?"

Nash stood up and ran into the kitchen. The sounds of drawers opening and shutting echoed. Nash ran back out with a pen and sticky notes. He sat them down in front of Jeremy, and Jeremy sighed and picked them up.

"Do you know something like... sign language or something?" Matthew asked. Jeremy looked over at him and slowly shook his head. "Well, we have to figure something out for ya. I'm no good a charades, and I don't think the beak helps,"

Jeremy shrugged and handed the sticky note to Nash. Nash read it and somehow looked more confused. "How did that mean this?" Nash asked sarcastically, "I don't want to sound mean, but charades isn't your strong suit."

"What was he saying?" I asked.

"Does Benji have any family involved?" Nash said, repeating what Jeremy wrote.

Matthew turned his head, rotating it sideways at the same time. "What now?"

Jeremy threw his hands up and laughed as well as he could. I couldn't help but chuckle to myself, and it seemed Nash and Matthew felt the same way. I think everyone needed a little laugh.

"I don't know, to answer your question," Nash said, trying to compose himself. "I figure he doesn't since he is able to live here. Damien handled that."

"What didn't Damien handle?" Matthew said jokingly.

"I think we'd need to take a vote or something, but someone will need to

take over the stuff he did for this place," Nash said, looking for our reactions. "I can help with any financials and might even get the workplace to do it free. As long as we are still a nonprofit."

"You work?" I asked Nash.

"Something has to pay for my apartment and bills," Nash said.

"I guess I didn't think you would work with your changes," I said.

"I'll work till I can't talk or type. I've been doing it this long. A few little changes ain't stopping me now," Nash said while pointing at me. "Plus, it gives me something to do."

Matthew and Nash continued talking about managing the house. Jeremy was quiet to the conversation, as per usual. And Barclay chimed in from time to time.

I felt my phone vibrate in my bag pocket. Not even a minute later, it went off twice more. I pulled my phone from my bag pocket and checked the message.

"Dude what the fuck is this" The first text read.

The following text was a photo, and I opened the picture to see a clear picture of Kole's privates. Nothing in the image looked human, instead was very pink and seemingly misshapen. I closed the image, not prepared for my long-time friend to send me a literal dick pic.

I heard a chuckling/rattling. I looked over to see Jeremy looking at me, then looking back down towards my phone.

"Did you see that?" I whispered to Jeremy.

He continued to make the sound and slowly nodded his head.

I opened my phone again and looked at the third message that came directly after the picture.

"Hey don't open that around your Mom it's a private photo"

I replied back, "Jeremy saw it. Why did you send it to me."

"It's weird when I pee it comes out on it's own" The text was followed by another "Then it shoots back in"

"TMI dude" Was all I said back.

"I know but its important" The following text read "I can not get it to stop"

"is it another change maybe?" I asked him.

"going to doctor tomorrow will let you know" He sent back.

I have an idea what is causing him issues. But I'm not sure if he would really want to hear it from me, especially after sending me that picture.

CHAPTER 8

The photo Kole sent me was far from the only weird thing I had seen today. Kole would soon find out what was happening, but I didn't feel comfortable telling him. It's getting later into the year, and as the hunters know, it's getting time for the "rut," With Kole's changes the other day, I wonder if he is starting to get instincts relating to deer's breeding seasons.

I don't think that's the type of conversation I could have with Kole. It is almost like the birds and the bees talk but with a deer instead of another person. If I were told that the private photos I just sent to my friend were related to another species' sexual habits, I would be embarrassed beyond all belief.

"Everything ok?" Matthew asked me.

I closed my texting app and sat my phone down. "Yeah, just a friend having some issues after fresh changes."

"Oh, your deer friend?" Matthew asked. "What's going on with him?"

Kole's changes and my changes are not too far apart. Will I be affected by the seasons? Mammals usually have a heat at some point every year but do birds? Kole's much farther along, but I'm not all that far behind him.

"Just changes with his legs. Trying to get used to walking on them," I said to Matthew.

"I knew a chick a bit ago who was a horse hybrid," Nash said, leaning forward. "When her legs went, she almost immediately was on all fours. She

said it was much easier than walking on her back legs."

"He had a scare with falling on all fours. But he was able to go back. It wasn't fun to watch by any means," I said to Nash.

Matthew shuffled a bit in his seat and looked almost like he was trying to scratch his back on the chair.

"Bug bite?" Nash asked Matthew.

"Nah, a bit worse than that," Matthew said, laughing, still trying to itch himself.

"Do ya have mites?" Barclay asked. "I don't feel like having any mites in my feathers, dude."

"I just have the urge to preen," Matthew said, sounding embarrassed.

"Then do it. No sense in you sitting and fidgeting for the next hour," Nash laughed

After a short delay, I saw Matthew's head turn, his beak running through his chest feathers. Moving quickly and in fast rapid movements. Once he finished the front, his head turned around and began running through his back feathers. I, for one, was surprised by his neck's range of motion. He continued to preen for a few minutes before bringing his head back to look at us.

"Sorry, it itches like hell if I don't," Matthew said.

"It's fine, Matt. It comes with the coat, bud," Barclay said.

"I didn't know your neck was so... mobile?" I said to Matthew.

He turned his head around again, then looked at me. "It's been like this for the past few days. I don't know if that triggered my preening, but it was nice when I didn't have to."

"Not everyone can skip it like Damien," Nash said. "But at least you don't have the neck he did."

Everyone was quiet after that. Nash, Jeremy, Matthew, Barclay, and I sat around trying to find something to talk about. Jeremy rapped his hand on the

table again, making a loud thud.

We all looked over to see what he was going to try and say this time. He started to make a hand motion but quickly stopped and audibly sighed. He was slouching in the seat.

"Not wanting to try?" Matthew asked, to which Jeremy just shrugged.

"We'll figure out something for you, bud," Nash said, patting Jeremy on the back.

DING

My phone had a notification. Pulling the phone out, there was a message about an article on the local paper's website. I figure the website must be tracking my recent search history.

"Last two in existence! Could an extinct bird be brought back?" The article title read. I figured I knew what it was all about, and it would just be a story about Damien and his story. But as I read the article, it became clear they did not want to give too many details. Although it talked about the possibility of reviving the entire species, it treated the male woodpecker as if they had just found it. No mention of Damien or Anima. The article was topped with a black and white image of an Ivory-billed woodpecker. Who I could only assume was Damien.

"The pair is currently at the Mavis Conservation Society's care and are being studied in the group's Sanctuary," The article read.

I knew where Mavis was. As a kid, we had a school trip to the conservation center, and it was about an hour and a half from here. There was a public walkthrough of many bird enclosures ranging from injured to rescued to endangered. If Damien was there, I had a good chance he would be publicly visible. The only issue was how would I get there?

Kole's car was too uncomfortable to drive a far distance. There was no way I could go to the center with Nash or Matthew. But Jeremy couldn't speak up too well. This could allow him to keep a secret longer. But I would have to convince him to drive the whole distance. If I remember right, it's about an hour to an hour and a half each way.

The others were distracted by the current conversation of preening, so I started my plan to go to Pines and try to get some answers. Pines looked like

an hour with current traffic if we left soon, and we would arrive just two hours before they closed the public side of the sanctuary. But what was around that could give me a reason to have Jeremy come?

Little white lies anyone can do. But this would be quite a story to try and tell. I could say it is a family emergency to him, but that does not seem right with recent events. I could lie about it having to do with my classes. In Pines, there used to be a satellite dish array on the outskirts. Since no one knows what I studied, I could maybe pull that one, but it's still a stretch.

"Jeremy," I said aloud. Jeremy turned his beaked face and stared at me. "Want to drive with me up to Pines?"

Jeremy cocked his head to the side, giving a confused look. He turned to look at the others for their reactions. Jeremy pointed at me, then himself, and held both hands out to motion for driving a car.

"Yeah, it's a drive, but I figured it would be fun for you to come," I said, keeping it cool.

Before Jeremy could say anything, Matthew said, "What's in Pines?"

"An errand I was going to run in my Mom's car. But she texts me saying it's down," I said.

"You were going to drive up this late?" Matthew asked.

"Yeah, I wanted to hang out here first. It turns out it was good to wait with it breaking down," I said, but even I was having trouble convincing myself of it.

I looked over to Jeremy. "So you wanna go?"

Jeremy sat still before shrugging and nodding, *yes*.

"Awesome, I'll cover gas and dinner if you drive," I said, standing up, and Jeremy stood up and shrugged. We started walking towards the door, and I heard Matthew from behind us.

"Not sure where you are going but please, just text me if you need me to bail you out."

I gave a confident thumbs-up, and we were out of the door. We climbed

into Jeremy's car, which was newer and fitted with proper seats like Nash's, and my tail did not feel compressed or squashed into the seat, unlike Kole's. Jeremy sat down in the driver's seat and started the car. He looked at me and then at the GPS screen on his car's screen.

"I'll call out turns for you. I don't have a real address for it," I said.

Jeremy just shrugged, put the car in drive, and off we were. Driving until we reached the freeway, there wasn't much attempt at talking. Once on the highway, I tried to talk, but it was a one-sided conversation. I tried to ask Jeremy more about himself, but he could only answer yes and no questions.

As we drove, we drove completely past Pine's downtown area, and we kept driving. Jeremy would make a sound at each exit to ensure I was aware we were skipping spots. We made it to the correct exit, and Jeremy pulled the car off the highway. I kept giving him directions once we were in the little town of Pines.

I closed the directions on the car's screen, and we continued using my directions off my phone. Jeremy was visually confused by this, and he gave me a side-eye and made a slow sound. I figured I would eventually have to tell him the actual plan, especially now that we were driving right through the town and approaching the reservoir.

"Jeremy, I gotta come clean with you, dude," I said. Jeremy looked over and showed some concern. "We are not running an errand. We are going to find Damien."

"Errh?" He attempted to talk.

"I didn't think I could go alone and knew you would be best," I tried to explain. "You would probably understand more."

Jeremy looked at me, then looked forward. I could tell he had a lot going on in his head. Maybe he thought I was crazy, and I practically kidnapped him by tricking him into coming. He turned his head and slowly shook it. I was expecting anger, but instead, he chuckled.

"I think he's being held at the Mavis sanctuary," I said, sounding like he was being held, prisoner. "I just want to talk to him."

Jeremy looked forward to the road, and his head was still thinking. Coming up the road, I saw a wooden sign hanging right before a gravel drive.

"Mavis Conservation Society: Rehab and Sanctuary"

We pulled in and parked with the eight or so other cars. The facility was a grouping of buildings around some concrete paths. In between buildings was a short wooden fence that would not be hard to climb if you wanted to try. Signs pointed down towards a small building with its front glass doors open.

"Visitor entrance:

Hours: Tues-Sat 10 AM-6 PM"

It was 4:27 PM, so we had plenty of time to look around. I started walking towards the doors when Jeremy grabbed my arm. He gave me a look with his head tilted to the left. Although his eyes were black, I could tell they were lined up with mine.

"Dude, you can stay out here if you want. I just want to go in and see if he really is here," I said to him.

He shook his head and closed his eyes. He audibly sighed and opened his eyes. He motioned his head to say, "let's leave."

"Jeremy, you can't tell me you don't want to know. We are already here, and we may as well take a peek since we will hear it from Rylie either way."

Jeremy again closed his eyes. This time, he lifted his head. Bringing it down, Jeremy made a chattering sound. He held up a hand and made a pinching motion with his fingers. I'd take that as something positive. Still not sure what it Truly means.

We walked up to the door covered in small printouts about upcoming events and general info on the birds. We entered the small room with a single woman at a fold-out table. To the left was a small collection of knickknacks and plushies. A door with a hand-drawn sign for the restrooms was on the other side.

"How can I help you fellows today?" The lady said.

"Is the walking area open?" I asked.

"The exhibit area is open until six, that includes the aviary. The trails are open until dark when we close the gate to the driveway," She said back.

"Ok, can I get two passes for the exhibits?" I asked.

"Sure!" She started punching information into her tablet. "Can I ask what brings you in today?"

"Just wanted to see how much has changed. It's been a few years since I have been here," I said to her.

"We've built a few new enclosures in the past few years," She looked over to Jeremy, "We have a Kingfisher in our care right now. Rocco lives in our aviary," She turned to me, "I'm sure you know we have a few red tails here too."

It took me a second to realize she was saying that because of my changes. I handed her my debit card and watched her swipe it.

"Great! The doors behind me lead to the exhibits. Follow the signs for the aviary, but make sure to only open one set of doors at a time at the aviary," She said, handing me my card.

"Thank you!" I said to her as I walked towards the door. Jeremy gave the nod to her and followed me.

Outside we were surrounded by the buildings and fences. Neat concrete paths sprawled the area leading to an outer ring of enclosures. Walking down the track and to one of the enclosures, I saw a small sign with a picture of a large black bird with a redhead.

Cathartes aura
Turkey Vulture

Inside the enclosure were two vultures standing on the ground. A thin mesh material that covered three sides of the enclosure separated us from them. It was enormous inside with artificial dead trees to make a perch. On the ground, near where the vultures stood, was a carcass of some small animal.

Looking down the path, I could see five other enclosures leading to the entirely mesh aviary, which had a screen door on the front. As I walked down the path, I peered into the various-sized enclosures. Each has a small sign on the front with information on each species and the individual birds. Most were rehabilitated from accidents but unable to be released.

Haliaeetus leucocephalus

Bald Eagle

Injured when struck by a vehicle.

Ardea Herodias

Great Blue Heron

Injured due to discarded fishing line

Tyto alba

Barn Owl

Rescued from illegal pet ownership.

Pandion haliaetus

Osprey

Affected by AN-0954, displayed per request (D.C.)

The Osprey's reason confused me. I had never heard of anything called "AN-0954". I asked Jeremy, and he wasn't aware either. I went to look on my phone but didn't seem to get reception, probably because we were in the middle of the woods.

Looking at the Osprey, it seemed to be staring at us. The other birds did not seem too interested in us, but the Osprey couldn't seem to look away. It sat perched on a high branch of what I assume is an artificial tree or at least a tree that wasn't growing. It had no leaves or smaller branches. As the giant white bird stared at me, it bobbed its head once. Without thinking, I mimicked its motions with a single head bob. It then quickly gave two head bobs in response. Before I got a chance to follow up with two bobs of my own, I heard a voice from behind us.

"Darren's wanting to dance with you?" The voice said. I quickly turned around to see a younger worker. She was wearing a long-sleeved shirt bearing the name of the sanctuary and was carrying a bucket.

"I think he is," I said, laughing. I was embarrassed to be making myself look like a fool in front of her, as if it wasn't bad enough to be half-bird myself. "So, is he injured or something?"

"No, he's perfectly fine. He just requested we care for him for a few years. He was afraid of the wild and he makes a great teaching tool for the kids," She said.

Not sure if she was pulling my leg or maybe she was a bit delusional, I asked her, "He requested? The Osprey?"

"Well, he wasn't fully an Osprey when he asked," She said, confused. "He made the formal request about three months before he finished transforming."

I got it, then. The Osprey was an Anima hybrid. He was like us, like Damien, and this was his final request. I looked over at him, and there was nothing that would tell you he was once human. Looking at him, I would have assumed he was always a bird, hatched from an egg and raised on caught fish from a lake. Instead, he hopped down to the floor of the enclosure and tore into a fish lying on the ground.

"So he was a hybrid?" I asked.

"Yeah, he was a pretty early hybrid. One of the first, really. He used to be our only until we recently had two others arrive," She explained.

Without thinking much, I quickly asked, "Can we see them?"

She responded, "I don't know if it would be possible today. They are both under pretty special care. Jesse and D-"

"Damien?" I interrupted her mid-sentence.

She paused before answering, "Yeah....Damien. Do you already know about the Ivory?"

"Yeah, I heard about them on the news," I said back. Jeremy's eyes opened wide, and he looked at the worker.

Jeremy made a sound to grab our attention. He pointed away, then to us. Afterward, he wrapped his index fingers and pulled them without letting them separate. She was confused looking and stared at Jeremy.

"I don't think I follow," she said, looking at me.

"He's trying to say we knew Damien before. We....I never really got to say my goodbyes to him," I said to her.

She thought for a few moments. "I can see what I can do. But you need to keep it on the down-low, ok?"

"That would be amazing! Jeremy and myself would be relieved to see him again," I said to her.

"Well, walk around for a bit, and I'll see what I can get set up for you," She said.

We continued to walk down to the last exhibit in that line. It was a similar size to the owls' display. Inside was a large-ish bird, white on the belly with brown spots on its chest. Light brown feathers covered its head, and darker brown feathers covered its wings. As if on command, it lifted its leg and turned around before jumping to the branch above it. It turned around to stare at me again but not before I caught a glimpse of its rusty orange tail feathers. Looking down at the sign, I saw it, but I already knew.

Buteo jamaicensis

Red-Tailed Hawk

Injured in a motor vehicle accident

In a way, it felt like I was looking at a mirror of my future self. I had seen a few hawks driving down the highway, perched on road signs. But this was the first time I looked at one and paid attention to its details. Like me, it had golden-colored eyes that always looked like it was thinking. Maybe it was confused about how there was a living thing that looked vaguely like it. Perhaps it knew what I was, or more probably, it did not care.

I could not stop watching it. It's hard to wrap my head around that the bird I was looking at is.. will be me. At some point, I will stand looking like it did, maybe not in captivity but perched on a tree all the same.

It jumped back to the branch in front of it. Its wings unfolding just enough to catch its balance. Once it landed, its wings pulled it, then shuffled a bit before coming to rest. Its tail shook, and it stood still on the branch once again. Tall and proud for all to see.

As I stood mesmerized by it, I felt warmth on my cheeks and neck. Unsure of fear or amazement, I stared at the bird. I glanced down at the small plaque next to the information sign.

"Sunny is estimated to be around eight years old. She was struck by a vehicle on a local highway at two years old and required extensive care for recovery. Due to this care, she is no longer eligible for release due to human interaction. It is believed that she would still struggle to survive without care

due to difficulty with her right-wing."

"Seems weird to be looking at myself, right?" I said, turning to look at Jeremy. But he wasn't there. Looking around, I could see him inside the aviary walking, and I stepped away from the hawk exhibit to the aviary door.

I opened the screen door and was in a small room that led to another screen door. Opening it, I was inside a vast mesh room. The path was a platform about four feet off the ground and more of a bridge. Walking out onto it, I could see all kinds of small birds: Cardinals, chickadees, sparrows, and blue jays. I got to a turn on the platform, and as I followed the turn, I saw Jeremy leaning against the railing.

"Yo, Jeremy," I said as I walked up to him. I realized he was looking at a small bird perched on the other side of the aviary. Darker blue with a white neck and belly, its head seemed very similar to Jeremy's. It had to be a kingfisher, and based on how Jeremy's stare was affixed to it, I would guess he already knew. I sat and watched him admire it for about ten minutes.

"Jeremy, you ok?" I asked him, but he did not respond.

"Yo! Jeremy!" I said louder. This startled the bird he was watching, and it flew further to the one side of the aviary. "Jeremy?" I asked again.

His head flipped around to look at me quickly. Then he turned to face the bird again and let out a loud call.

"EERREH!" He called out.

After a short delay, the bird responded with a similar sound.

"Eerreh!"

Jeremy laughed before turning to face me. Once he did, his eyes widened. Thinking it was at something behind me, I turned to look but only saw a blue jay on the railing.

"Oh, you're looking at the jay," I said as I turned to face him. He still looked shocked as I stepped aside, and his stare stayed locked on me. He lifted a hand and brushed two fingers on his cheek.

"Is there something wrong," I said as I lifted my hand and rubbed my cheek. Instead of squishy skin, I felt soft feathers. I pulled my hand back,

following the feathers to the back of my neck, and Jeremy followed with his. Feathers ran from my cheeks to the back of my neck. Jeremy's finger continued to the front of his neck as I followed. I felt feathers the entire way to the front of my neck.

I started breathing fast. The warm sensation I felt made sense now! I closed my eyes and began to imagine my neck. But all I could see was the hawk on display. Its neck feathers slid across each other as its head turned. All I could think of was my feathers doing the same. I tried to imagine them gone, and the image finally hit me. I felt the warmth on my neck dissipate. Once it stopped, I opened my eyes.

Jeremy was looking at himself frantically. He looked at his arms and his feet after kicking off his shoes. He didn't seem to find anything. He took a few steps as he looked behind himself and stopped, then took another few steps before stopping again. He put his hand against his pant leg and grabbed it. He quickly pulled his hand away and looked at me.

"Ok, I think I got it. You look fine, by the way," I said to Jeremy, and he held up a hand and rotated it side to side.

I pulled out my phone and looked at myself with the front camera. Sure enough, the feathers still ran from my cheeks to the back of my neck. While the number of feathers was less, there were still some new ones on my face.

"Jeremy, Hawk boy!" I heard the voice again.

We both turned to see the worker as she walked toward us.

"Wait, did you have those before?" She said, rubbing her hand on her cheek. But before I had a chance to say anything, she started again. "I can let you see the Ivory's, but we must be quick about it. Follow me," She said as she turned to the doorway.

We followed her out of the aviary and across the grassy exhibit space. She walked up to a door and typed in a code. I don't think she realized it, but I could see what she typed. "6389" Was the code she typed into the door. It was a reasonable distance, but I could see it clear as day.

We stepped into the small room, which looked partially finished and had some construction tools lying around it. We followed her to another door that was missing a keypad, and she opened the door to let us in. The room was small, but a glass window opened to a larger space, roughly the size of

the other exhibits. Just below the glass sat a small sign.

Campephilus principalis

Ivory-billed Woodpecker

Believed extinct in the wild.

There was no mention of Damien on the sign, unlike the Osprey Darren, and the sign just stated the status of the species. While looking at the sign, I saw a flash of black and white, and I looked up to see a bird with black feathers with a small white stripe covering its head. But just as I looked at it, it flew away, seemingly spooked by another bird. This one was almost identical, except for red feathers on the crest of its head.

"The one with the red is Damien," The worker said. "The other one is Jess."

As I looked at the bird, it seemed to look back. He was carefully watching me just as carefully as I watched it. Just a few days ago, it was almost human. He could speak, he could hold things, he could understand. Now he was no different from any other bird, or at least any other rare woodpecker.

"Damien?" I said aloud. "Damien, can you hear me?"

The small bird stared at me. He was not making any movement or making any sound. At least until the other woodpecker landed next to it, he still made no moves even as Jess tried to get his attention.

"Damien, do something!" I said as my breathing sped up.

As I said this, it seemed to scare the small birds. Both took off into the enclosure. Damien clung to the back wall and spun his head around to look at us. Almost as if he was afraid of us, fearful of me.

Was it still Damien? Was he still somewhere in the mind of that little bird? Would we still be there when it comes to this point?

CHAPTER 9

The little bird's head was staring at the glass. Eyes glued to us as he stood perched on the wall. All I wanted was a sign from him, something to tell me that Damien was still in there. But instead, all I saw was a small animal, wondering what I was yelling about.

A hand rested on my shoulder. It was Jeremy's hand, and once I looked at him, he shook his head. His shoulders slumped as he pulled his hand off me. Looking back into the enclosure, I saw the bird jump off the wall and glide to a branch. Upon landing, he began to preen his wings.

"Did you know him personally?" She asked as she removed her jacket. "Was he able to communicate last time you saw him?"

Jeremy slowly nodded.

"We all spoke with him the night he finished," I told her.

She walked up closer to the glass to stand next to me. We watched as the little bird carefully ran each feather through his beak. Afterward, he stretched and brought his wings close to his sides. Jess landed next to him and lowered her head to him, and he began to dig into her feathers with his beak.

"I didn't tell you this," She said aloud. "But he's a weird little guy. He is quiet and only tries to interject with her when she initiates," She turned to face me. "Just a little different from how these breeding programs usually go."

We watched the two woodpeckers as they stood together. I'm not sure why, but I felt an odd mix of sadness and relief. Sad for missing Damien and seeing

him so different from what I knew him as. Relief as I knew he was safe and seemed almost happy. If he is still in there, it seems he accepted the change. If he isn't, then at least he's safe and maybe even oblivious to the situation.

I turned to leave the room. As I did, she tried to stop me.

"Hawk!" She said, "Stop for a second."

I thought about stopping but kept walking into the hall and out the door. Once it shut, I was standing alone in the middle of the exhibits. A handful of people looked into the enclosures, but no one noticed me. I walked down the path and passed the same enclosures we had looked at before. I stopped at the Osprey and watched as he tore into a fish lying on the ground.

His motions were quick and deliberate. He would hold the fish with one foot and tear it with his beak. Darren's life was now reduced to living in a twenty-foot by twenty-foot enclosure, eating raw fish off the ground. His only interactions were with strangers watching him and his handlers caring for him—no way of speaking with anyone. I would be afraid of living that way if my mind was intact.

"Hawk!" She yelled out as she opened the door. She was walking in a direct line toward me.

"Lyall," I said, "My name is Lyall. Wait a few months. Then you can call me hawk."

She stopped directly in front of me. "Lyall, I know it isn't what you probably wanted to see. But, it's not what you think it is," Looking at her, she had a small badge previously covered by her jacket.

"Heather N.
Rehab Assistant"

"Heather, Doesn't it seem odd that you have three attractions here that were only a few years ago, humans?" I asked loudly.

"Maybe you didn't get the picture here. They all agreed to this. Hell, Darren asked for it!" Heather snapped back. "Just because you can't accept this does not mean they didn't."

I took a deep breath, realizing the fool I was making of myself. I looked back to the Osprey enclosure to see Darren perched on the stand, and his eyes

were watching Heather and I as we argued.

"If he could speak and say he wanted to leave. Would he be able to?" I asked her.

"Darren?" Heather asked, "If he could speak or express that desire, he'd be out in a heartbeat. It's not a prison here, and the changed are free to leave if they please."

I sat down on the bench in front of the Osprey cage. It seemed as though Darren was watching me just as much as I was watching him. Heather sat down beside me and stared in at Darren.

"Do you think he's still in there?" She asked with a sigh.

"I don't know. I came here wanting to find that out," I told her, "But I don't even know if I want to know. Would you rather be a prisoner in your mind or a prisoner in a cage?"

"I don't know about Damien," She replied, "But I can say he's the oddest Osprey I've ever met."

"Did you know him before?" I asked her, still looking at the Osprey.

She kicked her feet out before replying, "I met him once before. He was pretty far along, more like your friend inside. He supposedly talked to Gavin, the owner, a few weeks prior about it. He came in with an envelope for Gav and never said a word."

"Do you know what it was about? The envelope?"

"It was a date and time. Gavin told us to come in late that day. When I came in, Darren was here," She said, "I banded him and signed off the paperwork."

He planned his day to finish. No fanfare or announcement. Thinking of how I forced my change forward a few weeks ago, nothing stops anyone from just completing if they wanted to.

"So what's it like?" Heather asked me.

"Huh?"

"You know," She said, gesturing to my body, "This, changing, what's it like?"

She asked again. "I never got to ask Darren."

I looked down at my legs. "Not all that much fun, if I have to say," I said, looking up to her. "Whether it's knocking stuff over with the tail or walking around partially naked. It's always something new."

She smiled and nodded. "You know, I spent my entire life admiring birds. Now to think that some people get to experiment with it first hand, and it's just wild to imagine."

"I guess it's all perspective," I said to her.

We sat quietly as the few visitors walked around us. Some of the folks would try to keep from staring at me. As if to pretend they don't notice how different I look. But pretending I don't stick out is laughable, especially when I am only a hundred feet from an actual hawk.

Most patrons began to exit the small gate near the entrance. It's getting late, and it has to be getting close to closing time. Jeremy found his way out of the building and over to our bench. He held up his arm and tapped on his wrist.

"Yeah, we need to get going," I said, standing up and stretching. In doing so, my tail flared, then settled back to its normal *closed* state.

Heather chuckled to herself. "You stretch just like her."

"Probably not the only thing we have in common now," I joked back.

We passed a few of the enclosures as we walked towards the exit. I'm still on the fence about my feelings about them. But I guess for many of the birds here, life here is better than the death some of them would have had. But for Darren, did he know what he was getting into here?

We made it to the gate, and it creaked open. Jeremy passed through and was toward his car. As I went to pass through the gate, Heather spoke from behind.

"If you ever need to see him. Just find me. But please, don't tell anyone. Ok?" She said quietly.

"Yeah, I'll keep quiet for you," I said

I started to follow Jeremy, but he was already twenty feet ahead of me. He

seemed to be walking quickly and with an unusual gait. It looked almost as if he was having issues with chafing, and I figured it was probably too private to ask him and quietly followed.

Once in the car, we pulled from our parking spot and down the driveway to the road. Not long after we started, the sun began to set. With the darkening outside, I was pretty much blind, and moving objects appeared more like blobs than anything else.

"You think we should stop for the night?" I asked Jeremy.

Not being able to see his response and his refusal to make any sound made communicating more complicated than usual. After a few moments of silence, I spoke up.

"I can't see a thing. You're gonna need to give me some sort of yes or no," I said, waiting for him to do something. "How about one sound for no and two for yes?"

"Errh Errh," He chittered.

"Ok, find a hotel or something. We can leave first thing tomorrow," I said.

After a few more minutes of driving, we pulled up to a typical chain-style hotel. The street lamps in the parking lot help me be able to see my way in the door at least. Jeremy led the way to the doors and up to the front desk.

"Can I help you?" The man at the desk asked Jeremy.

I stepped in and said back, "We need a room."

"Ok, a king or two queens," He asked

"Oh uhh, two queens if you have them," I said, only to hear Jeremy half chuckle and half chitter.

"Alright, and are you both able to control yourselves?" He asked.

"Control myself?" I asked. Did he think we were some wild animals?

"You know, no accidents, feral stuff," He said back.

The way he said it just seemed too ordinary. Was that supposed to be an

insult or an actual question? Maybe it's my lack of interaction with unchanged people, but Jeremy made a grunting sound. Turning to look at him, he had a single thumb stuck up to the man.

He continued to type away at his computer when he asked me to pay and handed me a small sleeve with two room keys. I swiped my card and signed the line.

"Breakfast is from seven to nine. Your room is on the third floor to the right of the elevator," He said, pointing to the hallway.

Jeremy started walking, and I stood in place, still trying to decide if he was trying to be mean or just asking questions. Jeremy grabbed my arm and led me to the elevator. We stepped in, the door shut, and Jeremy pressed the faded third-floor button.

"Is it normal to ask that?" I asked.

Jeremy cocked his head to the side in confusion.

"You know, asking if you can control yourself. Is that like a thing people deal with?" I asked in more detail.

Jeremy shrugged his shoulders. He then moved his left hand to scratch at his pant leg. Once he saw I was watching, he quickly stopped. I reached my hand up to scratch at the feathers on my cheeks, which would take some time to get used to.

The elevator door opened to a dimly lit hallway. On the wall was a sign pointing to the third-floor rooms. We took a right and walked down to room 337. I pulled out a card and swiped it on the door lock. With a loud clunk, the door opened. To me, it was a black void with no details. I stepped aside for Jeremy to walk in. He stepped into the void and disappeared. A few moments later, the room lit up, and I could see Jeremy standing with his hand on the switch.

I walked into the room, kicked off my shoes, and immediately jumped onto the bed. I looked over to see Jeremy carefully taking his shoes off while sitting at the end of his bed. After removing his shoes, he began to itch his pant leg again.

"So what changed on you?" I asked him. "Legs?"

He looked surprised and quickly held his hand up to his chest. He shook his head and looked away from me.

"Come on, dude. You know I did, and I saw you watching that bird in the aviary," I said to him. "No shame in what we did."

Jeremy sighed and stood up. He unbuckled his pants and dropped them to the floor. Beneath were black boxers covering white feathers on his thighs. Starting at about his knees was dark, almost dry-looking skin. He reached down and scratched at the boxers. He lacked a tail, and his legs were still shaped like regular humans, just with a different skin.

"Jeremy, if they are bothering you, just ditch 'em," I said to him as I laid back down on the bed. "You've seen what I've seen."

Jeremy laughed in his chattering sound again. But after a few moments, he slowly slipped his boxers off and quickly slid under his blankets. Trying to make him feel better, I kicked off my socks and removed my shirt. I was now lying on the bed nude. Which being covered in feathers kept anything from being visible.

Laying down, I decided that I should take inventory to make sure nothing unexpected changed. But after a quick once over, I didn't see anything new. Feeling my face, I could tell there was no hiding my facial changes. I rose from the bed and walked into the bathroom. Looking in the mirror, I could immediately see golden-brown feathers across my cheeks. They ran from the front of my face to the back of my neck. From there, they ran down towards the base of my neck. If I relaxed my face, I could get them to lift, making it look much more prominent, maybe even *fluffy*.

Looking over it again, I knew I wouldn't be able to hide this one. With that, I walked back into the room and sat on the bed. I looked down, pretending to look at the small notepad left on the bedside table. Jeremy slowly crawled out under the covers and quickly moved to the bathroom. From what I could see in the corners of my eye, Jeremy's feathers ran up to his hips. His hand was held over any private parts.

I slid the small notepad back into the drawer and closed it. I opened my phone and checked my messages. Again I came across the photo from Kole and his questioning of his new anatomy. But below that photo was a new message.

"Deer are weird man," It read along with another photo of his crotch; this

time, it was just his small skin pouch.

I replied, asking him to please stop sending unrequested crotch shots in a joking manner. He answered a few moments later.

"But its weird right" it read.

"Yes but your not the only one haha" I sent back.

Jeremy walked out of the bathroom with his hands covering himself. Jeremy covering himself gave me an idea. If Kole thought his changes were weird, what if I sent him pics of my changes. Maybe then he would stop with the nudes?

"Jeremy, I have a big favor to ask,"

Jeremy looked at me, still using both hands to cover himself. I stood up from the bed and walked closer to him, holding my phone out. I think Jeremy could understand the joke in all of this, and he saw firsthand the original text.

"I need you to take a few photos of me," I said to him, and he reached one hand up, but before he could grab my phone, I said, "I need you to promise me that you never tell a soul. Ok?"

He hesitated but nodded his head. He grabbed the phone with one hand and held it up. I posed facing him, and he took a photo. I then turned around to face him sideways. Again Jeremy took the picture. I turned my back to him, and I heard the fake shutter sound of the phone.

"Ok, now for this next one. Don't think about it," I said, looking back at him, "Just take it and forget you ever did, ok?"

Jeremy cocked his head to the side. I immediately bent over and lifted my tail upwards. I didn't hear a sound, but I could feel the cool air on my newly exposed skin.

"Take it. I'll explain later!" I said, lifting my tail higher.

I heard the fake shutter sound. As soon as it stopped, I stood straight and reached back for my phone. He handed me the phone, and I immediately locked it without looking at the screen. Turning to look at Jeremy, he had a slightly horrified look, or at least as horrified of a look as a half-bird half-man's face could can.

"Remember that photo my friend sent me?" I asked Jeremy. "This is my revenge on him, so just don't think about it, yeah?"

After a moment of silence, Jeremy started laughing. But unlike before, he drug this one out. It sounded less like a laugh and more like the bird in the aviary. While he continued to *laugh*, I sent the photo to Kole. No context, no text at all, just pure bird butt. I put my phone down as we awaited the response. I couldn't help but laugh myself.

I laid on the bed, waiting to hear my phone go off. My eyes shut, and I could hear Jeremy walking around the room and the rustling of the covers as he climbed under his blankets.

BRRR *BRRR*

I opened my eyes at the sound of my phone shanking itself across the nightstand. But with my eyes open, I couldn't see anything. Everything was a black space. Reaching over to the nightstand, I tried to find the lamp switch. Instead, I knocked a few things off the bedside table and onto the floor. Finally finding the button, I clicked it on.

My phone, now lying on the ground, was screen side down. Picking it up, I saw two groups of messages—one from Kole and another from Matthew. Kole's was a simple "what the shuck" followed by "duck" and a final message "you know what I mean".

Matthew's was a different story. "Are you with Jeremy? Need you both back here tomorrow, need to talk about some things," The text read. After was another text, "urgently."

I received that text shortly after midnight. The clock on my phone read 1:18 am, and replying this late was probably pointless. Looking over at Jeremy, he was sleeping but now laying face up on the blankets. He probably can't stand sleeping under the blankets with the feathers on his legs. I know I ran into that issue myself.

I set my phone back on the table, and with a click, the room was pitch black again. Only the quiet hum of the heater and the occasional breathing sound from the other bed interrupted the silence.

"We have to get going, Lyall," I heard Jeremy say. I opened my eyes to see it was now daytime. The room was bright with sunlight. I sat up from the bed

to see Jeremy putting his clothes on, his pants pulling up to meet with a long feathered tail. Its feathers were blue with black and white bars running its length.

"Jeremy? Did your tail change last night?" I asked him.

"Yeah, but it's not a big deal," He said as he turned to face me. "We have to get back to Damien."

Whatever was happening, it must be a big deal for him not even to mention the tail. I stood up to follow him, but my legs felt unsteady like I was walking in water. I tried to push my legs to step further, but I never seemed able to get closer than a few feet from Jeremy. He reached forward and opened the door.

Following him through the door, we stepped out into the facility, surrounded by the enclosures full of large birds. I tried to follow Jeremy but continued to fall behind no matter how fast I tried to walk. I saw him enter through the screen door into the aviary. By the time I reached the door, he was nowhere to be found. Stepping into the aviary, I looked for Jeremy.

"Jeremy? I can't keep up! You have to slow down," I yelled out.

There was no response. Looking down the raised wooden path, I saw a small blue and white bird resting on the railing. Its eyes locked on mine. I tried to walk closer to it, but each step was small, and my legs did not want to move forward. A second landed next to it as I inched towards the bird. Both are identical to the one we saw yesterday. Blue body, white belly, and an orange line across its chest.

"Jeremy!" I yelled out again, still unable to see anything besides the two birds in front of me.

I waited to listen for a response. Looking down, one bird was still watching me intently. As far as I could tell, its eyes never left me. Its beak opened, but I heard a voice instead of a typical sound.

"Don't run," It said, "You can't run from it."

The voice was the same as Jeremy's. I watched as its eyes stared at mine. I tried to take a step back but still felt unable. It was like my legs were bound together and my feet glued to the ground.

The tiny bird looked down towards the ground. "It's too late anyways," It spoke. "You're too far gone already."

I turned my head to see what it was looking at. Looking down, I saw not my feet but two yellow bird feet with their black talons dug into the wooden boards. When I tried to lift my foot, the yellow-scaled foot would lift, but the black tips dug deeper into the wood.

"Don't think about it," The tiny bird said, "Just let it happen, don't fight it."

Panicked, I reached down to try and pull my talons free. Doing so, I began to fall backward. Just as I felt my body begin to swing backward, I saw the dimly lit hotel room.

I swung upwards to an upright position and, doing this, pulled on my tail feathers. The pain caused me to rotate my body, accidentally throwing myself onto the floor. Looking to see why my legs did not meet the ground first, I saw the decorative fabric wrapped around my feet from the end of the bed. I reached for the material and pulled a leg free. But I did not see the yellow claws I expected. Instead, I saw my usual human feet.

My heart was still racing as I lay down on the floor. I tried to calm myself as the reality set in that what I saw wasn't reality at all. It had been a long time since I could remember having any kind of dream when I slept. But I can't remember feeling anything quite as real as that.

Laying on the ground, I brought my breathing under control. Listening, I still only heard the sound of the heater fan and the shower. I stood up, looking around to see that Jeremy's bed was empty, his clothes lying in a pile near the foot of the bed. I walked towards the door and opened it, seeing the now slightly brighter hallway of the hotel. Stepping back in, I could hear the water in the bathroom running.

"Jeremy?" I asked before remembering that he could not respond.

I walked over to pick up my phone, but the screen did not light up as I brought it up to look at it. Holding the side button brought up a small icon of an empty battery. I'll just charge it in the car when we leave. I looked around for a clock but couldn't see one in the room. The alarm clock was unplugged, and connecting it to power flashed midnight. Looking out the window, it seemed to be very early in the morning, but it can be tricky to tell this late into the year.

While standing, thinking of what to do, I felt it. The sudden urge told me I had a very, very short amount of time. I rushed to the bathroom door and attempted to rotate the handle, which would move only a tiny amount before stopping. Of all the times for this to happen, it picked what could be the worst. I rapped my hand against the door.

"Jeremy! I need you to open up!" I yelled.

I still heard the water running, followed by a loud sound from Jeremy.

"Come on, dude! I can't wait. Just let me in!" I yelled again. But no response from him.

Knowing how short I was on time, I decided that a break to the hallway was my best option. Maybe it was just thinking in a rush, but usually, hotels have restrooms in the lobby, on the first floor and not the third floor. I rushed out the door running down the hall. The room's heavy door closed with a loud thud and a metallic latching sound. I ran to the elevators and saw nothing but the two elevator doors and the red door to the stairs. I kept running down the hallway further to the small room with an ice machine and a standard vending machine.

With no options, I began to run back down the hallway, and I saw a group of room doors propped open and a single cleaning cart parked in front of them. I barreled my way towards the first open door, but it was too late as I stepped through the door. My legs stopped, and I could not get myself to step any further. In my line of sight was the entrance to the bathroom. I dared not look down and look at what I had just done. I ran out of the room and back down the hallway towards my room.

Once I reached the door, I pulled the handle. It turned, but the door stayed shut. I went to reach for my pocket. Missing my pocket, I brushed my hands against my legs. Stuck outside the room with no key and no phone, I started hitting my hand against the door.

"Jeremy! Let me in!" I yelled.

The door opened slightly, and I could see Jeremy's face looking through the crack. I pushed the door, but the chain lock caught it. I could hear Jeremy giggling as he closed the door and unhooked the chain. Once the door opened, I barged in.

"Dude. We have to leave now!" I said as I grabbed my shoes and shirt.

Jeremy stared at me as I rushed. Looking up at him, I saw he was still wearing nothing with his hands covering himself. He brought one hand up to make an eating motion.

"No time, we can't stay here," I said, throwing him his clothes. I grabbed my phone and tucked it into my shirt pocket. I peeked out the door and down the hall. I saw a blanket and some sheets thrown into the hallway from the farthest room.

Jeremy came up and made a sound behind me. I didn't want to waste time, so I ran toward the elevator. Looking back, I saw Jeremy in tow. Once we got to the elevator, I frantically pressed the down button. The door opened, and we stepped in.

As the door closed, I could hear a female voice yell out. "What the hell!?" The door shut, and the elevator began to descend. Jeremy looked over at me and pointed at my chest, and I nodded back to him.

We reached the ground floor and quickly walked out the door and into Jeremy's car. As soon as we made it to the car, we were gone. I plugged my phone in and checked the clock on Jeremy's car.

"If anyone asks, we left at 7:30," I said, looking at the clock, which read 8:15.

Jeremy began laughing to himself. I let a deep breath out and leaned back into the seat. The trip was almost over, but to say it was uneventful would be a lie. Jeremy looked over to me, held a hand palm up, and shrugged.

"I don't think you want to know," I said to him.

His head quickly turned to look at me, and he nodded in the slowest, most dramatic way he could.

As I tried to tell him what had happened, my phone booted up and was immediately bombarded with missed phone calls. I unlocked it to see who they were from and saw they were all from Matthew. Among the missed calls was a single text.

"Call me ASAP."

CHAPTER 10

"Call me ASAP."

The only new text from Matthew. I knew calling him back was urgent, but at the same time, would I want to know what was happening? Could I go with the stress of knowing something big is happening? What If I'm overthinking it?

I sat my phone on my lap and turned to Jeremy, driving the car down the winding backroads towards home.

"Do you know of anything happening back at the house?" I asked him. He shook his head and continued to look forward. I replied to Matthew, trying to act casual and get a feel for the situation.

"Hey. What's up?"

With only a moment's delay, I received a call from Matthew. Hesitating, I answered and held the phone up to my ear. "Hello?" I said into the phone.

"Lyall? Where are you and Jeremy at?" Matthew asked, sounding a little frantic.

"We are on our way back from Pines. We had a holdup and stayed overnight at-" But I was cut off.

"What's your ETA?" Matthew said.

"Probably half an hour? What's going on?" I asked.

I could hear Matthew whispering in the background. Matthew's voice was muffled, but I could hear Nash talking in the background. I heard the phone shuffle, and Matthew spoke.

"Some stuff is going on. We need you guys back here as soon as you can," He said.

"Is it Barclay?" I asked.

"No," Matthew said. "It's Benji. He's been missing since last night."

"What do you mean missing?" I asked, "Like ran off missing?"

"I wish I knew Lyall," Matthew said. "Meet us at the house."

The call ended, and Jeremy looked over at me. I was unsure if he had heard the conversation or could read my face, but he knew something was up. We continued to drive until we made it back into town. Pulling up to the house, I could see quite a few cars parked on the street. We parked the car and walked into the house. Unlike usual, there were a few more people in the house, some of whom were hybrids.

The first person I ran into was Rylie. After seeing me, who looked surprised, shocked, and angry. She walked up to me and immediately stepped in my way.

"Where have you been? What happened to a quick errand?" She yelled.

"We had something come up, had to stay at a hotel," I said again.

"Sure looks like something came up, Mr. feathercheeks" She said as her expression changed to worry. "I'm glad you guys are alright," She wrapped her arms around me in a hug, and my face pressed into her neck feathers as she squeezed.

"Have you heard anything from Benji?" She said, pulling away from me.

"I haven't. What's going on?" I asked.

Matthew interrupted from the side. "Benji got upset over something's last night while you two were out," Matthew said, sighing. "He walked out, and no one has seen him since."

"Do you think....," I started to ask before stopping.

"We don't know," Matthew said. "Nash and a few others are out looking for him. Some friends volunteered to ask around if anyone had seen him. But nothing so far."

"Does he have any family around?" I asked

"No, after his Mom passed, he had no one," Matthew said, "Technically, Damien was his guardian."

"So he's gotta be somewhere around here, right?"

"That's the hope," Matthew said.

"I guess Jeremy and I will drive around and look," I said.

But then I heard a voice shout from across the room. "They found his shirt at Newberry park!" The voice was coming from a man with white feathers on his chest. He looked oddly familiar, but I could not place him.

"Jeremy! Can I borrow your car?" Matthew shouted. Jeremy nodded and tossed his keys towards Matthew. The keys fell just short, and I bent over to grab them.

"I'll drive," I said, turning to the door.

We, along with several others, walked out and climbed into cars. Matthew got into Jeremy's with me, and Rylie got into the other bird hybrid's car. We started driving towards Newberry park, about two miles down the road. When we arrived, we could see Nash and another man talking.

"Where was he?" Matthew shouted as he exited the car.

"Near the edge of the woods," Nash said, holding a shirt. "Sides are cut out, so I assume it's his"

Matthew took the shirt and looked at it. "Yeah, he was wearing it last night. Find anything else?"

"Just the shirt and a few feathers. Not sure if they are his or a crow's," Nash said. "But just a shirt could be a good sign."

"Let's search around," Matthew said. "Ask some of the folks around if they had seen him."

Matthew and Nash split off and began walking door to door, asking if anyone had seen a feathered kid around. Jeremy followed Rylie down the street to talk to the few people in the park's pavilion. I walked along the park's perimeter edge of the woods and eventually reached a small dirt path between two bushes. I followed the small path about three feet in the path and was met with a chain-link fence. The trail continued following the fence with a line of thick overgrowth covering the view from the park.

Reaching the end of the fence after about fifty feet, the path turned around the fence and downhill to a creek. Trying to keep my footing, I walked down the trail. About halfway down the decline, I felt my foot slip and landed hard on my side. I was sliding down towards the bottom when I reached the small rocks at the bottom.

Standing, I could see wet rocks around the creek's edge. With the creek's low water and slow speed, something had to have disturbed the water and soaked the stones. I walked further down the stream and came across a large hill. The side of the hill was made up of concrete slabs that had been broken up into large chunks and thrown down the hill. The number of empty cans around meant this must be a popular place for drinking and hanging out. The concrete sections hung off the side of the hill with small pieces of rebar hanging out of some slabs.

Walking across the concrete slabs was not easier after the fall I had earlier. I kept walking forward, following the path of the water, walking against the flow. I'm unsure how far it could go back, but I would need to turn around at some point. Reaching the end of the concrete slabs, I decided to turn around and head back, having found nothing. Turning around, I started the trek across the slabs once again, but when I made it about twenty feet, I could see what looked like a person in a black hoodie lying against one of the slabs. I could not see a face, only the black hood, and shirt on their back.

Out of curiosity, if that was a person or just an abandoned garbage bag, I yelled, "Hey!" The figure did not move much, but I could see it move. The coat on them almost looked shiny? Walking closer, I began to get a clearer image of what I was looking at. The hood was black, but along the front side, it was pulled tight and had white peeking out from the chest.

"Have you seen a young man with black feathers around here?" I asked

the figure, "We are desperately trying to find him."

Getting closer, still about fifteen feet away, I saw the coat expand, and once it did, I realized that it was not a coat or hoodie. The *hood* was comprised of black feathers smoothly transitioning down his back, meeting the white feathers of his tail.

"Benji? Is that you?" I said quietly.

The body pushed up from the ground, its head turning to face me. It was Benji's face, but from the chin down was white feathers down to his chest, black feathers reaching his waist. Around his face were the same black feathers wrapping around his head and neck. All of his human hair was replaced with jet black feathers. Around his black eyes were orange and blue flesh forming a circle around each eye. His arms were still as they were, long flight-ready feathers meeting with hands at the ends of his arms. Giving him his awkward arm/wing hybrids.

Benji stared at me with a look like a scared child. His voice cracked on the verge of tears as he spoke. "It got so cold... I couldn't," Benji said, "They just started coming... they wouldn't stop growing," His hands reached for his face.

"It's all going to be alright. Let me call-" I said before being interrupted.

"No," Benji shouted. "I mean, not yet. They can't see me like this," He said, looking down as he attempted to hide his face with his right arm's feathers.

I stopped, reaching for my shirt's pocket to grab my phone. I sat down on the concrete and tried to make myself comfortable. I laid down, my side resting against the flat concrete chunk, looking down slightly at Benji. His eyes were shut, and his body was shaking. The blue eyelid would occasionally open to look at me before closing again.

"Well, I can wait then," I said to Benji, reaching my hand to him. "But you have to tell me what happened to ya."

Benji looked at me irritated before looking at the ground. He stayed quiet and seemed to be on the verge of talking but could not start. The shaking seemed to subside.

"It's between us. I won't tell anyone. I promise," I said to him in a whisper.

"I'm... "Benji started before hesitating. "I can't stand being treated like a child," Benji lifted his head and pulled his arms to his sides. "I get that I am young, but I feel like everyone tries to make every decision for me. I won't get to be an adult, so why bother?"

"I think I know what you mean," I said back "with everything happening these past few weeks, everyone has been a little stressed."

Knowing everything Benji has been through makes it hard even to begin to come up with encouragement. He lost his Mom, followed by his father figure in a short time. Leaving him a kid with no family, not to even begin with his changes on top of it.

"Is it worth the effort?" Benji said

"Is what worth the effort?" I asked

"Look at me. I'm more bird than human now, and I wake up to check if I'm closer, then go to sleep to hope I don't change more," Benji said, "I don't even know where I'll end up! I can't stay here unless I want to become a thing to gawk at in a zoo."

"Benji, we will figure something out before then," I said.

"When? I could go at any second if I wanted to. I can already feel what's next," he said, rubbing his face with his feathered arms. "Before long, I'll be taken away in a box. Never to be seen again."

Do I tell him? Would telling him we found Damien make it better, or would it just upset him more? Even though it wasn't the Damien we knew, we at least know what became of him. But seeing what being around that place did to Jeremy, I don't know if I want to risk it.

"Why did you come here?" I asked, trying to change the subject.

"To the creek?" Benji asked. "I was headed for the park to cool off. But when the changes started."

"And you were cold?"

"It was freezing last night! I started feeling numb, then out of nowhere, I felt super hot and pulled my shirt off. When I realized what was happening, the feathers were already spreading," Benji said, running his hand against his

neck. "I guess it was warmer after that. I found this little space and climbed in. It was warm and quiet. Next thing I knew, it was daytime" He began to pull himself entirely out of the tiny space.

As he climbed out, I could get a better view of him. Covering his body were black and white feathers. His torso still had a human build to it, but it looked almost like he was wearing a wetsuit. He stood up, and I could see his hair was missing and his head covered in a smooth rounded layer of feathers. Had he grown the toucan's large beak, you would not be able to distinguish his head from a bird's.

As he stood in front of me, he pulled his wing-arms up and close to his sides. Seeing him do this reminded me of the later days we had with Damien before he lost his hands. He stood with a look of embarrassment as he tried to keep from making eye contact.

"You weren't the only one last night," I said, chuckling. I held my hand up and rubbed my cheeks. "If only you knew the story," I said quietly.

Benji looked at my face. "When did you change?"

I told Benji about running into the hawk and Jeremy's kingfisher, and I left out the parts with Damien. Benji laughed. Even though it was embarrassing to tell him about the housekeeping, it was great to see his mind off his changes, even if it was only for now. I led that into the call from Matthew and how so many people were looking for him.

"Maybe, we should find the others. I think they would be happy to see you again," I said, "I think you have Nash looking for a parrot!" To which Benji chuckled a bit.

"You think they will be mad?" Benji asked.

We both stretched a bit before climbing down to the creek's edge. We walked the same way out that I walked in. The steep incline gave us some difficulty as my shoes were slick, and Benji seemed to have little help due to the tiny claws digging into the mud. We reached the dirt trail that let out into the park. I'll admit I was nervous to know how everyone would react to his changes.

As I stepped out into the park, I could see Matthew talking on the phone. Once he caught a glimpse of me, he started walking toward me quickly, and he brought the phone down away from his head.

"They may have found some feathers near the bridge, and Nash does not know if they are Benji's or just a crow's," As he finished, Benji stepped out beside me. "Benji? Jesus Christ, kid! We thought you were gone," Matthew shouted as he ran up and wrapped his arms around the toucan.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and sent a text to Nash, Rylie, and Jeremy, letting them know Benji was safe. It wasn't long before Nash's vehicle pulled up, and they pored out the doors.

Rylie walked up and gave a long look at Benji. "The feathers look good on you. Orange 'round the eyes? Looks rad," She said with a wink.

"I'm glad I still have lips. I know you make it work, but I don't know. Have you seen what a toucan looks like?" Benji said, laughing.

Nash called the rest of the search party off. After talking about the changes, everyone seemed to relax a bit. We started piling into the car to head back to the house. As we drove, Nash joked about Benji's new *winter coat*, claiming it was naturally sourced and *'just in season*.

Once we arrived at the house, almost everyone had already left. Still waiting at the house was the fellow with the white feathers on his chest. Nash stopped to talk with him as everyone else walked into the house. In passing, I could hear Nash thanking the man. Not wanting to seem creepy, I kept on walking in.

Matthew told Benji to clean himself up, and Benji immediately walked upstairs. Shortly after, we could hear the shower start. We all sat down on the couches, and even in the late afternoon, I could tell everyone was exhausted already.

"How'd you find him?" Matthew asked.

"I don't know, and I guess I just happened to see him in the woods," I answered.

"I can't believe he is as far as he is," Matthew said. "I mean, I'm the furthest still, but he changed that much in one night?"

"Do you think the cold did it to him?" Nash asked. "Or do you think he..."

"He's too smart to let himself change here, especially with winter coming," Rylie said. "The snow would kill him."

"If he were just a few years older, this wouldn't be a problem," Nash said.

"Older? What would that have helped?" I asked. He may be young, but I can tell that Benji is mature enough to handle himself at this point.

"You didn't hear about last night?" Nash said. "Benji isn't allowed to stay here. He's a minor without a guardian, and Damien was his legal guardian before. Now that he's gone, they want to place Benji with either family or in a home."

"So he's upset because he's being taken?" I asked, "None of us can become his legal guardian?"

"Not while he was mostly human. They argued that he needed to be in a regular home since he wasn't very far along. Now that he is further, it could help us or hurt us," Nash said with a sigh.

"I'm going to argue that it will help us," Matthew said, "No regular strangers will know what is best for him than this group of strangers."

We sat quietly around the table. I looked up to see Rylie's emotionless face staring at me. I broke eye contact and looked down; I could tell she was still looking at me.

"So, what happened to your face?" Rylie asked.

I reached up and felt the feathers on my cheeks. "Just a small change. Nothing too bad," I said. I tried to play it off as nothing, but I knew she would be upset if she knew I went looking for Damien.

"What were you doing in Pines again?" She asked slyly.

I went to answer, but I couldn't for the life of me remember what I had told them before leaving. I tried to think back on what I had said, but the longer I took, the more suspicious it would be.

"We visited a relative," I said confidently.

"And you only had to go because your mom's car broke down?" She asked. Both she and I knew she had caught me in a lie. "You might as well

just tell me what you were doing," She said, sitting back in the chair.

I took a deep breath before starting, "I took Jeremy to Pines to try and find Damien. I mean, we did see him, but yeah," I said, defeated.

"Pines?" Nash asked, sitting up more interested. "As in the bird sanctuary in Pines?"

"Yeah? They have him there with another woodpecker," I said.

"It's funny that he and Darren are together again," Nash chuckled.

"Darren like the-"

"The Osprey! He used to hang out here with us," Nash exclaimed. "He was an odd fellow, but he and Damien were close."

"Darren is the reason we have the house. He initially owned it," Matthew said.

"And you all knew him?" I asked.

"Well, by the time I met him, he was pretty far along," Matthew said. "He was only around a couple of months when I was here."

While we were talking, Jeremy walked down the stairs and into the room. He wore a set of loose boxers in place of pants, and his legs were still covered in blue feathers. He walked past me and took a seat on the couch.

"A little late to the party, are we?" Rylie said to Jeremy. He nodded his head slowly. "So Lyall won't say what happened to his face. What's the story with your legs?" Rylie said jokingly.

Jeremy looked over at me and nodded his head. He looked at Rylie again and shrugged. He kept a relaxed demeanor while doing so.

"I know it had something to do with the sanctuary you guys went to, so either I can guess, or you two can spill it," Rylie said.

Jeremy's eyes went huge. He looked at me and nudged his head toward Rylie, asking if I had told her. I gave a loose shrug which caused Jeremy to shake his head.

Nash laughed. "You two can't keep a secret to save your life, can you?"

Rylie stood up. "Well, if you ain't going to talk, I guess I have other things to get done. Nash, let's go talk to him," Nash stood up and followed Rylie up the stairs. Once the door shut, Matthew leaned in toward me.

"So, how was Damien?" Matthew asked.

"I guess he is fine," I replied. "Not sure what we expected to be honest."

Looking back on the trip, we didn't accomplish anything we set out to find. Or I should say, I set out to find. Jeremy happened to come along, and all I managed to do was further his changes. He didn't seem upset over it, but I can't help but feel bad for him.

"Well, I can probably guess how it went," Matthew said. "I spent so much time doing the same thing you are doing," He leaned back into the seat.

Confused, I asked, "what do you mean?"

"I looked for answers. I had myself convinced I could figure out how it works. I chased down every idea of how the changes ended," He said.

"Did you find anything?" I quickly asked.

"See! You don't even realize you're doing it," Matthew laughed. "All I did was stress myself. Your changes are happening pretty quick, wouldn't you say?"

I looked at myself. Sure, I had some significant visual changes, but it was slowing down. "I've had a few, but the first ones are the biggest right?" I said, unsure.

"Mate, for first changes are usually in week one. You've been at this for over a month," He said quietly. "I think you're stressing yourself too much. I only say it because I did the same thing and spent so much time looking for answers. Hell, I spent two weeks trying to communicate with a raven hybrid, ex-hybrid."

While I didn't want to believe him, the more he spoke, I realized maybe I was doing more harm than good. I chased down a bird to ask it questions, and it sounds crazy now that I look back at it. Damien seemed no different from any other woodpecker, and Darren was... different. Maybe that's how

ospreys are?

"It took the beak before I realized what I was doing," Matthew continued, "Now I've been months without changes. Maybe I would know if I tried harder or worked a little longer. But is it worth knowing if I lose myself to find out?"

"The ravens, they changed you?" I asked quietly, glancing at Jeremy. I could see him staring at me as I asked.

"You are persistent. You know that?" Matthew said. He took a deep breath before continuing. "I think our minds are split, sharing space with the animal's mind. I felt a different part of me when I was around the ravens. I didn't want to stop the changes and wouldn't realize until I snapped out of it."

Thinking back to Jeremy and I's interactions with the hawk and kingfisher. I didn't want to leave the hawk and wanted to stay with it. I imagine Jeremy was not far off. He chattered with her and was engrossed in it. We both fell victim to ourselves without realizing it.

"I think... I felt that yesterday," I said, looking at Jeremy. "Did you feel it?"

Jeremy's eyes darted between Matthew and me. He closed his eyes and gave a very slight nod. His eyes slowly opened but started forward, not looking at Matthew or myself.

"How's the saying go?" Matthew said. "Don't fly too close to the sun? I'll be the first to tell ya. You'll get burned."

Maybe I was pushing it. Perhaps I've been pushing others too? Why do others seem to change faster around me? Kole was doing fine with almost nothing new before I started changing, and Damien had his episodes after I had shown up. Jeremy though, I don't think I can entirely blame myself there.

"Lyall!" I heard Rylie yell from up the stairs. "Can you come up here for a sec?"

I looked at Matthew, wondering if he had any idea. He shrugged and walked to the kitchen, and I stood up and walked toward the stairs. Walking up, I could hear Rylie saying something, but it was muffled. I walked into Benji's room, and on the bed sat Rylie and Benji.

Although I had already seen him quite a bit in his current form, seeing Benji with his new changes is hard. If you had seen a photo of him before today, you would not recognize him now. His hand was rubbing at his lips when he turned to look my way. His eyes were black with blue circles surrounding them. When he looked at you, the many colors were almost distracting.

As I sat down, Rylie got up and started to walk out of the room. I watched as she slowly walked towards the door, closing it quietly behind herself. All I could think of was the last time I was in a situation like this. Alone, in a room with someone deep into changing. Looking back at Benji, he was still staring at me.

"Sorry about today. I know whatever you were doing yesterday was stressful, and coming home to this probably didn't help," Benji said.

To further add to the distraction, every time he would *blink* instead of his eyes closing and opening like mine or any humans. His eyes would be covered by a clear-ish eyelid that, for a split second, covered his eye with a gray membrane. I tried to keep on track, but I felt worse for him with every detail I found.

"You weren't any trouble for Jeremy or me," I said, putting my hand on his shoulder. "We are just glad you're ok," I said, not knowing what would be the right thing to say. I had never been good at situations like these.

"I know, everyone keeps saying that. But I caused a big ruckus, and it all could have been avoided," He continued, "You know what I mean, right?"

"I know, but it's not a big deal. I'm here for you whenever you need me," I said confidently.

"So you won't mind being there when my final change happens?"

CHAPTER 11

Three weeks have passed since Jeremy and I found Damien.

Three weeks since Benji had his incident.

The first snow of the year fell last night. The ground seemed cold enough to keep it from melting on impact. The snow wasn't heavy, leaving only about a half inch on the ground. Temperatures seemed to hover right around twenty eight degrees Fahrenheit, just below freezing.

Growing up in the Midwest, the mild cold and snow never bothered me. You get used to heavier jackets and thicker pants to stay warm. But recently, it hasn't been so easy to keep warm. My legs are weird, and I can't wear jeans for the cold, but they also have not changed enough to insulate themselves. I've been trying to spend as little time outside as possible, but eventually, I have to go out.

The noon sun is reflected heavily by the thin coat of white snow. Longer nights with shorter but brighter days to make up for it. The occasional car drove past, leaving a light trail of smoke behind it. I haven't been outside these doors in three days, and although winter is cold, I can't keep myself secluded.

Almost everyone at the house seems to be handling the cold fine. The only exception is Benji, though. His body isn't built for the winter weather of Ohio. He's been spending quite a bit more time in his bedroom, where his space heater keeps it a warm eighty degrees. Matthew has been trying to keep it reasonable, with the rest of the house sitting at sixty eight degrees.

I have moved into the AA house, at least partially. For several reasons, I think it may help myself and the others. Relieve some stress for me and maybe prolong the cabin fever for everyone else. Jeremy and Rylie packed up the things left in Damians's room. Things that were more personal belongings were packed into large tubs and stored in the basement.

While moving the two tubs of personal belongings, I saw a few more tubs in the basement. Various names are written on the sides of the large plastic containers, and each is filled with random objects of what I assume are other members' belongings. Although it seems dark, they act as a sort of time capsule.

I've been trying to stay optimistic about everything happening, which is much easier said than done. I've brought myself to the conclusion that there is nothing I can do to stop the changes, which is probably not the best outlook, but I haven't had a change in weeks. I started to feel more in control of it, every day becoming more "normal."

Sitting on the couch with Jeremy, the TV quietly played the news. Nothing is too attractive, mostly just little stories from around the state, giving something to fill in the time between ads. Jeremy reached for the remote while looking at me for approval, and I shrugged back to him. He wasted no time when it came to looking for something else to watch.

I felt a vibration from my chest pocket. I reached in and pulled my phone from the pocket. I've begun to wear shirts with pockets or hoodies to get around the no-pants pockets issue. At first, it felt wrong having so much weight tugging on the breast pocket, but with time it became pretty standard. I was looking at the phone and saw a text from Kole in his usual style of speech dictation.

"You see the snow," he said.

"Yeah, how you holding up with it?" I said back.

"Made adjustments much warmer," he said back.

"New clothes?" I asked, wondering if he had somehow gotten custom clothes. Over the past few years, a few companies have begun to make custom-fit shirts and pants to help with either hiding changes or dealing with the weather. Only really being an option for those with slow changes or who have the money for custom-fit clothing, to begin with.

"Natural cover," He said back.

Confused, I replied, "Still planning on coming by?" I had worked it out with Matthew to let Kole come by at some point and meet everyone. Usually, the goal is to keep the group a little more private from non-avian hybrids, but one time shouldn't be an issue. Kole confirmed he would be by later.

The front door swung open a wave of cold air. The door slammed shut as Nash started kicking his shoes off.

"It's too early for this cold crap," He said. "Every year, I swear it's my last year in this cold. But here I am!"

"It's not like it never snows before Thanksgiving," Rylie shouted from the kitchen.

"I guarantee there won't be a lick of snow on Christmas!" Nash yelled jokingly.

"Can't argue with that," Ryle said, laughing.

Nash placed a few bags of groceries on the kitchen counter, and Rylie began putting the contents into their respective cabinets. Nash grabbed an orange can and tossed it towards me. Struggling to catch it, I dropped it on the floor, slowly rolling away. Picking up the can, I could feel it was made of cardboard rather than metal.

"What's this?" I asked, holding the can and reading the label. It was a container of orange-flavored drink mix.

"Tang," Nash said, "They were fresh out of orange juice, so I figured ya'll can manage."

I tossed it back toward him, and he caught it effortlessly and placed it in the cabinet above the sink. He continued to put away the groceries with Rylie, they were talking, but I could not understand what they were saying. Only the occasional laugh or slam of a cabinet door.

I heard a thumping and clicking sound from the main room headed to the kitchen. Benji walked past with his arms held to his side. His feathers puffed out as he walked into the kitchen. With each step, his feet thumped against the hard floor, and his claws clicked. He reached into the refrigerator and

pulled out a small, clear, plastic fruit container. He closed the door and walked out of the kitchen.

"If you get tired of cantelope, I grabbed some other fruits for ya," Nash said, reaching in a bag. He pulled out a round fruit and tossed it towards Benji.

Holding the plastic container, Benji moved his leg as the fruit barely missed him. The fruit rolled across the floor for a few feet and stopped. He leaned down, picked it up, and held the fruit and container against his stomach. He walked to the couch, positioned himself, and sat next to Jeremy.

"Is this a peach?" Benji asked, holding up the fruit. "it's smooth looking."

"I, uh, think it's a mango," Nash said back. "or something like that."

Benji looked at it carefully and took a bite. I could see the feathers on his neck flatten slightly. "It's no peach, but it's not bad," He said, taking another bite.

Recently Benji had begun to take a liking to fruits. However, he seemed to stick to cantaloupe and grapes, the typical make-up of small precut fruit trays. He left plenty of honeydew for everyone else.

Dietary changes are inevitable, but for hybrids like Benji, it's pretty easy to deal with. Jeremy had been eating more fish, but other meats and foods didn't seem to cause any issues. Eating more meat wasn't what worried me, and cutting down or even eliminating non-meat wouldn't be too difficult. The eventual switch to uncooked meat didn't sound too appetizing to me. Rylie's stomach could handle raw meat without getting ill. But she has been sticking to cooked until she isn't able to.

DING

The doorbell rang, and Jeremy started to stand, but I stopped him. "I think that's for me," I said, walking to the door.

Opening the door, I was met with a face that could only be Kole. Before me stood a deer. Although it stood upright on its hind legs, its head was that of a deer with large antlers growing from its head. Kole wore no clothing, but that should have been fruitless, and his body was covered head to hoof with brown and white fur. His arms and legs ending with black hooves.

His voice was coarse as he spoke, "A little different?"

I store at his new appearance. Trying to be quick, I said, "You look, uhh, warm?"

Kole laughed as best as he could. "Nice chops," He said, holding his hoof near my cheek.

I felt the feathers on my cheek lift away from my face before taking a breath and relaxing, bringing them back flat. "Yeah," That was all I could think to say.

"So, do you mind if I step in?" Kole asked, shaking me from my stupor.

"Oh yeah, come in!" Stepping aside for him.

Kole stepped into the house. Each step clicked against the floor. His careful placement of each hoof slowed his walking slightly, and he was careful not to slip.

Benji stared with huge eyes. He was looking down before averting his gaze. "Who's buck, Lyall?" Benji asked.

"Oh, this is Kole. He's an old friend of mine," I said, gesturing to Kole.

"I'm his dear friend, you could say," Kole said.

Nash came out from the kitchen. Once he realized who the deer was, he walked over with a hand out For a shake. "You're the Kole we always hear about. I'm Nash, and this is Jeremy and Benji," Nash said, pointing to the others.

"Nice to meet you all. Lyall talks about your folks a lot," Kole said.

He turned to me, "Lyall, is there somewhere we can talk privately?"

"We can go to my room upstairs," I said.

Kole looked at the stairs before sighing. "Yeah, that works."

I helped him up the stairs to my room. Being still new to the house, my room was pretty plain. A full-size bed, a small dresser, and a desk. My room was L slapped with the bed on the leg opposite the door, and the desk sat on

the same wall as the door. About half the size of your average hotel room. I sat sideways on the desk chair with the backrest under my arm, and Kole took a seat on the bed.

"You don't mind me sitting here, right?" He asked, "You know, no pants and all?"

I didn't think about it but replied, "Nah, it's no big deal."

Kole hunched forward and sighed. "Feels like it's been forever."

"What happened? When did this happen?" I asked, pointing to Kole's body.

"It happened about a week ago. But I.... don't want to talk about it," He said quietly.

"You can tell me. I get it can be embarrassing," I said to the deer man.

"No, it's beyond embarrassing, and it's disgusting. I'm not... I'm not proud of it. It's best for your sake if you don't know," He said, looking at the floor.

What would be that bad that he wouldn't tell me? Kole had been pretty open about the more embarrassing parts of his changes. But this seems to be a super hush.

"Ok, I get it. Suppose you do need to talk about it, though. Just talk to me, and I promise not to think differently of you," I said, rotating slightly in my chair.

Kole grabbed a pillow and held it on his lap. He leaned forward and scratched at his led hoof with his left arm hoof. "So, what's new with you?" He asked.

"Oh, you know, the usual," I said, "Pretty sure I'm banned from a hotel up north, though."

"What happened there?" Kole asked as he slowly sat up.

"Don't know if I can tell ya. Pretty embarrassing, if I'm honest," I said.

Kole closed his eyes and nodded his head. "I'll tell you, just.... not right

now," Kole gave me a serious look.

We sat quietly after that. Kole looked at the floor, unmoving. I wanted to break the silence but could not think of a way that didn't seem forced. I could ask about his weekend, maybe even his mom. While trying to think of what to say, he broke the silence.

"Any plans for the holidays?" Kole asked, looking up at me.

"Like Thanksgiving?" I asked.

"Yeah, like, are you having anyone over? You going anywhere?" Kole questioned.

Meeting with extended family was not something I had been looking forward to. My mom eventually came around to the changes, but I'm not sure how the rest of my family would do when they found out. I know most opinions are pretty negative towards hybrids, and not being open about my changes until now probably will not help. It's not that I've tried to keep it a secret, but with some of the public's thoughts being like they are, you don't want to go shouting from the rooftops.

"I don't know," I said to Kole. "If you mean family-wise, I don't think anyone is aware of this," I gestured to my tail. "Do you have any plans?"

Kole sighed. "No, we are keeping it kind of small this year. Last year seemed... tense if you get what I mean."

"I get ya. We were goin-" I started to say as I was interrupted by my door opening.

Nash's head poked through the doorway, and he turned to look at me from around the door. "Lyall, fella stopped by who I want you to meet," He said, "You can bring Kole too if you want" He turned around and walked off, leaving the door open.

Looking at Kole, he started to get up from the bed. I stood up from the chair and led the two of us out the door. As we descended the stairs, I could hear Kole taking slower, careful steps behind me. The sound of each step clicking against the stairs, one hoof on his arm dragging down the wall, trying to help balance. I tried to slow down without Kole thinking I was slowing down for his sake.

As I rounded the corner at the bottom of the stairs, I saw who Nash was talking about. It was a young man, older than myself, standing and talking to a sitting Benji. The man had white feathers on his neck, reaching down towards his chest. His arms had a peppering of blue feathers with a few sporting black lines running horizontally. He was a hybrid for sure, maybe a parrot of some sort?

"Westin! This is Lyall, our red tail, and his friend Kole," I heard Nash say.

The man turned to look at Nash in the kitchen, then immediately to me. He seemed strangely familiar, but I couldn't quite place where I had seen him. He, too, seemed to have a slightly puzzled look. He walked toward me and extended his hand out to mine.

"Names Westin, but everyone calls me Wes," He said, grabbing my hand and shaking it. "Nash has told me quite a bit about you," He turned to look at Kole and held his hand out. Kole Reached his right arm-hoof toward Wes. Wes rotated his hand around, confused, trying to figure out how to shake hands with a dud with no hands. After a moment of hesitation, he lightly grabbed the hoof like a stick and shook it. Kole smirked as Wes let go of his hoof.

"Well, I uhh," Wes said, looking at Kole, "I assume you don't live here?"

"Not inside. I live in the garage," Kole said back, "They let me inside on Wednesdays,"

Wes looked at Kole in a halfway confused, halfway concerning way. You could tell the gears were moving in his head, trying to decide if Kole was serious. Kole started smiling as best as he could, giving Wes all the necessary information. "Well, that's better than the closet under the stairs," Wes said to Kole.

Wes began taking off the jacket he was wearing. Below it was a light gray t-shirt, and written on the shirt was the word "Constant," in cursive. Still, the only changes visible were the white feathers on his chest. I know I've seen him before but still cannot quite place where.

"So Wes, are you planning on staying here? Or..," I started to say before he jumped in.

"Oh nah, at least not right now. Roommates probably wouldn't like me ditching on the lease," Wes said, "Unless you know someone looking for a

private room, they can only have four months in it, though!" He joked.

"Are any of them, uh, hybrids?" I asked.

"I'm the only one, at least as far as I know," He said, "I'm not sure they all know about my changes yet," He reached up and scratched at his chest. As he did, I could see a line of black feathers running across his chest, churning upwards at each end.

"Can I ask which species you are?" I said to Wes.

He grabbed the collar of his shirt and pulled it down. The fabric strained and stretched until I could see an end to the patch of feathers about halfway down his torso after the black line continued with more white feathers. "Not one hundred percent certain, but she thinks it's Blue Jay. She should have the results from the DNA test, but I haven't gone back yet," He said.

Curious, I asked him, "Who is she? Your doctor?"

"Yeah, Doctor Michael. Leslie Michael, she's down the road a bit near the old cafe."

Without thinking, I replied, "Hey, that's my doctor too" I remember now where I'd seen him before! I ran into him at the doctor's office weeks back and accidentally barged into his room. Unsure if I should share the exact details, I tried to see if he could remember me.

"I think I saw you there a few weeks back at her office," I said slowly.

He looked at me, thinking, "I saw a brown bird last time I was in, but he didn't have your.... chops?" He said, pointing to his cheek.

"It was probably me. These are a bit new to me," I said. It was him for sure, and he didn't seem to remember the exact details of what happened, which I guess is good.

"Yeah, I usually can remember folks. That day was just little stressful, new changes and all," Wes said.

From across the room, I could hear Rylie digging in the bags Nash carried in. "What's this for?" She asked Nash, holding up a box. Because of the glare, I could not read the label clearly, but I could see a round disk with tabs along the edge.

"Oh, I picked it up at the store while I was out earlier," Nash said, "I figured something too new to try, getting tired of Uno being the only game around here."

Benji stood up from the couch. "Let's break it out, I'm bored, and we have a large group here," He walked towards Rylie and took the box from her.

I turned out to be Kole. "You got time?" I asked him.

"As long as it works with these," Kole replied, holding up a hoof.

Eventually, we were able to wrangle almost everyone around the table in front of the couches. I sat on the left-most spot on the couch, and Kole was sitting on the arm of the sofa, and on my other side, Benji and Jeremy. On the floor were Nash, Wes, and Matthew. The game was a small round disk with a button in the middle and small flaps with letters on the outside. You draw a topic card, and everyone around presses a button and says a word beginning with that letter.

Wes had read the instructions and tried to explain it to everyone. Most everyone understood and were ready, but a few, namely Jeremy, seemed confused.

We started with Kole, who drew a card. "Science terms," Kole read aloud. He pressed the button, and a timer began ticking. He pushed the "G" key and said aloud, "Grams."

I pressed the "C" key and shouted "Catalyst," before pressing the center button.

Benji yelled, "P! Photon," Jeremy reached forward and pressed the "P" key, followed by the center button. Jeremy then pressed the "M" key and hesitated. Grabbing the pen and score sheet, he hastily wrote out "Mas" and pressed the button.

We continued around the circle, and fewer letters were left. Either Jeremy or I pressed the button for Benji. Jeremy struggled to spell correctly at the anxious, fast pace, but he began to write out multiple possible words during other people's turns.

The game continued round after round to the point that everyone began

losing track of time. It slowly turned into light-hearted bickering over whether words counted or Jeremy was cheating. Matthew elected to call it quits after Wes gained a significant lead, which turned into a discussion over whether Wes cheated instead of Jeremy.

Wes left after saying his goodbyes and assuring that he did not cheat. Everyone dispersed and left Kole and myself on the couch, and Kole slid down into the far left seat as I slid to the right.

"I really should get heading home," Kole said, shifting around, getting ready to stand. "Thanks for the invite. I have to say this....isn't like my support group."

"If you can call it that," I said jokingly. "I told myself I would never join a frat, but here I am,"

Kole stood up, walked towards the door, and I trailed. He gave a loud thanks to everyone as he opened it. The sky was already dark, and only the most negligible snow covered the ground, just enough to say there was snow. Kole stood on the front porch, the street lights allowing me only to see his outline.

"So you gonna tell me what happened?" I asked one last time.

Kole waited before replying, "Last week, I was...." He stopped briefly and continued, "Early last week was when it happened."

"That's all you can say?" I asked the blob in front of me

I could see the blob move slightly vertically, assuming that was a "yes."

"Kole, if you decide, you need to talk about it. You can speak with me," I almost whispered, "You know that, right?"

"Yeah, " Kole said before turning and walking across the yard to the sidewalk. Under the streetlight, I could only make out his head, looking forward and slightly down as he walked out of the light and down the street.

I closed the door just before Benji yelled, "Letting the cold in," Maybe it was the cold, but I felt pain. An almost instant headache went from the top of my head to the back of my nose. It must be another fun side effect of the cold and my changes. I started walking up the stairs as Nash yelled for me.

"We almost have food done. You want anything in particular?" He yelled, each loud word booming in my head.

"No, I'm headed to bed for a bit. Nasty headache from the cold," I yelled back. Each sound bounced in my head.

I walked up the stairs into my room. Inside was no different from before, the blankets slightly off-kilter from sitting on it. I laid face down on the blankets and turned the lamp off. I closed my eyes, and slowly, the headache melted away.

I climbed out of my bed and out of my tent. The ground outside was slightly damp, having just rained, the sun slowly drying up any puddles. I saw Kole walking out of his tent, still wearing his mismatched shoes. His mom rushed to pack him for camp and accidentally sent him off with two different shoes.

"We are supposed to meet with Mr. Gray at the mess hall," Kole yelled to me. I followed him through the woods path that separated the tents from the mess hall. As we ran, I saw a feather lying on the trail. It was a brownish-orange feather that looked like it belonged to a turkey. I figured the other kids would think it was cool, so I brought it along.

Making it to the hall, We walked in to be greeted by Mr. Gray and a few other scouts at the table. Our little group sat around the table with a small wooden sign reading "Wolf Pack."

"Lyll, what do you have there?" Mr. Gray asked.

I held up the feather to show him, "It's a turkey feather!" I exclaimed.

He gently pulled it from my hand and looked over it. "I don't think this is from a turkey, Lyll," He said, "It looks to be from some kind of hawk," He sat it down on the table, leaving a light red streak as he did. "Oh, it looks to have a bit of blood left on it. We should clean that up before we eat."

Noticing the tiny amount of red left on the wooden table, I looked at my hand. A bright red streak of dried blood marked my hand in a line following the path the feather traveled. The thought of blood made me lightheaded and dizzy, and I closed my eyes to try and get my thoughts off of it.

When they opened, I saw nothing. I was lying flat on my bed, still face down. The pressure caused the feeling in my face to disappear. I reached

blindly for the lamp and eventually found it. Turning it on, I looked at my hand for the blood. But found nothing. Thinking back to what I saw, I put together that it was not just a dream but similar to a scouts camping trip I went to in second grade. Being it was so long ago, what parts happened is a little fuzzy. But I remember the blood and the feather vividly.

I walked out of my room to see the sunlight in the hall. I must have slept through the night by accident. Walking into the bathroom, I started to get my toothbrush ready. As I did, I noticed my lips still had no feeling, unlike the rest of my face. I reached up to press against my upper lip, and the feeling was very subtle. But I could feel something hard just on the other side. Kind of like teeth, but more like a single tooth sticking out further than the others.

I turned to the mirror and saw my lip pressed out ever so slightly. I lifted my lip, and a single black point was in front of my short teeth. I pressed a finger against it from the front, and I could feel the pressure in my skull. Pushing from the bottom led to a pick on my finger.

Starting to worry, I tried to keep breathing. The anxiety causes each breath to be shallower. Forcing myself to take a deep breath, I blew the air from my mouth. I felt a tickle in the back of my throat as I did, along with a slight wheeze. Taking another deep breath, I assured myself everything was going to be OK.

As I let this one out, it seemed something in my throat clicked into place. Air did not exit quite as fast as this time, but a different, much louder sound echoed from my body instead of a slight wheeze.

"KEE-AHHHH"

CHAPTER 12

I jumped as the sound coming from my mouth screeched in the room. My ears rang from the volume of the sound, and I could hear the ringing, which felt like an echo of my voice.

Fear gripped me, frozen, unsure of what to do. I stood in the bathroom alone, staring at myself in the mirror. Spreading my lips as if to look at my teeth, I could see the black pointed growth. My teeth seemed almost shorter than I remembered. Running my tongue against my upper teeth, they felt shorter. I felt the bottom of my mouth; another hard object was in front of my teeth. I assume this was the lower part of the beak.

Beak.

Just thinking about it felt wrong—a beak attached to my body, replacing my mouth. My flexible, omnivorous, fleshy mouth replaced by a rigid, inflexible object built to tear flesh from bone. Realization of what this meant made my heart sink. I know what I need to try next, but I'm struggling to try.

I opened my mouth, took a breath, and attempted to speak.

"He..Hel...Hello," I uttered, "I... am...Lyall. I am a man," As I calmed myself, speaking became easier. Breathing felt different, with every breath, instead of just a simple rise and fall of my chest. I could feel there was more happening inside.

I could feel an urge, an urge to exhale quickly. A slight tickle in my throat felt like it needed it. With little hesitation, I inhaled. I pressed the air out of my lungs with force, hard and quick. The tickle felt like something resisting

the flow. I opened my mouth and let the sound free.

"KEEE-AHHHH!" The screech roared from my chest.

I fell to my knees on the ground and held my hands to my throat. I could feel the screech and vibrations throughout my neck. I now carried two voices, my usual, plain-sounding voice. Plus that of another living being, a predator, a wild animal.

A wave of emotion hit me, and I rolled onto my side, lying on the cold bathroom floor. I cried to myself, as I'm sure most probably would have. One hand on my chest and the other covering my mouth in hopes of keeping the voice inside.

I heard a thumping as someone ran up the stairs. Shortly after, the door attempted to open but was held shut by the lock. It pressed and pulled against its frame, the door handle clicking as someone tried to force it open. The thumping shook the floor.

"You in there?!" Rylies voice yelled from the other side of the door, "Lyall? Are you alright?" She kept pulling at the handle, but it did not budge, "Matt, Jerm, someone get a screwdriver or something!" She shouted.

I wanted to say something, but the fear of making that sound again kept me quiet. Maybe if I did nothing, I would wake up. I always woke up as things got too bad, and it was always just a dream, and everything went back to normal.

I closed my eyes and tried to wake myself up. This isn't real, and I would wake up in my bed at any moment.

The door clicked and swung open, hitting my legs and tail as it did. I yelped in pain, pulling my hand from my face as I did. Only for it to snap back into place. An Allen key shoved into the door handle fell out and bounced on the tile floor. Immediately Rylie and Matthew forced their way into the bathroom.

"Did you fall?" Rylie asked frantically, "Are you hurt?" She knelt next to me, looking me over.

I moved my hand, covering my mouth, "No..," I said slowly, trying to keep the other voice inside. I kept my hand cupped and ready to cover my mouth at any moment.

"Why did you scream? It sounded painful," Rylie asked.

I reached up and pulled my upper lip to reveal the beginnings of a beak. Rylie and Matthew stared at me with some confusion and elation.

"Oh, your beak is coming in. Is that what you are all excited about?" Matthew asked, knocking a finger against his own. Both Matthew and Rylie seemed to let out a sigh.

"No... the sound," I said, trying to think of a way to describe the noise.

Matthew snapped his beak shut a few times, resulting in a light-clicking sound. "Like that kind of sound?" he asked.

"No, like a loud, uh, yell," I said, stammering.

"You yelled, so you screamed?" Matthew said, confused. "Of was you're screaming the sound that spooked you?"

Rylie interjected as I went to speak. "Can you make the sound again?"

I shrugged and tried to prepare myself. I sucked in what felt like more air than possible, then breathed out quickly. Nothing, just a normal whoosh of air from my mouth. Maybe I imagined it, or perhaps I was still dreaming. I sucked in air again to try again, same result, no sounds.

Rylie and Matthew looked puzzled at what I was doing. They helped me stand up on my feet again. Now, all three of us were standing in this little bathroom, and Jeremy and Benji were standing just outside the door, trying to see what was happening. I decided to try one last time. I sucked in a lungful of air and tried to expel it as fast as possible.

Something moved into place, I felt the airflow restrict, and my lungs pressed hard. Out came the dreaded sound, maybe even louder than before. It resonated in my chest and pierced my ears.

"KEEE-AH!"

Both Matthew and Rylie winced at the volume of the screech. I tried to recover my breathing after, but again my lungs didn't feel right. It felt almost as if my lungs expanded twice with each breath. It felt so wrong, but it still seemed to work. They only appeared to be an issue if I thought about

breathing.

"Fuck, I thought Jeremy's was loud," Rylie said, rubbing her ear. "No offense," She said, looking towards the door, and Jeremy was peeking into the doorway.

Matthew said with some extra volume, "Can you still speak too?"

"Yeah," I said quietly. "But it feels like I have something in my throat," I said, holding my neck.

"What if you try-" Mathew started to say before being cut off.

"Let's not," Rylie said. "At least if Mr. Hawk wants to scream, let's move out of this little bathroom. I don't think my ears can take it much more. No offense to you" She looked at me with a wink.

"No, moving sounds amazing," I said quietly as Matthew helped pull me to a standing position.

We moved downstairs and sat at the couch, what seems to be the regular meeting place now. I sat on one of the seats beside, Everyone else on the couch or couch arms. Nash had not come in, nor was Wes there. But the seating made it feel almost like an audience waiting for an act and expecting something great.

"So try saying something," Matthew said, looking intently.

"Something? Hello, what great weather we are having," I said in a half-whisper.

"No, say it in a normal voice. Like I'm talking," Matthew said.

"Hello Matthew, I am talking to you like a normal human being," I said slightly louder than usual. Nothing was different except for the slight tickle in my throat.

"Now scream something at me... Well, shout, er, yell? You know what I mean," Matthew said, looking more and more interested with each test.

"MATTHEW, WHY ARE WE PLAYING TWENTY QUESTIONS?" I yelled at him as loud as I could. My throat was slightly irritated after, but my voice sounded normal to me.

"Weird! You can make your hawk noises but still speak," he said, looking surprised.

"Is that a big deal?" I asked, genuinely confused as he could talk with his beak.

"I have a beak, I can speak, but I can't make raven sounds, right?" Matthew said, nodding his head. "But Jeremy has a beak, can't speak, and can only make fisher sounds. But Darren was like Me. One or the other but not both, until now."

"So you cant make squawks?" I asked Matthew. "Does your throat tickle when you breathe?"

"Nope, no tickles or anything. We all had either voice, but never both," Matthew continued. "You also have a partial beak; ours all came at once."

"So, is that bad?" I asked Matthew, wondering where he was going with this.

"I wouldn't say so. The beak is going to suck, and I won't lie to you there," Rylie said flatly. "But I can't say I've seen it come partially like that."

I felt the sharp beak tip with my tongue. Mouth open enough that the lips were sealed, but I could worm my tongue past my teeth. My teeth were more petite, a possible sign of their near future fate. If I tried to close my teeth, I could feel the two sections of the beak touch—the top part overlapping the bottom slightly. The pressure was more into my skull than my teeth were.

We sat around and discussed the things I would have to do differently in the near future. As Matthew and Jeremy assured me, drinking, eating, and speaking were the main things. Matthew has it in his head that once he loses his natural human voice, he will still be able to speak with the raven's voice. Rylie disagrees, but as he puts it, *only time will tell*.

After the initial excitement wore off, things shifted back to normal. I tried to drink from a can and found it hard to curl my lips around the edge when a beak is pressing my lips out. I took a photo of the new development and sent it to Kole. Maybe I could give him a hard time and blame my change on his secret being withheld.

After a short time, the message was read but never responded to. With how Kole uses his phone, he isn't able to accidentally mark messages as read.

"Kole, you there?" I sent. No response, just a read receipt. Did I maybe upset him with my questions as he was leaving? He left quietly, at least quieter than usual.

"Did I say something off before you left last night?" I sent.

This time I saw the three dots saying he was typing, and they kept disappearing and reappearing. After he spent three minutes writing and stopping, I received a message.

"What time did Kole leave last night?" it read.

Kole left a bit later, I never really checked the clock, but it was dark enough for the street light to be the only light. But why was it referring to Kole in the third person?

"You left just after dark why?" I sent it back.

The same three dots went back and forth. This time it was a good ten minutes of typing. This couldn't be Kole, and all his texting is speech dictation. So who was it?

My phone began ringing.

"Hello?" I said into the phone.

It was Kole's mother, "Lyall? Is that you?" She asked.

"Yeah, is Kole there? I didn't mean to upset him if I did," I said, apologizing to her.

"Lyall," she said, her voice breaking slightly. "Kole didn't come home last night, and his bag was found near the park on Elmwood,"

I was silent.

"Did he say anything unusual to you last night?" She asked me. I could sense the worry in her voice as she spoke.

"He said something about a. Change a few weeks ago, but he wouldn't tell

me what caused it," I said back to her.

She sighed and was quiet for a moment.

"Is everything okay?" I asked her.

"We think he..," she said but stopped, her voice more broken. "We think he had a change last night on his way home."

"What changed? Is he alright? I asked, starting to sound a little frantic.

"We don't know," She started to say.

"Maybe he's at-" I started to say before she interrupted me.

"We think he's gone" Those two words broke her. I could not determine what she said after—a mix of my mind racing and her crying voice.

"Gone where?" I said without thinking.

Everything was quiet. I waited to hear the "but" or even a "wait" from the other line. But the longer I waited, the more I realized there was nothing more to say. I kept thinking that I needed to find him, and he was just lost or hanging out somewhere and dropped his stuff. He's fine, and he has to be.

I spoke into the phone, "Hello? Are you still there?" But there was no response. I tried again, but the same result. I hung up the phone and sat back in my chair. I can't let myself get emotional like this again. I took a deep breath and let out a huge sigh.

The others started to notice something was up. I don't know if it was my expression or even just my silence. Jeremy walked over first and sat down. He looked at me with his head cocked to the side, physically asking, "What's wrong?".

"everything's good," I said shakily. "I'm okay."

Hearing this, Matthew walked over and stood next to me. "Everything is going to be okay, and we are here to help," He said confidently. "My beak was tricky at first, but I was able to adjust."

Jeremy nodded in agreement.

"No, that's...I'm fine," I said before stopping.

I think Matthew thought changing the subject would help. He hesitated, then quickly asked. "What did Kole think of us yesterday? I saw ya talking with him before he left."

I tried to keep calm. I looked at Matthew and tried to answer clearly. "He loved you guys. I think he needed some fun."

Matthew sat down. "Is he going to stop by again soon?"

My head felt light. Dizzy, like I stood up to fast.

"No, he can't," I answered.

Matthew looked at me funny, and I saw his beak move but heard nothing. I needed to sit down, but I looked down and was sitting. I started to lean, and then it faded.

I got up from the chair. The room seemed oddly dim, and no one was to be seen. I walked around the room, trying to navigate in the dim light. The outside sunlight seemed blindingly bright, but none of it made it through the windows. I tried to look out the front door window, but it seemed too bright initially. But upon walking closer, it appeared almost dirty, like something was covering it.

I walked to the front door and opened it. Outside was the woods. It wasn't as crazy bright as it seemed. But it was comforting as if I was supposed to be there. Stepping out into the warm, dry air, I felt the need to run, to take a load off and relax in the woods. Walking out further, the trees seemed so tall. They towered and swayed in the light breeze, leaves rustling and the wood creaking.

"....." I could hear what sounded like someone in the distance. Yelling at something, but I couldn't make out what they were saying. I ignored it and kept walking.

There was no path, just dirt and small plants covering the ground. Each step felt great on my feet, never appreciating the feeling of the land against my talons before. I walked on until reaching the base of a mighty tree. It towered in size over me, and the width seemed like it could have been growing for centuries. I leaned against it as I took a breath. I could not have gone more than 200 feet and was already feeling much better.

I looked to see how far I had gone. But looking backward, I just saw more of the same trees, the same foliage. The house had to be close, and I hadn't been walking that long. I looked around more, the house was near, and I knew it. If only I could have a better view. The ground looked flat all around, so there were no hills to climb. But the trees did have some branches that seemed to have clear views. I'll look from above!

I widened my stance, digging my talons into the dirt, getting myself into position. I could feel my tail fan out and move to help balance, help keep me stable. I lifted my arms from my chest, and my wings unfolded to their colossal span. The light breeze was blowing right into my chest, right into my wings. I bent my legs, and my wings lifted higher, ready for the initial burst to get off the ground.

".....," I heard it again, the voice calling out. I tried to ignore it but heard it again—louder this time.

".....Lyll....." it called out. I wanted to ignore it, but I know that name. I looked behind myself, struggling to see around my wing, and lowered it to get a better view.

"Lyll...."

There it was again, that name.

"Lyll..... snap out of it....."

Lyll? What's Lyll?

"Lyll....wake up....hawk boy."

Hawk boy? I'm a hawk boy. Do they mean me? I lowered my wings, folding them neatly to my side.

They are talking to me. I'm Lyll. I'm not a hawk. I'm a human. I need to get out of here! I opened my mouth to scream for help. When I did, it was the loudest I had ever screamed in my life.

"KEEEE-AHHHHH!"

Screaming, I was lying on the floor, and I stopped to see everyone staring at me. My throat ached, my head hurt, and everyone looked at me in terror.

I stood up, picked up the chair, and took a seat.

"Sorry about that. I felt dizzy and must have fallen over," I said to the group.

Rylie rubbed her ear, and she spoke. "Dude, you just spent ten minutes freaking out and screeching on the floor." she said bluntly. "You do remember that, right?"

"No?" I answered. I attempted to look at my wings but only found arms. My talons appeared to be feet again. "Oh, they weren't real?" I asked, looking again at my arms.

"Where isn't real?" Matthew asked.

"I dreamt I had wings. But I guess I passed out," I said, confused.

"Lyll, you were freaking out just a moment ago and constantly screeching and fighting for any help. Do you not remember any of that?" He asked loudly.

"Was I? I don't remember doing that," I told him, "I was in a forest, and I think I got lost and tried to find my way back. I heard your voice, but I ignored it for some reason."

"You heard me yelling but ignored me?" He said, confused more.

"I heard you, but I didn't know you were talking to me. You were yelling for...," I stopped.

"I was yelling for you, Lyll," He said, concerned.

"Well, it was nothing. I'm fine now, but Kole... he isn't," I said, trying to get back on the previous topic.

Matthew questioned me, "Kole? What could be so important about him right now? You sound like you just had an episode like Dami-"

"Kole's gone," I interrupted, "He never made it home last night, and they found his stuff by the park. I think that's why I passed out. I didn't want to say anything, but we kept talking about him and..."

Matthew sighed. "I'm sorry, Lyll. I didn't know. I'm sure he's safe right

now, though. Nothing else can happen to him right now."

The front door swung open. Nash and Wes walked in as Nash shouted. "Good morning, associates!"

Nash looked to see everyone standing distanced from me. Nash looked at me before saying, "Is your lip alright? You look like you lost a fight with a door or something" He waited for a chuckle from anyone but never heard it.

I pulled my lip back to reveal the tiny start of a beak to him.

"Oh shit. You're growing a beak!" He said, shocked.

"Well, it's not growing right now, thankfully. But it has been a fiasco," I chuckled.

Matthew and Rylie walked over to Nash and began filling him in on what had happened. They were trying to get his opinion on what happened during my little episode. As they talked, I moved to sit alone on the couch. Jeremy and Benji walked off to the bar top and sat.

My teeth started to tingle as I sat, and I may have hit them when I fell off the chair and irritated them. Not a huge deal if I did damage them. I won't be needing them for long. I watched the four of them talk about me. Nash seemed to think it was just a one-time stress-related thing. Matthew is worried about it being an ongoing occurrence.

My head started to ache. Again it felt like something hit my head from the inside. Probably a similar story to the toothache. I would just wait it out, and eventually, the irritation would go away. I closed my eyes to try and ignore everything happening. I thought of being home and relaxing in my actual room before any of this began.

I started to have a gag-like feeling in my throat. I say gag-like because I didn't wretch like I was spitting something up; instead, I opened my mouth wide, and something began to move. Each time it moved, my mouth uncontrollably pushed open, and my head was forcibly pushed forward each time. My face began to ache, and the bones in my skull strained. My eyes watered from the strain as I kept wretching and pushing.

My lips parted slowly. The black growths were pushed out. At first, my lips burned as they were pushed out of the way. My tongue felt around in my mouth for anything. My teeth and gums were gone, and I could only feel the

inside of the beak.

I continued to push harder, the growth pushing out further and further. My lips were now one with the hard growth, and my nose absorbed into the now yellow shell covering my face. The final wave of pushes was so intense I closed my eyes to concentrate everything on it. After what seemed like ages, the sensation stopped. I closed my mouth, expecting to feel my teeth cold with each other, but instead, the two large black shells contacted.

I opened my eyes and could see what had happened. I saw the yellow base leading the sharp, hooked, dark beak between my eyes—a beak built with only one thing in mind, tearing into the raw flesh of my prey.

There was no way around it. From this point, I had the vicious beak of a Red-Tailed Hawk and the ear-piercing screech to match.

CHAPTER 13

By the time the changes stopped, everyone in the room was watching me. All the eyes locked on my face were not a great help, and my eyes could only focus on one person at a time.

"Lyall?" Matthew said quietly.

I opened my mouth to speak but was distracted by the feeling of my mouth hinging open. I experimentally opened and closed my beak a few times. Touching the hard surface with my tongue assured me there was zero give to the rigid material. My eyes always saw a small amount of it in the bottom center of my view, and moving my head around did not affect its position in my eyesight.

"Lyall? Are you feeling alright?" Matthew asked in a more natural volume.

"Yeah, I feel pretty good" I attempted to speak but had difficulty with specific sounds. The lack of lips prevented sounds that were not entirely in the vocal cords. "Why can't I say that?" I asked, getting antsy.

"Relax, it'll come with time," Matthew said as he slowly walked toward me. "Does everything feel fine? Any new thoughts or anything?"

I reached up my hand to my face. Expecting to cover my mouth with my hand, I was surprised to find it blocked. I ran my hands down the length of my beak, down to the hooked tip. Then moving from front to back, passing where my nose once was and back to what was once my cheeks.

"I uhh, need to go," I said, standing up and walking toward the bathroom.

Once inside, I could not bring myself to look in the mirror. Taking a seat on the toilet, I sat and felt the beak some more. It felt alien but oddly correct, as if it were new but also always meant to be there. Reaching up, I grabbed the upper section of the beak and gave it a tug to the side. My whole head moved with it, one piece with my skull. I reached for my phone to take a photo, snapping three images, one straight on, one from the side, and one holding my beak open.

I Selected all three images and started to send them to Kole. Right before sending it, I glanced at the previous messages, and Kole was gone. I closed my phone and sat it on the counter, resting both hands and leaning toward the mirror. This was going to be my most significant adjustment yet.

I can deal with eyes sensitive to the dark, a tail that catches on things, and even the changes to my lower anatomy. But the beak, that's a whole other set of issues. Struggling with speech, the screeching, the apparent mental episode, all of it happening just after losing Kole.

I stood up straight and looked at my reflection. The face in the mirror did not reflect the person I knew just a short while ago. I tried to force a smile, but the hard beak was unmoving. I was permanently locked into a neutral expression, no smiling and no frowning. I turned to exit the bathroom to find the group awkwardly waiting for me just outside. Walking toward them, Nash was the first to speak.

"Everything feeling alright?" Nash asked. "No extra surprises, right?"

"No, just this thing, ay-e a -ew extra -eathers," I tried to answer, struggling with a few sounds.

"Gonna need to work with you on your effs," Matthew said lightly, punching my shoulder. "They won't be perfect, but you can make the right sounds if you know the trick."

"-eah, I'll need that -or thanksgiving," I said, trying to smile. Although I wasn't too much in the mood to talk about it, I knew everyone had the best intentions.

Everyone broke off to do their things. Nash and Rylie decided to make lunch while Matthew tried to work on making "eff" sounds without lips. His method was using this tongue against his beak to mimic the sound. Although completely unnatural to do, he could make an incredibly convincing "eff" I

guess having as much time to practice as he has can help. He seemed excited to teach his little trick, and maybe with time, I could do it as well as he could. Assuming my speech sticks around a while longer.

Lunch was finished, and everyone sat around to eat simple burgers. Trying to eat for the first time was interesting. Trying to use the beak like a regular mouth did not go well, with me finding out you can quickly get stuff stuck inside. The bread was the biggest issue with sticking. Eventually, I just pulled the patty out of the sandwich, nibbling little pieces off as best as possible.

Matthew was adamant that I needed to be seen, worried about my diet and not wanting me to get sick. At first, I argued with him, but after the dream/whatever happened, I thought it might not be a terrible idea. Nash, of course, drove me over to the Doctors office to be seen and dropped me off with instructions to call him when I was checking out.

I walked from the car to the door, bundled up to try and stay as warm as possible. Once inside, I stepped up to the check-in window.

"How can I help you?" The woman behind the glass asked.

"Oh, I need to be seen if -ossible," I said quietly. "My name is Lyall Williams."

"Oh, Lyall, it's been a while since your last visit," She said, typing quickly into his computer. "What has changed since then?" I put my hand on the beak. "Okay, so beak has grown in.... anything else?" She typed continuously while taking glances at me. I shook my head.

I took a seat but was quickly called to the door. I was measured, weighed, and x-rayed. Being let into a room, I waited for the doctor. For as quick as getting into the room was, the silent wait in the room took what seemed like forever. I sat back in the seat and closed my eyes to rest for a moment. The clock in the room was ticking at an exact pattern, slowly waiting.

The door slowly opened, and I quickly sat up. Leslie walked into the room carrying a stack of papers, and she sat on the rolling chair and placed the documents on the counter. She looked up to see my face before writing notes on her computer.

"Lyall, I see your beak came in. How's it treating you?" She said, still typing on her computer.

"As good as it can, I think," I replied.

"When did it appear?" She asked, "Were you sleeping like your previous changes?"

"No, I felt it and was awake," I said.

"Any other new changes?" She said, bringing up the X-rays on her computer as she asked.

"My breathing feels funny, and I had this... screech?" I said, trying to think of the best term.

"Well, your breathing is probably because your lungs are no longer human. As for the sounds, are you able to replicate them?" She said with a slightly confused look.

I was caught on the comment about my lungs. "My lungs changed?" I asked.

"Your air sacs have grown in, bird breath a little differently. But it looks like they came in just fine," She said, "Now, those sounds you talked about."

I started breathing in and out until I got that tickling feeling. Then for wing air out, I screeched yet again. She had a look of shock and surprise. She began typing rapidly into the computer yet again.

"Sorry, I didn't expect it to be that loud," She said. "You can still speak too?"

"Roughly, I think," I said, slightly slurring.

"That's good. Most people lose speech after something like that," She said, looking at the screen again. "It seems you've had quite the changes internally, and both respiratory and digestive systems are more bird than human."

"What does that mean?" I asked her, "Do I need to do anything differently?"

"Possibly not," She said, looking at something on the computer. "Eating will be different at first, and filling your crop can feel like you cannot swallow."

"Crop?" I questioned.

"It's like a pouch before your stomach. Things you are stored there and start digesting," She said, reaching for a drawer behind herself. She pulled out a small piece of paper and handed it to me.

"Digestive adjustments (Falconiformes)" Read the header.

I sat the sheet next to myself, wondering who writes these and how many exist. With a glance at the paper, I saw mentions of crops, pellets, and gizzards. All terms I was not looking forward to. I looked back to Leslie; she was quietly waiting for me to finish. When I didn't say anything, she sighed and closed her computer.

"Lyall, is everything going okay at home?" She asked softly. "Anything you want to talk about?"

Taken off guard by the question, I replied, "What do you mean? Like with my Mom?"

"I'm worried about you, Lyall. Your first change was only a few months ago, and you are already as changed as you are," She said, looking me in the eyes. "Stress and cause the changes to come quicker. Do you have any stresses you need to talk about?"

At first, I thought of saying no, but thinking back to the past few months, My stress levels have been all over. Dropping out of school, Damien leaving, moving out, and now Kole going missing. I'm sure there is a better way to handle it, but at the same time, I didn't think there was much to be done with it.

"Yeah, I've been pretty stressed," I said, unsure if it was a mistake or the right decision.

I spoke with her for the next while about everything going on. I tried to explain my reasoning for everything, but she didn't say much while I spoke. I told her about taking Jeremy to find Damien and Kole's secret from the last night. After I finished my monologue, she waited for any last-minute things I would say before starting.

"Lyall, I worked with Kole up until the end. There is nothing you could have done to stop him. You can only control yourself, and there is nothing

you can do to stop what others do," Leslie said, watching my expressionless face. "You are stressing yourself too much about others, and it's hurting you."

"I know, but what if I did do something different?" I asked.

"Nothing would have stopped Kole. You did everything you could, but you can't let that take away yourself right now," She said.

DING Her phone on the computer desk light up. She glanced at it but ignored it. With the angle of the phone, I could not fully make out what it said.

".....princi.....aliv....." That was all I could make out.

She finished giving the basic info for my changes and reminded me to call if I had any more changes, even if they were small. I checked out with the lady at the front desk and left the building. Standing outside, I sent a message to Nash and waited for him to pick me up.

It was getting into the late fall, and the trees looked barren and dead without their leaves. Halloween passed and was uneventful for the house. Not partaking in the local neighborhood trick or treating, although I'm not sure how many parents would allow their kids around the bird freaks.

Nash arrived and took me home. On the way back, he asked the usual questions about how it went and if they found anything.

"Turns out, I have a beak now. Glad they were able to confirm that, though," I said to Nash.

"Next, you're gonna tell me that your eyes ain't supposed to be orange," He said sarcastically.

We arrived back at the house, now the sky was getting darker, and with it, my eyesight was getting worse, the shorter days of the approaching winter looking less and less appealing every day. As usual, I walked into the house to find everyone doing their own thing. Rylie and Jeremy were in the kitchen, and Matthew and Benji were on the couches talking until I entered.

"Hey there, mister gizzard," Benji said jokingly.

"Is that a compliment or...." I asked.

"I don't know, is it?" Benji said, laughing.

"Do I have one? I think. Do I know what it does? Not a clue," I said, chuckling as best as I could.

Matthew was behind Benji, holding a thumb out and rotating his hand, asking, "yes? no?". I nodded, and he gave a thumbs up before walking toward the kitchen. I sat down on the couch, taking the coat I was wearing off. While it seemed to help with the cold, anything against the feathers was incredibly uncomfortable.

I retrieved the sheet Leslie had given me out of the coat pocket. The paper did not seem to withhold much information, for better or for worse, and it detailed in somewhat gross descriptions how the digestive system of most birds of prey functioned. Raw meat, pellets, and everything I didn't want to hear were all everyday things.

Benji was standing over my shoulder, reading the page. "Hey! I have one of these. It's a little different, diagrams different too."

"Are toucans meat eaters?" I asked Benji.

"Carnivores, you mean?" Benji laughed at my question. "They are omnivores. They eat anything, or I guess I eat anything."

"Fun," I said, continuing to read.

"Does that say pellets? Like owl pellets?" Benji said loudly. "we dissected those in school!"

"Dissected?" I asked, confused.

"Yeah, like picking out the bones and stuff," Benji said. "Did you not do that in school?"

"No. We did like mice and stuff" I couldn't help but feel disgusted about digging through droppings. "So does someone just, like, scrape up the poo?"

"What? No, pellets are regurgitated," Benji said, still chuckling. "Like spat up kind stuff."

I gagged. I couldn't stand it think about it. I quickly sat the paper down and stood up. I quickly walked away as I continued to gag. "We are done

talking about it, Benji," I said. "Not another word!"

I walked over to the kitchen where Rylie and Jeremy were preparing food. As I went to talk, there was a loud snap, and Nash yelled, "Damn it!"

Looking over to the walk-in pantry, Nash was sitting on the floor with a mouse trap snapped on his fingers. He removed it from his hand and reset the trap. He carefully placed it on the ground, careful not to trigger it.

"Can you push it a bit closer to the back?" Rylie asked, "I'd rather not have it snapping at my feet."

"It'll be fine for tonight," Nash said, standing up from the ground. "It'll need to be cleared in the morning. Lyall will take care of it, right buddy?" Nash said as he walked past, patting my back.

"Yeah, sure," I said, pointing my head in his general direction. "Anything I can help with?" I said to Rylie and Jeremy.

"Nah, Jeremy did most of it," Rylie said, looking at the counter. "So blame him if it is terrible," Jeremy gave her a light shove as he started spooning chili in a bowl.

We gathered around the table and ate. Jeremy and Rylie received many compliments for the chili, but oddly when I tried some, it seemed like it had little to no taste. Trying to smell it, I could not tell the difference between it and dirty water. It had to be just me, as everyone else seemed fine.

The beef had some taste to it. However still bland tasting and certainly not how it should be. I tried to force myself to eat but didn't have the desire to. Once everyone finished, I helped Rylie clean up from dinner while everyone else moved into the living room. Rylie noticed me carrying the almost full bowl to the sink.

Quietly she asked, "A little too spicy for you?"

"No, actually kind of the opposite," I said to her as I rinsed the bowls.

"Well, look at you, Mr. Spice," She laughed. "If you need your mouth to burn, just tell him to make yours hotter next time. He can't taste spices, so he guesses anyway."

"I'm sure it was good, and I couldn't taste any of it," I said, joking back.

"Probably still adjusting to it," Rylie said before walking toward the living room. "If you feel peckish, just raid the fridge for something."

I finished wiping the bowls clean and put them in the cabinet. Walking toward the living room, I felt my stomach wanting some kind of food before I left the kitchen. No one was paying attention, so I figured I could take Rylie's advice and grab something from the fridge.

Opening the door, I saw many random prepackaged, single-serving things, and nothing seemed quick or appetizing. After looking over the same few things for the fourth time, I noticed a small tray. The tray had a plastic film over it and some sliced meat. Something about the red color looked interesting, and my eyes kept coming back to it whenever I scanned the fridge.

I reached under the film and pulled a thin strip from the package. About an inch wide, four inches long, and a quarter inch thick. I tried to smell the red ribbon but could only get some slight odor from it, not a foul odor, and honestly, it smelled kind of okay. Without thinking, I held it up and grabbed it with my beak from my hand. Once it was in my mouth, I flipped my head back, assisting it on its way in.

Unlike the dinner, I could taste this. I'm not sure how to describe it, but it tasted great, and eating it was incredibly satisfying. Without thinking, I swallowed it whole. It felt almost like it didn't make it all the way through, like it was just past my neck. I assumed that was fine and reached for another without realizing it. I stopped and thought about what I had just done—eating raw beef from the fridge, a new low for me.

I shut the fridge door and walked toward the living room. My hunger partially satisfied, I walked into the living room. Everyone was sitting around the Tv watching whatever movie they had just started. I sat down next to Jeremy and joined in watching. I tried to pay attention, but my eyes felt heavy as they went. The movie seemed to drag on and on.

At some point, I had fallen asleep. Waking up alone in the living room with all the lights still on. Looking at the clock on the cable box, it read "3:43 am". I laid my head back against the couch, stretching my neck out. I felt the seemingly stuck food move further down. Giving a bit of relief that the issue sorted itself.

But my stomach still ached, not having eaten a good meal in so long. I

pulled myself to my feet. I was again walking toward the kitchen to repeat the same routine of searching the fridge five times over. I opened the door and looked inside again. Unsurprisingly, nothing had changed except a small pot of chili with foil now residing inside. And there sat what my stomach wanted, the small thin strips of beef. I grabbed one piece and picked it up with my beak, swallowing it. The same taste after eating nothing but bland bean water was a godsend.

POP

The metallic sound made me stop mid-reach into the fridge. What followed was a high pitch but quiet sound. I wasn't sure of what could make such a sound, but something about it piqued my curiosity. I followed the sound and found myself in front of the pantry. Opening it, I found the trap Nash had set and, in it, a field mouse. Its head is caught in the trap that failed to do its job. Seeing how it was trapped, I knew it wouldn't survive even if released.

Having grown up in a home with a mouse problem, I had to deal with similar things in the past, and the only humane thing to do would be to put it out of its misery—no reason to let a living thing suffer. As I picked up the trap, it began to flail and yell, and I dropped the trap before getting up and grabbing a bowl of water to drown the poor mouse. I sat back down, not looking forward to the next step but knowing it was the right thing to do.

I picked up the trap, but as I did, the mouse started to move and made me lose my grip on it. Trying to keep from dropping it again, I grabbed it with my other hand, and the mouse managed to get ahold of some skin on my finger and bit. Most surprisingly, I pulled my hand away and smacked the bowl, causing it to spill on the floor. Now I was left with no water, holding this poor suffering animal, and my mind raced to think of a solution to stop it.

Something in my head clicked. The stress of the situation, the pained yelps of the mouse, and the idea or more of an action came into my head, and without a thought, I did it. In one swift motion, I pulled the trap to my face and bit the mouse with my hooked beak. The mouse flinched, then stopped moving. My head racing in realizing what I had done, I froze, not moving an inch. I felt the warmth of the mouse, now entirely dead hanging from my beak. I tried to pull the trap away but instead pulled the trap from the mouse.

Unable to bring myself to open the beak and release the mouse, I felt like bawling. While I accomplished my goal of ending its suffering, I did it with

my own body. And now my body had the instinct to do only one thing. As I fought the urge, I started to feel almost dizzy. It felt like a blink. I saw still on the kitchen floor, mouse trap in hand. I opened my beak, and it was empty. I stood up and left the kitchen without looking around, leaving the presumably dead mouse for someone else to deal with.

I ran to my room, closed the door, and lay on my bed, on my back, looking at the pitch-black ceiling. While I probably left a mess in the kitchen, I needed to escape the situation. Remove the stress and keep the changes at bay.

As I lay down, trying to think of something else, to take my mind off what happened. I felt my upper chest and felt stuff in the space. According to the paper, it was a "crop". As I felt it with my hand, I could feel what I assumed was the second piece of meat move from it into my stomach. But I could feel something else in it.

I knew what it was, and I knew what it meant.

CHAPTER 14

Laying in bed, I tried all manners of positions, trying to find some way to fall asleep. My heart was racing at the thought of what I had just done. I could still feel something in my throat.

I tried my best to get some amount of sleep. Eventually, I turned the lights out and lay on my back, staring at the black void my eyes presented me. There is nothing I wanted more than to try and sleep off what had happened tonight. Maybe it was a combination of the small amount I slept on the couch and the stress, but I felt wired and awake!

I heard a door open, then shut. It was distant, sounding like something downstairs. Shortly after, I heard an upstairs door open, then slam shut. I tried to find my phone lying on the bed, shuffled my arms around, and blindly reached for it. Upon finding the phone, I looked at the time.

"7:45 am"

I had laid in bed for hours, getting no sleep, and the whole house was now waking up. Someone had to find whatever mess I had left behind last night. Water was all over the floor, and dishes were strewn about. It was quiet for a while after, waiting to hear yells or even shouts of my name. But nothing came, just the peaceful silence that filled the night. I gave up on sleeping, climbed out of bed, and stumbled to the light switch. My only guide was the tiny slit of light under the door as I drug my feet slowly, feeling for anything on the ground.

Turning on the light, I could see my image in the mirror. I call it my image, but it didn't feel like myself. I saw a partially feathered monster staring back

at me. Its movement perfectly mimics my own, but none of it seemed real. I spent the next few minutes looking over myself in the mirror. Feathers covered my legs with the classic "red" tail hanging behind me. My face had a beak with a small number of feathers filling some of the space around it, flowing down onto my neck. My eyes were yellow circles that gave no visible expressions when paired with my beak.

What would remain of me after the last changes? Sure, by this time, having been dragging the tail along for as long as I have, I would consider it part of me. What's the difference if it happened over a year versus over a few days? Would I even know I became something different, or would my mind be entirely replaced?

I had to stop myself from thinking this way. Like I was told, all I'm going to do is bring it quicker. Maybe I should look forward to the change and embrace my new self. I stood up, straightening my back while looking in the mirror. Looking at myself, I wanted my thoughts to change, but they still seemed alien. But at the same time, I couldn't fully remember what I looked like before my changes.

I coughed, feeling a tickle in my throat. My crop still felt like it contained something, perhaps even stuck inside. I massaged my crop as best as possible, which led to no change in the feeling. That paper probably talked about what to expect, but the crop, raw meat, and lack of chewing were disgusting and barbaric. But if it was going to happen, I may as well know ahead of time.

I opened the door and began walking downstairs. As I rounded the corner heard Nash and Rylie speaking in the kitchen, Rylie was visibly standing at the counter looking down. As I stepped into the living room, Rylie saw me reaching for the paper.

"There's the party fowl. It looks like you made it upstairs," Rylie said.

I nodded, the tickle in my throat causing me to adjust my neck.

"You make this mess last night?" Nash shouted from the floor.

I was about to confess to what happened before Nash continued. "Mouse set off the trap and somehow got out of it. Left a mess of blood on the ground. We should probably find it before it decomposes and stinks the place up."

"Yeah, it's probably not far then," I said, knowing full well where that

mouse was at this exact moment. I had a very slight gag reflex, which I attributed to disgust. "How bad was the spill?" I asked,

"The water?" Nash asked to which I replied, "Yeah, the water was me. I uh... dropped the bowl in the dark."

"I.... it wasn't terrible. Two towels got most of it up," Nash said with hesitation. "You didn't see this mess last night?" Nash pointed to the brown and red streaks on the ground.

Internally my hand slapped my face. He never mentioned the water. I tried to think of a good reason, but Nash asked again, "Did you?"

Own it.

It WAS you.

OWN IT.

"Yeah, I saw it last night before I went to bed," I said quickly, passing the point of no return. I took a breath and prepped myself for the barrage of questions.

"Oh, ok," Nash said as he kept working on cleaning.

I waited for the questions to flow in from Nash and Rylie, but they never did. Instead, there was just silence for a while. I walked into the kitchen to see what was left and saw a white towel with reddish-brown streaks. It looked worse than I could remember last night, but I couldn't remember too much detail of what I saw, being half awake at the time.

Nash stood up from the ground, the dirty towel in his hand, "I can't wrap my head around how that little mouse made such a mess and still ran off. It should be long dead after this disaster zone."

"More like a rat if you ask me," Rylie said.

"Yeah, a rat. That's what we will go with," Nash said, looking at Rylie.

Ding

I pulled my phone from my shirt pocket, reading the text from my mother.

"you planning on coming to the dinner on Friday?" The text read, "I can cook your favorite :)"

I wanted to put off dinner. I hadn't seen my mother in person for over two weeks and did not want it to seem like I was ignoring her. But at the same time, I'm not super excited for her to see the new changes. I can put it off a little longer, but I don't think I can skip dinner on Friday,

Benji walked into the kitchen, his arms tight to his sides. as he walked in, his head cocked, looking at the various things on the counter. "So you all good?" He said, looking at Rylie and me.

"I'm fine. You doing alright?" She asked Benji.

"Peachy," Benji said, "Maybe a little better if I could find something to eat," He continued looking around the kitchen.

"There's probably a dead rat somewhere around. Unless it's alive and just pissed now," Nash said, throwing his towel in the trash.

"I'm good on rats, and that's probably more Lyall's taste," Benji said, leaving the kitchen.

I tried to chuckle and attempted to think of a comeback. Benji kept walking and left Nash, Rylie, and I alone again. Looking at Rylie, I could tell something was different. She could not stand still, and something about her.... seemed off. She scratched at her chest before looking over at me. She stopped when she saw I was looking.

"You sure you're fine?" I asked.

"Yeah, just getting used to something," She said, reaching to the neck of her shirt. As she scratched, I could see white feathers on the base of her neck.

I nodded in response. "I understand"

I could hear Jeremy and Benji interacting in the living room, and Benji seemed excited about something. Rylie stopped her scratching and Looked into the living room, surprised. "Jeremy?" She said, standing up straight.

I turned to look and saw Benji sitting on one of the recliners, but Jeremy looked different. His difference was easy to see through. And his head was

fully feathered, and its shape resembled that of a bird more than a human. His head turned to look our way; its movement was quick and intentional. His head turned slightly as he stared our way.

His black eyes stared expressionless as he looked at us. His arms were also held to his side. Although his arms still had hands at the ends of them, he held his hands sideways as if that would be the next step in his evolution. His actions as a whole look more "bird like" than anything. Dull blue and white feathers raised and lowered slightly with his breathing.

Rylie walked over to Jeremy just as Matthew was coming down the stairs. Matthew walked past Rylie and Jeremy and greeted Nash and myself.

"Fun morning, eh?" Matthew said, opening one of the cabinets. He stopped to look at Nash, who was still cleaning himself off. "You fist fighting while we were sleeping?" He asked Nash.

"Sure looks like it," Nash said, chuckling. "You decided to sleep in late on such a fine and, well, odd day? You're missing out on all the fun."

"Well, I know what happened with Jerm, and I know what happened to myself. Am I missing anyone?" Matthew said, turning to look at me.

I shrugged in response. As I did, I felt the tickle in my throat, although it felt more like a slight gag this time. Matthew looked at me, unsure, "Ok then," He turned back to the open cabinet, digging through the contents of the cabinet.

I looked at Nash only to find he was already watching me. I opened my beak to talk but quickly closed it as I felt the immediate urge to throw up. I tried to withhold it but still made the motions, even with my beak shut. I brought both hands up to my mouth, err, beak.

"You alright, dude?" Nash said.

I felt something coming up from my crop. Unable to stop it, I ran to the sink and made it just in time. It slowly rose up my throat as it pressed against the inside of my beak. A gray cylindrical object fell from my mouth as I opened my beak. It fell into the sink, and I quickly glanced at it. It was dark in color and looked oddly fuzzy. While it was damp, it held its shape on the bottom of the sink.

"What the..," I said aloud as Nash looked into the sink next to me. He

looked at the object for a moment. Then turning on the sink, the object came apart in the water. Small white bones floated in the water and separated from the gray matter. As the water dissolved the materials, I could see what they were. Fur and bones.

Nash turned his head to the living room before exclaiming, "I found where the rat went!"

Matthew walked over and looked at the sink. "What are you two on about? Oh," He said, getting a look at the bones. "Did you Jupiter that up?"

Nash grabbed my shoulder and gave it a light shake. "You shoulda just said their cooking was bad," Nash said, laughing to himself.

"I didn't... It just kind of happened," I said before Matthew interrupted.

"I'm confused. Did Lyall just spit up bones?" Matthew asked, "Did you eat a rat?"

Rylie walked in and asked, "Lyall, did you eat the rat?"

Anxious, I hesitated to answer. Without thinking, I shouted, " YES! I ate the mouse. No! It was not a rat. No! I did not want to!"

The room fell silent, other than the water in the sink running. All eyes were on me, waiting for my next move.

I walked out of the kitchen and walked upstairs. Laying in my bed with the door shut, I thought about what they said. Maybe this is the new normal for me. Perhaps I am just meant to be a feathered mouse exterminator. Was that all hawk ate? Was that all I would eat? I grabbed my phone and began searching on the internet.

"Hawk diet" I searched.

I found plenty of sites with information on what hawks usually ate. Something felt off about essentially picking my diet from the Aubdon website, though. Picking though, I found the explanation for why I threw up in the kitchen. On top of not being able to chew anything, I also can't digest everything. Leading to expelling "pellets" of inedible material. Disgusted by the ideas of that "thing", I opened a new tab and searched "Raven diet". Followed by "Falcon diet". Finding all similar details to my own.

Ravens seem to be more omnivores, but falcons such as Rylie have a similar diet to hawks. Complete carnivores.

I'm not sure what possessed me to search, but I typed in "Woodpecker diet" and found info on general woodpeckers but not many specifics. So I searched "Ivory woodpecker diet". There were not near as many results, but I opened the first result, which mentioned nuts and fruits on top of insects. Looking more at the page, I saw it had a few linked articles.

"Hope for a once extinct bird" One of the article headlines read.

"Are Ivory's back from the dead?" another said.

I opened the later article, and it had the usual history of the birds going missing, the whole gone extinct thing. But then it talked about two living birds being "discovered". Knowing full well, one of those two was Damien. Further, it spoke of the possibility of reintroducing the species and the typical fluff they usually hyped up about the future. But towards the bottom, I saw a small statement I did not expect.

"With the first clutch having just hatched, we expect to be able to begin the process of expanding the Ivory's numbers soon," It read.

Hatched? Does that make Damien a.... father? A father to a clutch of eggs laid by...

Not wanting to read any more of it, I closed the app and dropped my phone on the bed. I tried taking deep breaths to relax and maybe nap a bit, and I thought that perhaps a little sleep could help.

I heard the door open. The sound of the latch opening startled me upright. Matthew walked in and closed the door behind himself. He grabbed my desk chair and sat on the chair backward.

"Interesting things happened last night, eh?" Matthew said with his head turned. "I wouldn't fret it. Nothing you could do about it."

"I couldn't stop myself. It just kinda... happened" I said to Matthew. "I panicked, and next thing I knew it was done."

Matthew adjusted himself on the chair. "I know, we all know. It wasn't you that did it. The hawk did what it wanted to."

"But I'm the hawk, right?" I asked, "Like physically and mentally, it's me."

Matthew sighed "I couldn't tell ya, but what I'm trying to say is that you couldn't help it. It would be different if you did it on purpose. You know?"

"But what if I did it on purpose? I'm not even sure how it went down last night. It's all fuzzy," I said. "What if I wanted to do it, and I don't remember?"

"Lyall, dude, we both know you didn't mean to do it. Your body wants... different nutrition," Matthew paused, "You got into the beef strips, right? No problem if you did."

Beef. So that's what the slices of meat were; just thinking of them made me crave more. I thought about the textures, rather lack, then my mind wandered. The warm, moving flesh of the fresh.... No. I tried changing my thoughts back to the cold beef.

"Yes? I couldn't do the other stuff. It just seemed.... right?" I said quietly.

"Great, I'll make sure we have stuff like that for you. See how easy that was? You just need to tell us what's going on," Matthew exclaimed, "We are here for each other's help, not some pity party."

Matthew stood up from the chair. He stretched and scratched his tail as he nudged the chair away. "So you can hang up here for a bit, or you can come chill downstairs. Either way, lunch will be ready in a few," He said, walking towards the door. "If you need anything, we've got ya."

I smiled at Matthew as he closed the door behind himself. I continued to lay on the bed for a while. I listened to the ringing of my ears in the dead silence of my room. After what seemed like forever, I got up and walked downstairs. I walked into the living room as everything was getting sat down.

"Hey! I made up a plate for you on the counter," Rylie said as she walked past with a bowl of soup.

I walked into the kitchen to see a small plate with four slices of red meat. Reluctantly I picked up the container and walked toward the living room. I sat at the bar top next to Matthew and Jeremy. I expected stares or even comments about the contents of the plate. But not a word was said or even a glance given.

I waited to see if anyone would stare before picking up one of the strips

and biting it. Pulling at it, a small chunk ripped off and stayed behind in my beak. This time it had been thawed more and was lukewarm. Not seeing any reaction, I went for another bite.

I started chatting with Matthew and Jeremy. At the moment, everything feels the same as before my recent changes. Maybe Matthew said something before I came down, and that's why no one is saying anything. It was nice to chat over lunch with Matthew and Jeremy when everything felt like it was falling apart.

Nash shouted, "I grabbed a few bags of candy in case any kinds come to the door on Halloween. Usually, the neighborhood has it on Saturday, but kinds might still come out on Monday," Nash said, sitting down with a grocery bag. "If they are brave enough to come to our door, give them a handful or something. But I don't want the same thing to happen last year."

"Nash, only two kids came up last year. We could just leave the light off," Rylie said.

"Damien scared the hell out of them when he answered the door. The least we could do was give them something," Nash laughed.

Rylie stood up from the couch and walked toward the kitchen with her empty bowl in hand. "Well, you can answer the door then, Lil red."

As she walked, I noticed that she must have removed her shirt while I was upstairs. Her body, up to her neck, was covered in white and black feathers. I wanted to ask her about it but also thought of the courtesy given to me. No questions. For now, it was probably my best course of action.

"Hey, Lyall," Matthew said. I turned to look at him. "yeah?"

"Hmmm, ok," He said before looking back at the plate in front of him.

"What's up?" I asked him.

"I'll talk to you later about it," Matthew said.

I couldn't help but be a little concerned. I felt my face, and nothing felt different. But as I felt around my head, a finger got very close to my right eye. As it got close, the sight in my right eye suddenly became out of focus partially. When I moved my hand away, it cleared up. Paying more attention to it, I blinked. When I did, it seemed.... different. Instead of a quick moment

of darkness, my vision only slightly blurred, never entirely going dark.

I opened my phone's camera. Looking at myself, I touched a finger next to my eye, and instantly, a cloudy cover slid over my eye. My vision blurred at the same time and cleared once it moved away. I watched as my eyes blinked but never closed. Instead, a membrane slid quickly over them and back almost instantly.

I took a deep breath. *No sense in getting worked up about it.* I locked my phone and turned to Jeremy. His complete kingfisher head turned to look at me as I spoke to him. His head moved in its quick, short movements.

He ignored my changes, and I ignored his.

I tried to converse with him, and he tried to talk back as best as he could using only physical motions. With his head entirely changed, it was even more challenging for him to express emotion. Well, other than his feathers on top of his head moving at times.

As the one-sided conversation ended, he began to preen his arm feathers using his beak. Thinking back to how he looked before this, I couldn't recall, and my mental images of him just seem to be of him with the bird's head, even partially. What did I look like before? What color were my eyes? No matter how hard I try to remember, I can't seem to remember any of the basic details.

I looked up at Jeremy "What color were your eyes?" I asked him.

"err?" He grunted.

Realizing what I had just asked the one person who could not verbally answer, I quickly said, "Nevermind"

I turned to Matthew "Hey quick question"

"Shoot," He said.

"My eyes... did I ever mention what color they were to you?" I asked.

"No, what color were they?" He said.

"I don't remembeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee" I said as everything slurred. I felt like I was falling backward, forward, and backward again. I felt stable after a

few dizzy moments.

I found myself standing in the living room. Talons firmly planted on the ground, wings held tight to my sides. Wondering how I made it inside and what was the quickest way out.

CHAPTER 15

"Hello?" I called out to the empty room. But there was no one called back.

Looking around, it was as though everyone had taken off and left the house. Nothing seemed out of place. Chairs were neatly put away against their respective tables, couches and recliners perfectly placed facing the television.

"Matthew? Rylie?" I yelled out as I walked toward the front door. As I walked on the living room's carpeted floor, my talons could grip the surface without issue. Once I reached the entryway to the front door, the hardwood had much less traction. My foot slipped, and I fell sideways to the ground. Attempting to catch myself, I put my wing out, contacting the floor but only succeeding in rolling myself onto my back.

Looking down to my feet, past the white and brown feathers, the dull yellow scaly limbs desperately grabbed at the air. Using my outstretched wing, I rolled myself onto my belly and back onto my feet. Carefully I approached the door taking slow, cautious steps. I reached for the door handle with my beak, biting it and pulling it down until the door pulled free. Stepping out into the warm sunlight.

Walking out past the porch and down onto the dirt and short grass, I felt sure of my footing again. The grass only extended a short distance before it met a large brush wall—much too tall and thick for me to climb over or through. Swiveling my head, the wall seemed to extend around the house. The deep forest extends past the wall in all areas except directly in front of me. A gap in the trees was just past the wall in front of me. It must lead somewhere.

Looking above the wall, there was a branch, too small and with plenty of open air around it—a perfect vantage point. I unfurled my wings, wide and proud. My tail fanned out as I ducked my head low, lifting my wings high. My legs crouched until the feather of my chest just brushed the ground. I took a deep breath, ready to take off.

In one quick action, I jumped into the air a few inches from the ground. My wings came down quickly, the resistance of the air fighting their movement but pushing down harder until the tips of my wings brushed the dirt. My wings pulled in closer as they raised again before extending out and pushing back toward the ground. I was climbing in the air as I repeated the routine of the rhythmic beats.

Before I knew it, I was on a level with the branch. I stopped beating my wings and held them outstretched, feeling the wind slipping across my body. The branch was getting closer, and I leaned back, outstretching my legs. My talons are open and ready to grab. I slightly pushed as I flared my wings, eyes locked on the grey tree limb. My talons made contact, digging into the bark of the tree. I held my wings out for balance before folding them neatly to my side again.

There was a breeze up that high, approximately fifty feet from the ground below. I could only see grass and trees, not a human in sight. The light breeze rustled some of the feathers on my chest as trees creaked and leafs swayed. I looked back to where I had taken off from. I had the urge to fly forward again, away from the building. As I prepared to jump, a pricking feeling shot up my wing. As if I was stabbed with something, but on closer inspection, it was free of anything unusual.

There was a quiet beeping sound in the distance, and I could not tell which direction it was from. Always sounding like it was to my left, no matter how far I turned my head. I turned back to face the clearing and fell back toward the ground with a slight hop. I opened my wings, and the wind carried me forward. My tail made minor corrections as the breeze bumped me in the air.

I continued flying, only flapping as I got closer to the ground until the trees cleared to an open meadow. Tall grass covered most of the environment, with a few small bushes and a handful of trees taking up the rest. Eyeing one of the trees, I again made my landing. Looking across the meadow, I could see the movement of small creatures in the grass with stellar detail. Although the sun was beginning to set, my vision was losing its edge as the light faded.

I stepped close to the tree trunk, preparing myself to rest for the night.

The black void of the once vast meadow was only interrupted by the moon's round shape. Closing my eyes, I tried to rest as tomorrow I needed to find something. What exactly was I looking for? I could not quite remember, but I knew I was searching for something.

beep *beep* *beep*

That sound was back again. It was slow but consistent and quiet but persistent. Was it following me? I must have traveled at least a mile since I heard it last. It again always sounded like it was from my left. I could not fly from it now as I was blind to the night sky and could only hide and hope it went away. Nervous, I tried to stay still, my eyes as useless open as they were closed.

*beep*beep*beep*

The beeping was now faster, still quiet but gaining speed. I tried to concentrate on where it could be coming from. Once again, I felt the prick on my arm with a slight burning sensation. The volume of the beeping increased but only slightly at first. My heart was racing as the beeping sped up to an incredible speed again—Sounding closer, louder as it approached me.

".....waking.....soon" Said a man's voice as distant as the beeping. I could not hear everything it said.

".....he.....himself" Said a woman's voice to the right, still quiet.

The beeping loudness increased to sound as if it was right next to me. A pressure on my back like I was peeing pressed forward. The branch I was holding disappeared, my talons stuck open and unable to close. My wings stuck to my side as if I was wrapped up. I did the only thing I could do, I opened my beak and let out a screech hoping it would scare whatever had me away.

"KEEEEE-AHHHHH!" I screamed.

The beeping was now the loudest I had ever been, feeling like it was inches from my head. It had me, and I was trapped. I opened my beak and tried again.

"KEEEE-AHHHHH!"

I forced my eyes to open, ready to bite, fight and run from the thing that held me. My eyes were flooded with bright white light. So bright I had to close them to try and block it as my eyes burned from the intensity.

"Lyll?" I heard the man say. He was close, within feet of me.

Lyll? What is Lyll? I have heard that name before.....

"Lyll, honey," the woman's voice echoed. Her voice was familiar, as if I had heard it before.

"Giving him the Prythica" the man said, right before I felt the prick again.

Instantly I felt... different. It felt as though a veil was lifted from my face. At the same time, my eyes finally adjusted. I struggled to focus them on the objects in front of me, and I could tell they were white and grey square tiles. But my eyes didn't seem like they wanted to focus on them.

"Lyll? Can you hear me?" The man said, "Nod if you can"

I nodded my head for the man.

"Do you know where you are?" He asked.

I shook my head. Looking over at him, I could see a man with a darker complexion in a white coat that continued to the ground. Blinking my eyes now felt like two separate actions—a blurry wipe followed by darkness, unlike the uninterrupted blurry wipe before.

"You're currently at the hospital. You've been out for the past few weeks after you fell and hit your head on a table. Things may take a while to get used to. We administered a drug that can take away the instincts from your changes," He continued, "It hasn't been tested in avians, so we are not sure how it would affect you."

Looking to my right, I saw two familiar faces. My mom and Matthew. Although Matthew's eyes were jet black, and his head was slightly shorter than before. My mom's eyes were red, her face swollen as if she had been crying.

"We heard you were being woken up today. So the whole freak show is

waiting for you," Matthew said, "I'll leave you two be, and I'll be in the waiting room" He walked out the door, closing it as he left.

My mom held her arms up in front of her chest. "Is it you?" She asked.

"Yeah, it's me, mom. It's just me," I said as she wrapped her arms around me. My heart rate slowed as I relaxed, and as it did, the beeping slowed as well.

~~~~~

December 12th

After my hug with mom, she sat and told me about everything that had happened. Apparently, I passed out at the bar top, and as I fell from the seat, I hit my head on the glass table behind me, shattering it. After I didn't immediately wake up, Nash called an ambulance, and I was taken to the hospital. Because of the hit and a fracture on my skull, I was placed in a temporary coma until they could make sure my head was fine. While waking up, she said I was screeching and fighting. Having expected the possibility of this, they had strapped me down to the bed before hand. They administered an experimental drug that can sometimes stop instinctual brain activity. This helped pull me from my trance but also has given some odd side effects; my brain no longer uses some of my instincts needed for my changed body, at least until it wears off.

Blinking is now a multi-action process, and my balance is terrible without my tail counteracting. My eyes struggle to focus, and my breathing feels labored. But my mind feels 100% me, not a bird-like thought or action. I hadn't realized how much I acted differently, how much I was different until it was all taken away.

Walking out of my room and into the waiting area, I was met with the entirety of the AA crew. Matthew, Rylie, Nash, Benji, Jeremy, and Westin. Although not everything was the same. Rylie sported a grey beak, not too unlike my own. Jeremy had a dull blue tail, matching the feathers on his face. Nash had red feathers growing on his arm like little hairs. Westin had bright blue feathers covering the back of his head, replacing the little hair he had. Benji had the most apparent change of them all. From the middle of his face was a toucan's enormous orange and black beak.

I slowly walked to the group of chairs where they sat. With my tail no longer moving to assist in balance, I struggled as my body felt like it wanted

to fall forward, and my useless tail only added more mass to fight. Nash saw this, and the whole group stood and ran to my side, quickly seating me at the nearest chairs.

We visited, and everyone shared their new changes. It was fun to hear some of the excitement, but I knew the changes may have been my fault somehow. Everyone spoke of worrying about me, and what had happened the night I fell, and from my experience, I know what stress can do to a hybrid.

We joked about Westin now being the only "lips" club member. Benji now struggled to speak but still had mostly functional vocal chords. Getting through doorways now required some extra planning on his part. Rylie switched to a fully meat-based diet, so I was no longer the only raw meat eater in the house. This made Nash happy as he had two fewer mouths to cook for.

I was to be monitored for the night and would be allowed to leave in the morning. Sometime tomorrow, the instinct inhibitor would wear off, and things should return to how they were after the changes. Everyone had left except my mom, who insisted on staying with me overnight. She laid in the tiny chair in the corner of the room while I attempted to sleep on the bed. The dark of the room left me blind again.

"Llyall?" Mom whispered, "Are you still awake?"

"Yeah, I'm up. Are you awake?" I asked her.

"When did your mouth change?" She asked.

"Two days ago....I mean before I fell," I said, correcting myself.

"Were you afraid to tell me?" She asked quietly. "You can be honest."

I paused before answering, "I didn't know what you would think. I know this has been hard for you."

"next time, just tell me when something happens," She said, "It's not like I will be upset. I just want to know what is going on in your life."

"I know. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner," I said, readjusting my position.

There was a short time of silence before she continued. "It was once to

meet your friends, and that Nash character is a funny guy," She said with a chuckle.

"They are my second family. I don't know what I would do without them," I said.

"Sad to hear about Benji, but he seems happy with the plan. They will take good care of him at Arbour," Mom said.

"Arbour?" I asked.

"Yeah, the rescue that Benji is relocating to is in Arbour. Didn't you know?" She asked.

"No, I didn't know...", I said quietly.

I slept until sunrise. I experienced an ordinary human dream for the first time in months. Until now, it was always some weird dream involving the hawk or just no dreams. This time I dreamt of school, and having forgotten my bag, I snuck out, thinking I would get in less trouble somehow. It was weird, but it was a shift from the usual. The inhibitor wore off, and I was back to feeling my birdy self, for better or worse.

Upon leaving the hospital, I walked outside with my mom to find the ground covered in seven inches of snow. The cold wind was in stark contrast to my hallucination while waking up. Mom drove me to the AA house and, after a few words, left me there. I could tell she was worried, but she tried her best to hide it.

I walked into the house to the excitement of everyone inside. A crude "Welcome Home" sign was on the wall, along with most everyone rushing me as I walked in. I sat on the couch to see the table in front of it now had a roughly cut plywood top. Knowing what I had done to the table, I pretended I didn't notice it.

"How's it feel to be back?" Nash asked as he sat down.

"Fine, I guess I never knew what it was like to be gone," I replied.

"We missed ya, bud," Nash said.

"I missed you guys too," I said when it felt like everything happened just yesterday.

Matthew sat down next to me and put an arm around my shoulder. "So, did anything fun happen while you were out?" He said, "You had some issues waking up, and it seemed like you were fighting something."

"I don't know how to explain it. It was like I was in a different body, in a different world," I said, "It wasn't for long, I guess just long enough to go outside and fly a bit."

"Fly?" Rylie asked.

"Yeah, I had wings and flew from the ground to a branch. Then it got dark, and I woke up," I said, recalling the dream.

"Oh, that's... worrying," Rylie said quietly.

"Maybe," I said back. "What's this I heard about Benji?"

"Oh, his beak? Yeah, that was quite a morning!" Nash said, laughing.

"No, something about him going to Arbour?" I asked. The group got silent, and there were a few worried expressions.

"You heard about that?" Matthew asked, "Yeah, that's in two weeks. You and I should talk about it in a bit."

"Ok, sorry if I wasn't supposed to know," I said to Matthew.

"You're good. It makes telling you a bit easier," He said, half chuckling.

We continued mall talk for a bit until the food was ready for dinner. Everyone sat at the table, each with slightly different foods before them. Matthew, Westin, and Nash were the only ones eating the cooked pork. Rylie and I had pork on our plates, and Jeremy had small, whole fish on his plate. Benji had some small meat squares and chopped fruit on his.

We ate and spoke about the past few days and the craziness of me being put in the hospital. Apparently, they were told to prepare for the worst, and doctors were not the best prepped to deal with a half-human patient. An avian vet was brought in to try and give insight into my body structure. Usually, the hospital would not involve itself in change-related emergencies, but since this was technically blunt force trauma, they accepted me.

After we finished eating our part of the vast menu, Matthew asked to speak with me in private. We walked upstairs as everyone else moved to the living room for a movie. In my room, I sat on the bed, and Matthew grabbed my desk chair, sitting on it backward. I could tell he was dreading the conversation.

"Benji is leaving us on the twenty-ninth. He wanted to have Christmas with the group, but then he is flying south," Matthew said, depressed, "He has some valid reasons, but we found a place in Arbour that would accept him. They are not any sort of a zoo, or somewhere he will be experimented on. Just a massive indoor aviary displaying tropical birds."

"So is he going to stay there until he fully changes?" I asked.

"Well, kind of. He's going down to finish changing," Matthew said reluctantly. "He isn't happy with dealing with the hybrid life. He talked with Rylie and me, and we agree it may be best for him to change on his terms."

"Oh."

"Yeah, it wasn't an easy decision for him. But he got to chat with the director and fell in love with the facility. He is genuinely excited to go down on the twenty-ninth," Matthew said, "Only thing is he is to bring someone with him, to be with him when he finishes. He specifically requested you, that is, if you woke up in time."

Benji wants me to be with him when his changes finish? Why me and not Matthew or Rylie?

"Why me?" I asked Matthew.

"I'm not supposed to tell you, but he said, Damien, and you have been like a father and a brother to him. He wants you to be there; otherwise, he was going alone," Matthew said.

I never knew Benji thought of me like a brother. I try to be there for him; I guess he does not have anyone outside the house. Do I have a choice? If he wants me, then I'll be by his side.

"Ok. I'll go if he thinks I would be best," I said.

"Great, I'll talk to him and get everything scheduled with the rescue. You don't know how much this means to him," Matthew said.

"Yeah, seems like I missed quite a bit around here," I looked at Matthew's eyes.

"A little bit. I can now say you are no longer alone when it comes to the down below," Matthew joked, and he pointed to the feathers covering his lower region. "I get your *short notice* problem now, and three times I've missed making it in time."

I laughed, knowing now someone else had experienced it. His jet-black eyes stared at me as he also began laughing. Maybe even a bit embarrassed having admitted to having accidents. But laughing seems to be one of the best ways of coping with significant change. Maybe Benji has the right idea. He is unable to do much day-to-day on his own. Without hands to manipulate, a beak makes navigating and eating a chore. Would I be better off living fully as a bird? In my dream, it felt so good, like a dream fulfilled almost: flight, freedom, and the absence of the normal day-to-day stress involved in human life.

Maybe it's a sign, or perhaps it's just the hawk wanting to be free.



## CHAPTER 16

The light buzzing of the lamps gave the room a small amount of white noise. It was early morning, and the offices of Dr. Leslie had just opened minutes before as I patiently waited. Although I had no new changes since my last visit, I figured being a month and a half between visits now should be a perfect time.

"Lyll?" The nurse called out to the empty room.

I quickly got up and followed her to the scales. I was weighed and measured all the usual beginning activities for a visit. I was led to a room where I was asked to remove my remaining clothes. This was quick as beyond my shirt, jacket, and shoes, and I was already what you would call naked.

"The doctor will be with you shortly," The nurse said as she closed the door.

I could hear only a few footsteps outside the room, but they moved about the offices. I tried to be patient, but minutes seemed to drag on as I sat alone in the quiet room—all the same posters on the wall, the same pattern on the floor. Everything was still the same as ever, and nothing new to at least read through.

Footsteps seemed to be approaching the door, and with a click, the door swung open. Leslie walked in and sat down a large binder of papers. She opened the first page and read as she began to speak.

"Mr. Williams, you've had an interesting past few weeks. First, you get into a coma, some mild head trauma, and you become the first avian hybrid

to try that inhibitor," She said as she looked up from the papers. "No changes, though?" She asked.

"uhh, none that I could see," I said, looking down at my body.

"I think knocking yourself out may have been a good thing, minus the skull fracture, of course," She said, looking at her papers again. "According to what you had said before, you only passed out when you had one of your hallucinations, right?"

Thinking back, I the dizziness I felt, the fall. I must have been going into one of my episodes. But sitting high caused me to fall hard.

"I think so?" I answered, unsure.

"Well, it's hard to do anything when you are entirely unconscious," She flipped a few pages in, "But once they started to wake you up, your brain lit up like a Christmas tree. Did you have one of your hallucinations then?"

"I had one, and it was vivid. I swore it was real. But night came, and I think I fell out of it?" I said.

Leslie again dug deeper into the binder. "Three doses, all separated. It seemed to have snapped you out of the trance. Did you feel any different after?"

"I felt.... disconnected? Like I was unable to function. I couldn't balance right, my eyes hurt, and my breathing was hard. But I didn't feel him in my head either," I said quietly, trying to remember the odd sensation.

"The inhibitor did that. It blocks most of the instincts caused by the changes. But the flip side is it can also stop some of the most fundamental instincts," She pulled a sheet from her binder pocket and handed it to me. "I can get you into the trial if you want to try it. It has been shown to stop all changes, but it can take a while to get used to the side effects."

It seemed almost too good to be true. Possibly stopping all changes forever, or at least until I stop taking it. But I would have to feel like I did after waking up. The stumbling, the vision, and even blinking was troublesome.

"I want it," I said to Leslie.

It took a few days before the pills arrived. I was given a massive packet of paperwork to fill out. The drug was free, under the condition that I answered any questions about my experience. But once they did arrive, it felt like an early Christmas gift, and by early the day before still counts. The savior pill to save my humanity, or at least what is left of it. I happily took the first pill and would repeat the same each day indefinitely.

The house was getting ready for Christmas Day. Late, but I can't blame them after what I put them through. Benji insisted on having a tree in the house, and Matthew wanted to try and accommodate as well as he could. This led to a small plastic tree being assembled and decorated by Nash and Rylie.

Benji was the most excited of the group about Christmas. Odd for how you would expect someone in his current situation to act. But maybe Matthew was right, and maybe Benji did look forward to the trip. I wanted to talk to Benji about it, but all he would do was thank me for going and ignore my questions.

We attempted to take a Christmas photo as a whole, but without a proper tripod for the camera, the angle was off, and the stack of books prop the camera left a funny pitch. The photo was acceptable, and after almost an hour of trying, we knew continuing was futile. Benji ran off to go to bed, leaving the rest of us alone.

"Merry Christmas!" Westin said, pointing to the clock, which read a quarter past midnight.

"Merry Christmas, I guess," Rylie said.

"Merry Christmas," I said quietly.

Nash turned to look at me, "How's the miracle pill?" He asked.

"Dunno hasn't kicked in yet. Maybe tomorrow?" I said.

"What's the chance you got the sugar pill?" Westin said, "You know the control group?"

"Knowing my luck? One hundred percent," I said, trying to smile.

"Luck? Lyall, we all know why you changed so quickly," Rylie said.

In unison, we both said, "You fight it too much."

"I know, but maybe this can help. You know?" I said, looking for someone to agree with.

"Yeah, sure," Rylie said. "I'm only saying this because I care about you. But you can't rely on that pill to save you."

She was probably right. Maybe I am putting too much faith in it, but If it can do to me now what I did before. It would be well worth the try. I could handle what was coming; it couldn't be worse than the alternative.

Everyone slowly broke off and went to their separate rooms. Westin was staying on the couch instead of driving home, just to drive back in the morning. I lay in bed and closed my eyes, hoping things would improve tomorrow.

"Lyall!" I heard my mom call. "It's time to wake up!"

Opening my eyes, I was in my room. The smell of cooking filled the air as I quickly got up and ran down the stairs. Mom was in the kitchen cooking what looked to be pancakes. The small table was set up for breakfast, and my school bag lay on end, almost ready to fall from the edge.

I sat down and ate the food. My lips got covered in the syrup as I rushed to eat. I tried to wipe with my hand, which I then wiped on my pant leg. The blue jeans have a slight streak down the side now. As I worried Mom would be upset, I tried to hide it.

Getting up stepped out to catch the bus. While standing at the edge of the driveway, I saw something on the ground. Reaching, I picked it up and held it in my hand. What looked like a long leaf was a feather. Holding it in my hand, I looked at the slight rust color and its neat and orderly vane. The school bus honked, scarring me as I jumped.

My eyes flung open, unable to focus at first. The light on my desk gives the room a light glow. I got out of bed and tried to stand. My balance was difficult, but I was able to move forward. Making it to the stairs, I slowly climbed down them. Arms gripped the railing as I tried to stay upright.

Once at the bottom, I heard Benji call out. "About time you woke up!"

Everyone sat on the couches as per usual. I joined in, slowly stumbling over. While trying to sit, I sat on my tail and felt the pain up my back. Standing, I use my hand to guide my tail into the couch forcibly.

"Pill start working?" Matthew asked.

"Yeah, it should get easier, though. I just need to give it time," I said.

"You're not required to take them if you don't want to, right?" Nash asked.

"No, I can stop any time I want to. I'm just required to let them know if I do," I responded.

"Does it still feel the same as before in the hospital?" Rylie asked.

"I don't know," I said, thinking back to the hospital stay, "It felt a little more disorienting then, but that may have also been from waking up."

The disorientation I had this time wasn't quite as bad as before. But it was making things more difficult. The number of things my body did on its own that wasn't human was staggering. Even down to my tail, assisting in balance was a huge change. There is the possibility I will adjust to the changes, but there is no guarantee. The small sacrifice for slower or no future changes was a huge bonus.

"I think we should start cooking if we are going to have dinner early," Matthew said, looking my way. I asked Matthew earlier in the week if we could make our house dinner earlier so I could make it to the family dinner at home. He agreed to try and motivate everyone, which was not always easy at the house.

Matthew, Rylie, and Nash walked into the kitchen, carrying on some joke from earlier, leaving Benji, Jeremy, and myself behind. Wes was supposed to arrive before dinner as he was with family in the morning. Matthew called out from the kitchen for Jeremy, and quick as lightning his head turned to face the doorway.

"Errrh?" Jeremy called.

"Just get in here, mate!" Matthew yelled out, laughing.

Jeremy stood up and walked to the kitchen, grumbling the entire way. I

looked at Benji, who was busy looking at the tree. The flashing lights enamored him, and he was not sure if it was Benji or the toucan who had the easily distracted mind.

"Benji?" I tried to get his attention.

"Yeah? What's up?" He asked.

"Are we going to talk about this week?" I asked the young toucan.

"I dunno. Maybe we can, but it does not really matter, ya know?" He said, still looking at the tree. "We are gonna fly down, probably have an emotional moment, aaaaand I'll be gone."

I can't fault him for probably calling out the proper course of events. But he sounded way too laid back about the situation to me and sounded like he hadn't given up but instead was giving in. But Benji also seemed happy about it.

"And why did you choose me and not, like, Nash?" I questioned.

"I can only take one person—their rules, not mine. And I figured it would be fun to take you to the place," Benji said.

"Fun?" I said, confused.

"Yeah, fun. Maybe not fun? I don't know," Benji said, "It can be sad if we want it to be, I guess. But why get all worked up about it?" Benji turned to face me, swinging his massive beak around.

"I....don't know..., " I said, stumbling, "Because it is sad?"

"I get why you say it's sad. But I'm ready for it! Why delay what's coming anyway? I'm done with it," Benji said seriously.

Benji had no other emotions in his voice. The tone was as if you asked his favorite color, with no sadness, no worry. Just ordinary, Benji.

"I don't know if you see it, but it's going to happen to all of us. Damien seems happy, and I'm not; the only difference is that he let himself finish," Benji said, looking sideways slightly. "I'm just ready to move on to whatever happens. I don't want to fight it anymore. I'm happy we are going there to let myself go."

I couldn't imagine thinking that way. To me, finishing seems like glorified death, and surrendering myself to the hawk always seemed like giving up on living. But maybe it's different when you get to be like Benji.

Benji turned on the TV and started watching the Christmas movie that was playing—still seeming content, happy with his statement. I joined him, and we watched the film until dinner was ready.

Dinner was quiet, with small conversations here and there but nothing too grand. Midway through, Wes arrived and joined in, sitting down and dishing himself a plate, and he brought some discussion with him and helped to lighten the mood. After dinner, everyone started to clean up. It was getting close to the time for my dinner at home, and I said my goodbyes for the night and left out the door.

My cousin Arron was supposed to pick me up from the AA house. We have seen each other for over a year, and outside my mom, he would be the first family member to see me as I am. I stood out in the very light snow waiting for him to arrive. Temperatures are cold enough to catch your breath.

A car pulled around and into the driveway. I approached the door when the windows rolled down, revealing a young man with long blonde hair behind the wheel.

"Yo Lyall! Is this the birdhouse?" He said.

Looking back at the house, I replied, "Yeah, that works," as I opened the passenger door. I sat down in his passenger seat as best as I could with my tail.

"So you look different, facial hair or something?" Arron said, pulling out of the driveway.

"Did my hair up different, too, you notice?" I said, running my hand through the feathers on my neck.

"Wouldn't be so bad if you would dress modestly," Arron joked. "Not everyone has the stuff to show off to the ladies."

"If only you knew," I said quietly.

Arriving at my mom's, many distant relatives greeted me. A mixture of

shock and surprise started every conversation. Ranging from surprised at how far gone I was to others surprised I could speak without lips. It all depends on the person, I guess. I tried to answer as many questions as possible, but it still did not help getting asked the same questions tens of times in a row.

Dinner was uneventful, and I didn't eat anything myself. Afraid of the show I would be putting on trying to eat the cooked food, I was better off just skipping the meal. Lots of side glances and stares from around the table, and I knew that they could not help it. It's not every day you not only see a hybrid but sit at the same table as one. Occasionally someone would break the silence, asking how college was, what my plans were, what career I was trying for. It seemed awkward to keep telling them I had no plans for the future. I could make plans, but I don't think the plan of living outdoors and hunting small animals would sound pleasant.

After dinner, I tried to involve myself more, afraid this could be the last time I see some of my aging relatives and possibly some of the younger ones. Some began to warm up to me. Maybe they realized I was still the little ole Lyall they all knew, just... different looking. My uncle bombarded me with questions, starting each one with his classic "If you don't mind me asking...", which I didn't mind. Just getting to interact with different people and other voices was worth the repetitive questions about me.

My aunt Ashley had been eyeing me, and her look told me she wanted to ask but was too afraid. "Aun-Ash? You look like you have something to say," I said to her, sounding confident with all these simple, basic questions.

"Umm, you are a hybrid, and you said you already had some internal changes," She asked hesitantly, "If you are changed like that, and you...umm, you were too uh," She kept rephrasing the start of the question, everyone now waiting to hear what the seemingly difficult question was. "If you fully change, would you find a partner or something?" She asked, sputtering.

I didn't completely understand what she meant by the question. "I don't think anyone would be open to dating a complete hawk," I said, chuckling a bit. "I think that's pretty frowned upon as well. I couldn't even, Uhm," I said, looking around for young ears, "I couldn't do anything for a person. I don't have the same parts anymore,"

Her husband jumped in, "Ash, I don't think Lyall is all too worried about finding a date. Relationships with other people aren't something a hawk will ever think about."



"Ok, but what about another hawk? Wouldn't that be best then?" She asked.

I had a sinking feeling in my stomach. I couldn't begin to answer the question of what I would do. From going through basic questions to this suddenly being thrown into the air, I couldn't tell if I was embarrassed, confused, or offended. I know she didn't mean any harm, but everyone eagerly awaited my confident response.

"I don't think about that," I said quietly.

The rest of the night carried a slightly different tone. I couldn't help but think that the lingering questions of my future were on everyone's minds. I didn't have it all figured out, but at the same time, if I didn't figure out my future. The hawk would.

My mom drove me back to the AA house, and our drive was quiet. Heat blasted as the car drove through the freezing December air. Reaching the house, my mom stopped me from leaving.

"Ashley didn't mean to surprise you with that question, and she meant all the best," She said.

"I know. I'm not upset. I just never thought about what really was gonna happen. I don't want to worry about it, you know?" I said to her.

I walked into the house and went to bed. Everyone else was already in their rooms for the night, and I may as well turn myself in.

The rest of the week leading up to the trip was hectic. I had only flown on a trip once when I was young. So trying to remember everything I needed for the airport was a crazy, last-minute endeavor. I worked on getting my bag into Nash's car while everyone else talked with Benji.

Benji seemed happy, while the rest of the house had a quiet and depressing vibe. For everyone except myself, today was the last day they saw Benji as he currently is. After everyone said what they needed or wanted to say, we left the house for the airport.

Benji sat back seat while Nash and I sat n the front. There was no talking during the drive, and the drive seemed to drag on. Once we arrived, Nash navigated the car to the departures. Odd looks were given as three hybrids

climbed out of the vehicle, especially when seeing one was uncommon. Nash talked to Benji for a moment before hugging him and sending us off. I feel bad for Nash having to make the trip back to the house alone.

At the airport, I drug my lone bag to the check desk, and Benji was carrying only a small drawstring bag with a few personal belongings. Matching our faces to our IDs led to a slight delay as my photo was not only old but also fully human. After some convincing, they took the bag and went to print our passes.

"I have a round trip for a Lyall Williams and a one-way for Benjamin Vann. Is that correct?" The desk agent asked, looking at us with some disgust in their voice.

"Yeah, that's correct," I said in response.

"Well, your gate is A23, and you will want to use the north security checkpoint," The attendant said, handing me the paper slips.

We walked to the checkpoint and got in line. The line wasn't long, but there were many curious people. No one asked anything, but we did get a bunch of stares as we waited. I started to get used to the eyes, and perhaps it would feel more strange not to be constantly looked at by strangers.

Security gave me a hard time—something about the rule saying that sharp body parts must be bound for safety. My beak was the problem, but not Benji's massive beak. After some slight pushback, I was eventually let through with a warning about future flights.

Boarding the plane was chaotic due to Benji's beak. The long, inflexible object required careful thought before walking down the plane aisle and sitting into seats. Although not meant to, the flight attendants were becoming irritated by the amount of space Benji needed. Benji and I took up three seats together, with Benji's beak crowding my personal space.

The flight was Benji nervous at first, but falling asleep somehow got him through the flight. I spent most of the time with Benji's beak knocking into my head to the rhythm of the turbulence. But being just this one time, I didn't say a word to him, and it's not like he could heal it, to begin with.

Arriving at the final destination, we exited the plane and picked up my bag from the baggage claim. I was calling a taxi to the rescue's address written in my small paper notebook. I tried to take photos of Benji as if it were a

vacation. Even though the photographs are all smiles, the final result didn't seem to call for them.

The Taxi driver arrived, and we drove to the building for the next fifteen minutes. The sign on the building read in large print, "Thomas Kate aviary and rescue. Open to the public, Tuesdays and Thursdays". Dropping us off at the door, we were met with a young man who looked to be of similar age to me.

"Benjamin?" He asked, looking at Benji.

Benji nodded his head. "Are you Austin?"

"It's great to get to see you finally!" Austin said before turning to me, "and you must be... Lyall?"

"You bet. Assume you and Benji have been speaking a bit?" I asked Austin.

"Austin is who organized me staying here," Benji said.

"Oh, alright," I said, not knowing what to say next.

"Benji and I need to handle some things before Benji can enter the aviary. We won't be long if you want to hang out here," Austin said.

"Oh, uhh, sure, I can wait," I said as they walked off and down a hallway.

I waited in the closed lobby for almost an hour before Austin and Benji came back down the hallway. Upon reaching me, Austin held out his hand and dropped a small ring with letters pressed into it. He closed my hand around it and nodded.

Looking at the ring, it was small in size, much too small for a finger. Pressed into the surface was "HA628" with the "HA" gold colored. Austin then walked us up to the door labeled "Aviary."

"I'll wait out here for you, Lyall. But Benji did ask that you go inside with him," Austin said softly.

Benji nodded as he pushed the door open. I followed him into the small man-trap room. The light was red on the next door until the door behind us closed, and the light turned green. The door clicked as it unlocked. Through

the small window, I could see green vegetation inside the room.

"Are you sure about this, Benji? We can still go back if you want to," I whispered to Benji.

Benji answered loudly, "I'm sure. I've been ready for this" he pushed the door open with his shoulder.

Walking into the aviary from the lobby gave me an idea of how huge this place was. The ceilings were massive, and the walls went beyond what I could see due to the trees and brush. The building was roughly the size of a football field but maybe some extra width. The excitement as Benji walked in for the first time was like a kid on Christmas morning. As he looked around, his head bobbed up and down with excitement. As it did, more feathers sprouted from his head and neck.

"Benji! Your head, dude!" I said to him loudly.

He turned to face me, his head looking more toucan-like and less human. "It's ok, Lyall. I want this remember?" He said as his eyes shifted into dark black orbs. "This is where I'm meant to be."

We walked deeper into the aviary, following the gravel path into the small forest. As we walked, we could see various parrots of many colors: blues, reds, and even some bright white birds. Benji looked in amazement at all of the space and other creatures living inside. I heard a flapping sound near my head, and turning to look, a bright blue and yellow parrot had landed on a tree branch within ten ft of me. It preened itself and then adjusted a gold and black band around its leg before taking off again.

"Hey, Benji, the bands, what do they mean?" I said, looking over at him again. This time he was noticeably shorter, maybe six inches shorter?

His head turned sideways with one black eye facing me as he spoke, "It has info on where they came from. Some colors mean different things. I'll have one soon. That way, they know who is the real me," Benji said, lifting his leg toward me.

"Hmmm," I said as Benji brought his foot to rest again.

We sat and listened to the sounds of the birds, standing alone in the aviary. Benji closed his eyes and nodded his head. He opened his eyes again and said proudly. "I'm ready, Lyall."

Having spent as much time with Benji as I have, I know he can sound confident even when he isn't. But this time, there was no doubt he was entirely sure of what would happen. He wrapped his wings around me, his height inches shorter than just moments ago.

"Thanks for coming all this way with me," Benji said, his voice sounding raspier. "You are like the brother I never had"

Not knowing what to say, I patted my hand on the kid's feathered back. More feathers fill out the gaps on his head and face. His head slowly shifted, his neck lengthening as black feathers covered the new openings. Benji made a quiet croaking noise as he lost another three inches in height.

"Glad I could be here for you, Benji," I said before he let go of me. He took a few steps back, his body now looking like a large toucan. His balance shifted as his torso completely changed. His tail flicked, giving his wings a small flap before folding them again.

"Stay out of trouble, yeah?" I said, trying to keep calm.

Benji croaked and gave a brief nod. He looked away and back to the trees as his height shrunk further, now less than four feet tall. At this point, Benji was indiscernible from a Toco Toucan without a size gauge. He stopped at around a foot and a half in height, and he stopped shrinking. The bird looked at me again, his head bobbed, and he gave a little jump. He held his wings out wide, and with a leap and a hard flap, he was in the air.

He went up into a tree, turning again to face me and give another head bob. After, he jumped from the branch and retook flight—this time out of my sight, somewhere into the forest. I could hear him calling out, but eventually, his sounds became one with the mass amounts of sounds from the various birds. Along with the sounds, he was now one with the aviary.

That was the last time I saw Benjamin Vann, the young hybrid toucan.

## CHAPTER 17

I stood alone.

In the middle of the aviary, the sounds of other birds filled the air. No longer able to pick out the sounds from Benji, I listened. While the haphazard mix of bird sounds had no pattern, they did provide a relaxing white noise. I started walking to the exit, unsure if I should stay there or leave. Neither felt right, I wanted to stay with Benji, but I knew there was no reason.

Reaching the door, I stepped into the mantrap. The door behind me latched while the door in front of me was unlatched. Waiting for me on the other side was Austin. Holding in his hand was the drawstring bag Benji had arrived with. He handed me the bag and gave me a nod.

"Benji wants me to give this to you," Austin said, "He wanted to make sure no one had read the letters before, so he asked me to give them to you."

I slung the bag onto my shoulder. "Was this his?" I asked, pulling the small ring from my shirt pocket.

"Kind of. It's the same band he will be getting later. Allows him to be identified as Benji," Austin said, "I assume you'll get yours before you... you know"

"Yeah, I know," I said.

"I thought you might want that as a memento, and I stamped them at the same time even," Austin said. "If you want, we are going to band him in a few. You can stay and join us for that if you would like."

I thought about it but ultimately turned him down. I don't think I could watch them, assumably, man-handle Benji like that. I think Benji is ready to move on, and I need to as well. I thanked him for the offer and called a ride on my phone.

Austin gave me some information as I started to leave. His cell number and a small folder of info about what will happen to Benji. As the car left, the large print sign seemed to hang around in my view. I both wanted it out of my sight and wished it wouldn't at the same time. My flight wasn't until tomorrow, but I didn't want to be here any longer than needed. Unfamiliar places, alone, like I am, seemed uncomfortable and awkward.

Arriving at the airport, I went to the desk for the airline. They were able to switch my flight and one leaving that night, and I would be home not terribly late.

Security was less trouble, no concerns over my face or any stops. Walking down the path to my gate, everything seemed slowed. My head felt like a rush, and I thought I might fall. In the back of my head, I saw thoughts, saw visions of myself doing things—eating, hunting, flying. The thoughts felt weird but correct like I wanted to do what the thoughts were suggesting. I started to relax, started to let myself go...

The realization hit me like a ton of bricks. I shouted aloud, "WOAH! NO, NO, NO!" Pulling my head up to look at the ceiling. I missed my dose, and the inhibitor was wearing off. Walked quickly to the nearest restroom. Reaching it, I dug through my bag, looking for the bottle. Of all places I did not want to have an episode, the airport was on top of the list.

Pulling a pill from the bottle, I took it. Nothing immediate happened, but I continued my walk. The further I went, the less oriented I felt and the more disconnected from my body. My walking felt natural when I was off the drug, and now it was back to my usual stumbling, fighting to keep upright. This was the way it had to be, the only way I could be me.

The flight home was mostly uneventful. No one wanted to sit next to me, which at first felt bad, but halfway through the flight, I realized all around me were empty seats. Plenty of personal space, I guess? When I arrived at the airport, I waited before exiting the plane and letting everyone off before I attempted to leave. My head ached, my tail was sore from the constant pressure, and my legs were asleep.

I went to baggage claim and awaited my checked bag for twenty minutes. Only a few bags remained, but mine never arrived. I realized I had never brought the bag with me from the aviary, and all I had brought back was Benji's small drawstring bag I had on my back. I left defeated and called for a taxi at the pickup.

Arriving at the house, I stepped in without a knock. I was exhausted from all the traveling, and I had been gone less than twenty four hours, but it felt like I had been moving for days. I immediately walked upstairs and into my room, closing the door behind me.

"Lyal? You can back.... already?" Nash asked through the door.

"yeah. I just wanted to be home," I said, tired, lying in bed. The door swung open, and Nash slowly stepped in.

"Did everything go fine with Benji?" Nash said quietly, standing at the side of my bed.

"Yeah, he's happy. They're all happy," I said, reaching into my pocket and removing the metal ring. "The guy there gave me this, and I figured you may want to put it up."

Nash carefully grabbed the ring from my hand. "Is this his band?" Nash asked.

"It's the same as the one he was getting, and he didn't have it when I left," I said, still lying back in the bed. I sat up and reached for the drawstring bag, removing a bundle of envelopes. "Benji wanted to ensure everyone got one of these, and I am supposed to deliver them," I said, handing Nash the stack of letters.

"Ah, stork duty?" Nash said with a light chuckle. I couldn't help but smile at the corny joke. Nash shuffled through the letters before removing one from the stack and handing it to me. "This one for you."

I looked at the envelope. In rough, barely legible writing was "Lyal" although it was visually closer to "lyol," I started to open the envelope before Nash spoke. "Seems the only one who doesn't have one is Jeremy?" Nash said, confused. He left the room, still shuffling through the letters as I continued opening mine.



The writing inside was much cleaner and legible compared to the outside.

"Lyll,

I'm writing this assuming you still flew out with me, if you did thank you for coming in along and being with me for my journey the past few months. I know you have been struggling with it all, and I wish I could have helped. I am ready for my next step. Having to have others do everything for me, just so I could keep sitting around doing nothing, does not feel right to me. I would rather be like Damien and take this head-on instead of fighting it.

Maybe we will meet again, but I wont forget you guys.

-Benji"

I closed the letter and sat it on the bedside table. I should have stayed, I should have watched Benji get banded, and I should have stayed with him for a while. Instead, I rushed out of there because I couldn't face it. I lay in bed and tried to get some sleep. I had a long day; starting tomorrow, being tired would not help.

\*BEEP BEEP BEEP\*

My phone's alarm went off as I quickly sat up and scrambled to turn it off. I tried to stand but felt incredibly disoriented, stumbling and falling to my knees. My tail was useless in its now important role of balance. My eyes require two steps to blink, and my feathers are not adjusting on their own. I walked downstairs and into the living room, where I saw Nash, Matthew, Jeremy, and Westin. I sat down in the recliner and tried to join them.

"Morning," I said to the group. Westin looked over to me and responded, "How's the first day back?"

"Hard, I dunno how I feel about it," I said to Westin. "he's happy, he's done, but like, is it Benji who is happy?"

Nash sighed. "Lyll, can I be honest with you?" he asked. "This was going to happen no matter what. Benji just got tired of waiting for it to be forced on him. The same as Damien and Darren."

"I know, I know," I said before Nash continued, "You cent go thinking that way, that it's your fault," He said.

"Maybe that is the way to go..." I said quietly. I tried to stand but lost my

balance and fell. Pulling myself back onto my feet, I stumbled into the kitchen—the unnatural feeling of my body fighting the entire way. Pulling meat from the fridge, I tried to get my body to eat it. But my human mind fought it.

Over the next month, I took the inhibitor daily. Never allowing myself to skip a dose, I tried to get used to the off feelings it gave me, but they were better than changes, right? The new year was wrought with fun challenges.

Westin moved in late January, taking what was Benji's room. It seemed wrong for someone else to use it, but saving it was pointless and a waste. Getting to know Westin more, he seemed alright. He never talked much except when you found one of the few topics he was passionate about. Then it seemed like you couldn't stop him.

February started with a massive snowstorm that killed any hope of leaving the house. Nowhere was open for the days it took for the snow to calm, leaving everyone a little couped up.

The power was in and out on the third day of being snowed in, and it could be on for an hour and off for four immediately after. Benji would have hated the cold; the temps would drop to the point you could start to see your breath. The power would come on long enough to get a bit of heat before dropping out again.

I had not taken the inhibitor for two days; what I had of it was gone, and the postal service was delayed for the weather. The disconnected feeling was gone, and not everything felt... better? I could keep my balance again, my eyes seemed to work without any thought, and eating felt normal again. Everything was going right until the cold set in again.

Everyone who could still wear coats wore and even slept in them—those who couldn't stayed wrapped in blankets whenever possible. We had fun with the time, from card games to storytelling, and we found many ways to keep the time passing. When sleeping, we kept a heater in each of our rooms so that whenever power did come back, it would give some extra warmth.

I woke up at 2 am on the fourth day of the storm. The power was currently on, and the heater was running. Feeling thirsty, I carefully left my room, being quick to shut my door in an attempt to keep the heat inside. Once in the hall, I could see my breath in the air as I quickly walked down the stairs and into the kitchen. Grabbing a cup of water, I walked toward the stairs. While walking across the living room, the lights went out.

I tried to keep walking to the stairs, but my vision was pure darkness. I stumbled through the room, trying to find my way up the stairs. Taking my time, I slowly climbed the stairs out of fear of falling. Although my balance was restored, my vision still left me blind. Once I reached my room, I swung the door open and felt my way into the room. I reached for the door but could not find the handle in the darkness. I sat the glass of water down on the bedside table. Giving me two hands to search with.

Closing the door, I turned around and reached for the bed. Finding its edge, I went for the glass on the table, only to find it was not there; the table as a whole was empty. Feeling the bed, I found out why as I ran my hand across the wet blankets and bedsheets. Angry, I removed the comforter and sheets, leaving me with a damp bed and a thin blanket. I made do, getting in bed and trying to sleep the night away. The single blanket gave almost no help from the cold.

I held my eyes shut, shivering and wishing the night would end so I could at least see what was going on. As I shook, I was now half awake when I felt myself getting... warmer? A slow-spreading warmth ran across most of my body, making falling asleep a breeze. The best sleep I have had in days.

I woke up to the room acting like a sauna. The lights were on, and the heater clearly had been running for a while. I sat up and looked around the room, the sun was shining under the doorsill, and the heater glowed orange. I pulled the blanket off myself with a single hand. In a swift motion, I caught a glimpse of brown from my arm. Pulling my arm back to look at it, I was shocked to find I could see no skin. Instead, my entire arm was covered in feathers flowing down to the back of my hand.

Quickly I followed the path of the feathers up my arm, where they met with my torso. I unbuttoned my shirt only to find everything, from my arms to my knees, covered in feathers of various colors. Looking in the mirror, even my back was fully covered in feathers. Even the little skin on my legs felt rough and more rigid than before. I walked into the hallway to find it, too, was warm. No longer could I see my breath. Walking down the stairs, I heard Matthew yell out. "Powers back on! Should stay on now that the storm passed."

"I think it was a few hours too late," I said.

"I don't think they should have cycled it as they did, but at least the lines didn't freeze," Matthew said from the other side of the room. He turned

around and looked at me, his eyes darting up and down.

"I guess I know why I was warm last night," I said, half joking. I couldn't help but try to make a small joke. Otherwise, I would probably be freaking out.

"Did you... have an episode or..." Matthew asked.

"Nothing, at least I don't think I did. But I was freezing last night and felt very warm..." I said, wondering if I had unknowingly forced the change.

Nash and Rylie made no mention of the change. The shocked looks said enough, but both had been critical of the drug that may have prevented it. That or they didn't want to point it out. Westin was quick to notice and say something. He stated that I "Looked mean as hell," which I think was a compliment, but I didn't want to look any different.

The next few days were spent trying to get everything back in order from the freeze and finish getting Westin moved in. Benji's stuff had been moved to the basement in totes next to Damien's. Again not being easy storing his stuff with all the rest of the totes. But at least this time, there was more time to prepare. The new pack of inhibitors came, but after experiencing a week without them, I don't know if I want to retake them. Thinking maybe having the changes was worth it compared to the difficulties they caused. Perhaps I'm just too far gone for them to work happily. I left the box still sealed in the kitchen, not wanting to deal with the weird unreal feeling they gave me.

"Westin!" Nash yelled from the kitchen. "We are all waiting on you to get down here!"

Matthew, Rylie, Jeremy, and Nash sat down at the table. I was sitting at the far end, trying to straighten the feathers on my shoulder. Feathers had their positives, like never having laundry, but they had their downfalls too. Keeping them in order was a job all its own, and the things are sensitive to any force. Which explains all the preening birds do.

Westin came marching down the stairs, his button-down shirt lopsided with one side shifted to the wrong buttons. Westin hated the feeling of the shirt against his chest feathers but was too embarrassed to walk around shirtless. I haven't worn clothes since my last change, freeing if I do say so. It seems like one of the things that seem normal to do without. Nash tells me that my mind is slowly allowing the hawk's instinct, but I think it's more reasons not to wear anything.

We sat and ate our meal as usual. I couldn't tell you the last time I ate something properly cooked, but the raw foods were more flavorful. Rylie continued to eat raw with me, leaving three fewer mouths to prepare for. Rylie and I got beef strips, and Jeremy ate his small fish.

"I swear you guys just don't like my cooking," Nash laughed. "Wes, you'll tell me if it's bad, right? If you start eating crickets, I will have to assume."

Westin looked slightly confused. "Crickets? Why would I eat those?"

"Well, you know..." Nash said. "Isn't that what jays eat?"

"I have no idea. Nor do I want to know!" Westin said, closing his eyes. "I'll cross that bridge when it comes. But I would rather that over the raw crap they are eating."

"Ask Matthew what he can eat. Fresh raw sounds great compared to his roadkill," Rylie said.

"I haven't eaten roadkill, nor will I ever eat it," Matthew shouted.

"We'll have to see, won't we" Rylie winked at Matthew.

Matthew shook his head. "Nah, I'm good."

"Lyll's the only one who has eaten properly, right rat catcher?" Rylie said, looking at me.

I shook my head. "As long as I have hands, I'm not doing that again. I don't want to eat this stuff in the first place," I said, holding up my plate.

"Hands, eh? Specific choice, but I would have said feet," Rylie joked as she kicked my leg under the table.

"Ouch!" I shouted.

We finished dinner, and I moved to the living room with Westin. The more time I spent and got to know him, the more he reminded me of myself. Although he seemed to be able to control his changes better than I did, he still seemed to have trouble worrying about the changes.

"How's the feather body suit doing you?" Westin asked.

"Fine, I think. It's weird getting used to feeling them move. It's like hairs all over," I said to him.

"It's better than other things that could have changed. I'm not looking forward to the face. You seem to be getting on fine with yours, though," Westin said.

"It's not as terrible as it was. When I was taking the pills, it felt weird and stiff. But now that I'm off them, it feels normal," I said, shrugging. "Everything feels better now, and it feels like everything is right."

"Once I get to that point, I'll probably call it quits. I think Benji was right. Why make it difficult on yourself," Westin said quietly.

As I tried to reply, something felt like it clicked in my head. A burning sensation went from the back of my head and down my arms to my hands, like a severe cramp but also hot. Holding one of my hands up, my fingers were frantically shaking from the pain. My arm looked as if it was slightly slimmer as longer feathers sprouted downward from my arm. My fingers straightened and held together, straight out. My hand grew feathers that quickly covered any bare skin. I knew now that there were no longer fingers at the end of my arm. My arm as a whole seemed to extend, the blanket of feathers filling the space below my arm, forming into a wing. I held both arms out as the surging was most manageable with them fully extended.

I opened my mouth to scream, both in fear and some pain. But all that came out was the screech, getting the attention of everyone as I stood in front of the couch, changing. This was different from all my previous changes, and I felt entirely out of control of this one. Nothing I did affect the wings growing from me. The feeling of being disconnected from the change filled my mind, disconnected similar to how I had felt on the inhibitor.

As the change began to slow, I closed my eyes. I knew what had changed, I didn't want to believe it, but eventually, I would see it. I tried to flex my fingers only to find they would not move. As I brought my arms close to my body, my wrist bent in a new direction. I could feel every feather sliding and moving as I folded my arms.

I tried to think about reversing the change. But trying to imagine my arms, my mind was hazy. I could only imagine large, clumsy wings in place of my arms and hands, and I could only think of it as a bad dream. Maybe I could wake up? If I just opened my eyes and looked, it would be over, and

everything would be fine.

I held my arms out, fully extended, before opening my eyes. My arms were significantly longer. Without even a patch of skin visible. Looking down from my arm, feathers stretched beyond my waist—off-color white with brown at the wing's leading edge. Pulling my arm in to look at my hand, I was met with the reality that I had no hands. My arms were no longer arms by any definition. They were now fully formed wings, not built for picking up objects but for flight.

"Lyall, you with us, buddy?" Matthew said from the other side of the couch. I nodded my head in assurance.

"I can't go back! They won't go away!" I frantically shouted. "I can't take them back. I can't imagine my arms!"

"It's ok, dude, we can make this work. Just stay calm and take a seat," Matthew said, walking toward me.

My mind was racing, trying to think of any reason why I couldn't think. My thoughts returned to the pill, the same disconnected feeling I had before, but in reverse. I sat on the couch, unable to guide myself down with my wings. Matthew sat beside me and tried to relax me.

"Deep breaths, deep breaths. It's not as bad as it seems," Matthew said, patting me on the back.

For the first time, I felt utterly helpless. I couldn't feel this change coming and still don't feel in control of it. Maybe it was a mistake. Perhaps it was still in my system. What if the inhibitor was blocking the wrong thing? I know I don't have long now, but could my attempt to stop the changes worsen them?

## CHAPTER 18

I tried to wipe my eyes, but even that was near impossible. I wanted nothing more than to slam my hands against the table, do something to let out my emotions. Anger, grief, sadness, pain.

I stood up from the couch, walked toward the door, and stopped mid-way across the room. I unfolded my wings and gave them a large, rigid flap. The force pushed me closer to the wall behind me, and the muscles in my chest pulled tight. I took a deep breath and forced it back out as hard and fast as possible.

"KEEE-AHHHHH," I screeched before taking another breath and repeating. "KEEEE-AHHHHH" As I went to take another, my breath was broken up. I folded my wings tight, fell to my knees, and rolled onto my side. Crying as well as a hawk could, I wanted nothing more than for it all to stop. I tucked my head under my right wing and tried to hide from it all.

"Lyall?" Rylie called out. "Everything is going to be okay. But I need you to try and calm down, and this isn't going to help you right now," She said.

Wouldn't help? Nothing seems to help, and I get myself worked up just to bring on more changes. What's stopping me from ending it here? I could end the stress and worry if I had given in.

*Darren did it.*

*Damien did it.*

*Benji did it.*



*I could do it.*

*I SHOULD do it.*

"Lyall! Snap out of it, kid!" Rylie shouted.

I opened my eyes to see. A mess of feathers surrounded my head as I lifted my head out from under my wing. Looking around the room, and everyone was watching me, waiting for my next move. I made a huge scene and made myself look like an utter fool. A hawk, a fierce predator, curled up on the floor, crying to himself. I tried to situate myself back onto my feet, a struggle without hands. Once on my knees, Rylie and Matthew assisted me to my feet.

"I'm... sorry about that," I said quietly.

Nash quickly responded, "Sorry? For what? You have nothing to be sorry about."

As I collected myself, I still had thoughts lingering in my head. They did not seem to be my own, but they felt right, even if I knew they weren't.

*Give in.*

*Let the changes finish.*

*Embrace it.*

I ignored the thoughts as best as I could. But they were persistent, constantly filling my head. Even though it's entirely against how I would think, my mind WANTED to finish.

I inspected my wings, and the feathers had fully grown in. The back sides are covered in shades of black, brown, and white. My muscles had changed. Stronger muscles connected my wings to my chest, and They would flex as I pushed my wings forward. Slowly my body had begun preparing itself for flight.

I looked about the room at all the faces watching me. "I think I'm gonna sleep this off," I said, unsure.

"Is that a good idea?" Matthew asked, "Are you sure you are thinking

straight?"

"Yeah, no, maybe?" I answered, "This is different. He's not trying to take over. He's just here now."

"He?" Matthew asked, confused. "Who is He?"

"The hawk. He's here, and he wants me to change," I said.

Matthew looked at the others, confused. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah. I feel fine," I said flatly. "Good night, all," I said as I started up the stairs. Careful as I could not use the handrails. I opened my door with my wings and laid on the bed. I had no desire to get under the blankets, and laying on them was okay. I closed my eyes and drifted off.

The trees creaked as a light wind rustled the leaves. I was standing in the woods with the sun peeking through the leaves. I heard a flapping, and I turned to see a hawk perched on a branch. The colors looked identical to mine, but looking at myself, I was fully human. The hawk stared at me as the thoughts returned.

*Let the changes happen.*

*Don't fight it.*

As the thoughts came into my head, I felt my body shifting—first, my eyes, then my tail. I tried to stop them but nothing would, the changes slowly creeping along. The hawk perched in the tree, still watching motionless.

*This is the real you.*

*This is the better you.*

*You WANT this.*

My hips shifted, and feathers covered my lower body. I could feel my insides moving as they changed. The hawk was still staring at me as if it were waiting for something. I opened my mouth to speak, and it seemed to lift its head.

"It's you?" I asked. "Are you doing this?" As thoughts entered my head yet again.

*We are one.*

*I am you, and you are me.*

*Don't fight it.*

My face pressed outward as the beak emerged from my lips. My vocal cords became raspy as they, too, changed. My feathers spread down my back and across my body, filling in the skin gaps on my torso.

"Will I still be... me? When it's over?" I asked the hawk.

*This is you.*

*This will be you.*

My arms shifted into wings, the feathers growing out, my arms extending and changing. My whole wings span, my new muscles, and my wings were ready for flight. The hawk adjusted its wings, standing still otherwise.

*It's almost done.*

*There is no sense in fighting it.*

I closed my eyes to try and block the thoughts. They boomed in my head. I tucked my wings in tight and lowered my head to my chest, digging my beak into my feathers. I opened my eyes to see the ground. I saw a man standing in the clearing, staring at me. He was looking up at me from the ground. Looking at my body, I was entirely changed and standing on a branch. My eyes were glued to the man in the clearing.

I heard my voice this time, and it boomed in my head as it spoke.

*This is me.*

*Embrace it.*

I woke up on my bed, panting. Unsure of what I had just witnessed. My body was still the same as before I went to bed, and nothing looked human besides my rough-skinned feet. I climbed out of bed and to the door. I could hear talking downstairs, but it seemed to hush as my door opened. I carefully

walked down the stairs, afraid of falling with no way of catching myself.

All five of my housemates were sitting on the couches. TV turned off, silently sitting. Rylie and Jeremy looked my way as I approached the group.

"Morning, guys," I said to the group. "Weird night, yeah?"

"How are the wings holding up?" Rylie asked.

"Like this," I said, holding my wings up slightly. This got a chuckle from Nash. "I think it's still just the initial shock, that, or I guess I don't really mind them?"

"Well, after your reaction last night, I think there may be a bit more to it," Rylie said. "Come sit with us."

I sat down on the recliner, and it seemed almost like a parent setting up a talk about bad behavior. Rylie looked at Matthew, and Matthew took a breath in. He opened his beak to talk but hesitated, and Rylie quickly jumped in and began.

"Lyall, we need you, to be honest with us. Did it take control last night?" She asked.

"The hawk? No, or at least I don't think so. I dreamt last night, but it was different. Come to think of it, last night in my head was different," I said, questioning my memories of last night.

"What do you mean different?" Matthew asked.

I thought about it for a second. "It doesn't seem to take over as it did, but I can hear it. I can feel its thoughts almost like it's... disconnected?" That term, I could only think of one thing when I thought of it. Could I still be affected by it? Could it have permanently changed my mind?

"What did it feel like when your arms changed? Did it seem different?" Rylie asked.

"I just felt it happen. It wasn't like a mental episode, and I felt the changes as they happened. It was weird," I said, reliving the burning growth of my wings.

Matthew sighed. "I know you have been avoiding this talk, but we have

to think about your plans."

I waited to say anything. Unsure if I didn't fully understand or wanted to ignore it, I asked, "Plans for what?"

"Lyal, you're only a few steps away. After last night, you have no way of knowing when it will happen. We need to talk about what you want," Matthew said quietly.

"Oh," I whispered. I was just a few changes away from becoming a full bird, and I didn't have long, and deep down, I knew it already, and I just couldn't admit it to myself.

"Do you know if you want to be captive or wild?" Matthew asked, looking at a sheet on the table. "Benji and Damien are captive; we could set you up with that."

I didn't want to be a model or some experiment—The idea of living the in the wild seemed to excite me. Freedom from enclosure and freedom to do whatever I would desire. I had thought about where I would want to go—the meadow where Kole and I walked last year seemed like a beautiful place. Away from danger, protected lands, and close to home... accessible?

"I know where I would want to be. I don't want to live in a box, and I'd rather live the full life as my new self," I said confidently. "I want to decide when I change, and I want to be in control."

Matthew nodded. "If that's what you want, but it's never too late to change your mind, you know."

I could see why you wouldn't want to be turned loose. The safety of a controlled environment and all your needs met for you. But I don't know if I could have a fulfilling life in that manner. I want to embrace it and live a new life.

Living with no hands required a lot of adjustments. I could no longer be completely independent as I could no longer do some of the most basic tasks myself. Without assistance, I could no longer operate the TV or even contact my Mom. The longer I went, the more I felt like I constantly needed help.

I visited Dr. Leslie, but Nash had to accompany me for the entire process. It seems funny that until now, I have been able to live a mostly independent life, but I currently need assistance with almost everything. Soon I would go

the opposite extreme and live a wholly independent and frankly isolated life. Humans are social creatures and need interaction, whereas raptors are alone, with a few exceptions.

During my visit with Leslie, she essentially warned me of how close I was. She tried her best to word it as nicely as possible, but I was already aware I was in the final stretch. She did not bother with X-rays or any testing because I needed to get all my ducks in a row and be prepared for when it happens. The only thing other than talking that happened was an ID microchip put into my back. It was a quick and painless injection, and she explained it similar to what they have for pet dogs, the alternative to being banded before release.

As we left, I thanked her for everything she had done. Her face told me that she had grown numb to her patients finishing. As often as she has seen it, I don't envy her and the stress it probably has on her.

Over the next few weeks, the weather improved. Officially making it to spring as the outside world lost its depressing, dreary look and trees began to fill with leaves again. I found myself spending more time in the small yard behind the house. I felt the sun's warmth on my feathered body for the first time, and it felt cozy and calming compared to the cold winter air.

I preferred to walk barefoot with the partially changed skin on my legs and feet. While it was still mostly human, it became easily irritated when covered with any fabric material, and I enjoyed the feeling of the ground directly against my feet anyways. While walking around the neighborhood with Rylie, talking about her springtime adjustments, I found my feet slightly irritated, and I tried to ignore them as we walked.

"They feel out of place all the time, and the constant irritation grinds you down," Rylie said as she messed with her feathers. "Molting is easily the worst part of having feathers."

"I'm glad I haven't had to deal with it yet," I said, chuckling. "When do hawks molt anyway?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. I know male peregrines molt later in the year, and females get to deal with it early, though," Rylie said, "Something to do with nesting."

"I should probably learn this stuff, you know, might be-," I said as I was interrupted by the irritation in my feet. "Agh, I don't know what I've done to my feet, but it feels like they are covered in bug bites," I said as I scratched one foot with another.

Rylie looked down at my legs as she asked, "Do they hurt, or are they still just itchy?"

"Itchy, but like deep itchy," I replied.

Suddenly, my feet had a small amount of pain and fell asleep. The pins and needles feeling gave me a shock. Looking closer, it looked as though my skin was changing. The skin of my legs and feet slowly turned a light yellow as the skin toughened further. My feet ached as my two smallest toes merged to become one. My toes extended longer, growing as I felt my big toes begin to ache at the joint. They turned inward, forcing me to lift my heel from the ground and only stopping once my bog toe faced backward.

"Oh god, Lyall," Rylie said, taking a step back.

"All good. All good," I assured her, watching my own feet shift.

My four toes continued to extend as black claws grew from their tips. The claws curved down to the ground, forming large, sharp "C" shapes. My toes eventually stopped leaving me with fully formed talons. I lifted one talon and experimentally closed it. I sat my new talon back on the ground and looked at Rylie.

"See, no big deal," I said calmly.

"Are you feeling okay? That isn't a little deal. That was your last human body part!" She shouted.

I looked back down at my feet. She was correct; at this point, there weren't any specific human parts on me. Besides my torso's general shape still resembling a human slightly, I was mostly a bird. I should be worried and concerned, but it just seemed okay. It didn't seem all that worrying to me.

"Ehh, they look fine. I kind of like them," I said excitedly.

Rylie gave me a blank stare before speaking. "That hawk has more influence on you than you know," She said quietly.

"I should be freaking out, but it just feels normal. I still feel like I'm in control, but I feel like I don't care about my feet," I said, "I still feel like Lyall, and I still feel human."

Rylie threw her arms around me as she gave me a surprise hug. "Lyall, please just tell me if you feel it take over," She said roughly.

"I promise I'll give you a sign," I said, leaning my head against her shoulder. "It's still Lyall. I'm still myself."

"I've liked having another raptor around. Someone who deals with the same crap I do," She said, chuckling as she let go of me. "I hate to see you get to this point, and I know I'll be here too in the future."

We walked back to the house, my new talons clicking on the sidewalk the entire way. My new walking motion felt odd as what was once my heel now lifted, giving me the feeling of standing on my toes. We entered the house as Nash and Matthew cleaned up some spill in the living room. Rylie and I walked into the living room and watched as they wiped up blue juice from the floor.

"When you guys get a moment, Matthew, I want to talk with you privately," I said slowly.

Matthew turned to look at me and immediately noticed my feet. "Oh, oh my..." He turned to look at Nash. "Can you finish this for me?" He asked Nash as he got up. "Upstairs, your room," He said as he turned to the stairs.

I followed him up the stair to my room, where he shut the door behind us. He sat on the bed and gestured for me to sit in the chair. "So when did this happen?" He asked quietly.

"While walking with Rylie. My feet felt itchy, and then..." I said, holding up a partially closed talon.

"Damn, you couldn't stop it? I mean, if you wanted it to happen, that's fine too. I just want to know," he asked.

"No, It just happened. I had a little cramp, and then it was over. The whole change probably took five minutes," I explained.

"Is there anything you need help with? Anything I can do?" He asked.

I thought hard before saying my following sentence. I know what this means and have been expecting it for quite a long time. I had reached the end and wanted to stick to my guns and have it end my way. Either I do it now, or my next change will be it.



I took a deep breath before speaking. "Matthew, I'm ready to go. I'm ready to go to the meadow and end this," I said confidently. "I either do it myself now, or it does it for me."

Matthew closed his eyes. "Okay, I understand. When do you want to do it? Do you know?" he asked.

"No, I want to see my Mom first. Then I guess we can go," I said quietly. How would my Mom act? Would she feel the same relief, or would she be sad? I would argue to say sad, but I know this whole last year has been a rollercoaster for her. I feel bad dropping this all at once to her, but I know I need to see her one last time before.

Matthew and I sat in my room without saying a word. I adjusted my wings a bit and experimented with my feet, trying to make it less awkward. Matthew sighed before he spoke, "Do you want to tell the others, or do you want me to?"

"I guess if we are doing that soon, I'll need to tell them now," I said quietly. "What if we did Thursday?" I asked.

"Tell them Thursday? Do you know you can go that long?" Matthew said his voice breaking.

"No, I mean, what if I finish Thursday? Today is Tuesday, so I would have to get everything in order tomorrow," I said.

"Oh, uhh," Matthew stammered, "You are sure you want to do it? Do YOU want to do it?"

"I promise. It's one hundred percent Lyall that wants to do it," I said, trying to reassure Matthew. "I'm ready for it to be done. But I want to be in control when it happens."

Matthew nodded and stood up. "Well, I guess we need to talk as a group then," I followed Matthew down the stairs and into the living room. Everyone was still sitting around and conversing. I took my seat on the recliner, and Matthew sat next to Jeremy.

Nash broke the conversation to ask, "Everything okay there, Lyall?"

"Feeling great!" I said back. "But I guess I need to tell you guys what's

coming. Thursday, I'll be finishing. I don't know the complete logistics of it, but I have to do it soon. I don't know how much longer I can be like this."

The room was quiet for a moment.

"I figured you would want to do it soon," Nash said, "Is there anything you want us to do? Anyone, you need to see before?"

"Tomorrow, could you drive me home? There is only one person I need to see," I asked Nash. He nodded in agreement.

"I knew this talk was coming, still doesn't make it any easier," Rylie said, trying to laugh. "Hard decision to make, harder to go through with it."

It was weird how real it suddenly felt. Maybe I didn't piece it together, but I only had days left as I am. I may have a week if I tried to resist it, but still only a week of worry and anxiety that I could suddenly change. I was fully human only months ago and am mostly an animal now. Much of it is my fault, though. Only at the end did I realize I was causing most of my changes.

The rest of the night was quiet. Very little was said, and everyone seemed down. I went to bed early, realizing my current situation had set in. I knew tomorrow wasn't going to be any easier. Breaking the news to my Mom was not going to be fun. But she needs to know, and I don't want her to hear about it after, like Kole's mother did.

Another night of no dreams. I haven't had one in weeks, and it just seems like I close my eyes, and it's morning. I walked downstairs to the kitchen. Nash and Rylie talked as I walked in, and Nash quickly sat his cup down.

"You ready for this?" He asked.

"I think so," I said, unsure.

He nodded, and we walked out to his car. I climbed in the back, and we left the house towards my childhood home. Tomorrow was the day. I tried to be upbeat about it but couldn't be like Benji. I worried if it would still be me. If I would be in control or if I was going to be overtaken. What if this is just the death of my mind? I tried not to think about it, but it was too hard not to think about what would happen.

We arrived at my house, and Nash parked on the street. He killed the engine and turned back to look at me. "I'll be here. Take as long as you need,"

Nash said as the side door slowly opened. "Thanks, Nash," I said, climbing out of the car.

Walking up the dirt path to the door, I wanted to turn around and leave. I reached the stairs and slowly climbed up them and to the door. I went to knock only to remember my hands, and I reached down with my beak and bumped the doorbell. The door opened to reveal my Mom.

"Lyal! I didn't know you were coming by! Come on in," She said, standing aside. I walked in, and she looked confused at my arms. The moment my talons first contacted the wood flooring, she looked down. "Oh, honey, what happened?"

"I had a few changes this week," I said, trying to sound confident. "That's what I'm here to tell you, though."

She sat down on her couch and watched me intently. Her hands were crossed and shaken a little.

"It's been months since I started changing. We both knew what that meant, though. I'm this far now, and the next step... I decided... After..," I tried to speak but struggled. "Tomorrow, I'll be finishing my changes. I'm sorry it's sudden, but I either do it now, or it happens to me anyway."

"You are going away tomorrow? As in..," She asked, her face looking pale.

"Tomorrow, I'll entirely change into a hawk. I'm sorry it's sudden, but I don't have much of a choice now," I said, trying to stay calm.

"Will I be able to see you after? Where will you be living?" She asked, sounding worried.

"Maybe. I am finishing at the walking field on the east side of town," I said, "I decided I don't want to live in captivity, and I'd rather be a hawk than a display piece."

She stood up and paced around a bit. I could tell she was breathing quickly and was anxious. I walked toward her and tried to comfort her.

"Mom. I'm going to be okay. I'm ready for this," I said, half lying to her. I wasn't sure if I wanted to go at this point.

"I'm not ready for you to go. How am I supposed just to take my son

telling me he's becoming a bloody bird tomorrow?" She roared.

"I wish I could stop it. But If I don't do it tomorrow, I'll be forced to change. I would rather do it myself than be forced to do it," I said, trying to explain.

We talked more about it for the next hour, and I explained what the doctor had told me. I told her that I had depended on others since my wings formed. I offered for her to be there when I finished, but after some thought, she decided it would be best if she stayed home. I told her I understood, and she hugged me.

"I'll come to visit. But you have to promise me you'll come to find me," she said, squeezing me.

"I promise I will. I'll be there," I said quietly.

I left the house and met Nash in the car. While climbing into the van, Nash asked, "How did it go?"

"Started it out rough, but I think it went alright, all things considered," I said, sighing.

We drove back to the house and the clock already read 1 PM. Less than twenty-four hours until I would finish. We walked into the house and found everyone getting ready for dinner. Rylie and Matthew decided to have a going-away-style celebration to raise the house's morale. It seemed funny, but it made sense to me.

After dinner, we sat and talked about things we had all done together. Similar to what we had done for Benji. It was fun to remember the weird stuff that happened. My trip with Jeremy still had its many secrets, though. Although my time at the house was short, I was glad I had some others to relate with during my changes. But I did have one request.

"Guys, can you promise me one thing?" I asked, "The name of the house is Avian Associates, and I'm sorry, but I could never take that seriously."

This got a small laugh from everyone. "It's just always been that since Darren named it. But maybe a new name would be a little better," Matthew said.

"Just call it the Bird House," I suggested. "It's still cheesy, but at least it

doesn't share letters with AA."

"Sounds fine with me," Rylie said, laughing.

It was getting late, and slowly, everyone broke off to sleep. Eventually, it was just Jeremy and me sitting alone. The clock read 11:47 PM, and I was feeling tired.

"Jeremy, are we still keeping what happened at the hotel a secret?" I asked.

Jeremy nodded and laughed in his weird, rattly laugh. He ran his hand across his beak like a zipper.

"Good, I don't know if I can ever live that down," I laughed.

We both went to bed. Laying in my bed, I tried to ignore what was coming, but I knew it was only hours until I would finish my changes and this whole ordeal would be over. I closed my eyes, and it was daytime when they opened.

7 AM

Five hours later, I would be finished.

## CHAPTER 19

7 AM

I climbed out of my bed, standing and stretching for the last time in this room. I didn't have many personal belongings in my room. Most of everything would be given back to my mother in the coming days. Everything else would be collected and stored with the rest of the previous house member's personal belongings.

Walking downstairs, Nash was watching the television with Westin. A news story was playing, and the location seemed oddly familiar. I sat down to watch them as they continued talking about a miracle. The reporter talked about a once beloved species now having an official count of six living individuals. The screen flashed an image of a bird, black, red, and white.

"With the four offspring being fledged, this could mean the eventual reintroduction of the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker," The reporter stated. There was no mistaking who was responsible for those said offspring, considering he was one of only two remaining.

"Sounds like Damien is making a name for himself, that is, if they would call him by name," Nash said, watching the TV.

"Ehh, they never mentioned him by name when I saw him there," I said, "I would guess they don't want to associate the disease with the whole project."

"Maybe, or maybe they don't see him as a human. Could be a few things," Westin said.

"It's weird, really," Nash said. "Humans being used to save a different species, and neither of them had any control over it, except maybe luck."

"Well, thank god the red tail isn't going extinct. I don't know about having children, let alone in another body," I said that the thought of having children as a non-human sent a disturbing shiver down my spine.

I heard the sounds of footsteps on the stairs as Matthew walked into the living room. Shortly behind him were Jeremy and Rylie. Jeremy sat on the couch and stared at me. Matthew opened his beak and hesitated before asking, "You feeling alright, Lyall? You still feeling up to this?"

"Maybe. I guess it is what it is, right?" I replied.

"Well, let's make up some breakfast and see what the day looks like," Matthew said as he turned to the kitchen, gesturing me to follow. I followed behind, my talons slipping slightly on the hard floor of the kitchen. I would try to catch myself, but the wings make it difficult. Matthew grabbed a plastic cup from the cupboard and put it on the counter.

"You want a glass of something? I can pour it for ya," He offered as he removed a jug of orange juice from the fridge. I shook my head, and Matthew closed the fridge door, jug still in hand.

"Have anything you want to do once you finish?" Rylie asked from behind. I turned to face her, but my left wing caught Matthew's glass the threw it to the ground.

"Oh shoot!" I shouted as the partially filled glass was dumped on the floor. Without thinking, I reached with my right talon and picked the glass up, holding it to Matthew. It wasn't until after he took the glass from my foot that I realized what I had done. I opened and closed my grip before returning my scaly yellow foot to the ground.

I turned to answer Rylie's question. "I mean, if I'm somehow still in there, flying would be the first thing I want to try," I said, holding my wings out slightly. "These have to be worth something, right?"

"Well, you already practiced hunting, but next time Nash won't be there to assist," Rylie said with a wink.

I shook my head, scoffing at the remark. I would have to hunt for my

meals, wouldn't I? I don't know what I thought I would eat. I was banking on losing my mind to the hawk. But I have a little more hope that won't happen each day.

When everyone was done with breakfast, the clock read 9:24 AM. The old saying that *Time flies when you are having fun* also fits with dreading something I'm my experience. It seemed as though the time was whizzing by the moment you looked away from the clock. Matthew asked me privately how I would like the trip to go down. I was slightly confused as it seemed pretty simple to me. I figured we would get there and just go with whatever happened.

"When you shift, do you want to be alone for it, or do you want us there to watch?" Matthew asked.

I guess I had not thought about it. I watched Benji shift at the end, but Damien chose to turn alone. I didn't know. I was both afraid to be alone and would have liked some privacy, and I told him that I would decide there what I preferred.

10 AM

The time came to get in the cars and head for the trail. Everyone tried to joke and make it seem normal, but the trip had an off feeling. I rode in the car with Matthew and Jeremy; everyone else was in Nash's van. I had offered my mom to come, but she stayed steady that she could not handle being there.

The ride was quiet, the roads nearly empty, mid-morning on a weekday. We didn't expect many others to be on the walking path today, making it less of a public show and a little more personal and private.

We pulled off the road and into the gravel parking lot. The last time I was here was when Kole had his scare with his hips reforming. That was the last time I was in public with Kole and the last time I spent much time with him.

Stepping out of the car, the cool morning air was still warming. The slightest of breezes rustled my chest feathers. I closed the door, and we slowly walked toward the trailhead. We found the small map at the entrance to the trail, and I knew where I wanted the change to happen and the direct path to it.

I lead the way down the trail. We passed an older couple walking in the



other direction in the straight section under the trees. They seemed confused, but I wouldn't blame them. Not often, you would see more than one, let alone six hybrids at the same time.

Once we reached the clearing, the area was empty of anyone else—only the tall grass with dirt paths sprawling around groupings of wild plant growth. We continued to walk along the perimeter path until we were next to the creek, covered by the edge of the woods.

"What time is it?" I asked. Westin pulled out his phone before replying, "11:45".

There was no rigid set time of 12 PM. But I know that if I didn't give myself a time, I would procrastinate out of fear. I felt proud of being on time, but I also wished I could have procrastinated this one time. I walked a few yards into the clearing, knowing full well I was not walking back to the car from here. I was about to cross the point of no return.

"Well, this is it, isn't it?" I asked the group. "For everything that happened, it seems like it was way longer than a few months. Benji's mom, Damien, the road trip and hotel," I said, giving Jeremy a nod. "Almost killing myself on a table ledge, Benji..." I paused. "But hey, I made it. It wasn't a race, but I sure did get here quick."

I looked at the tree line. It seemed so similar to my dreams, and I could feel myself getting excited. I turned back and gave my final words as a hybrid. "Thank you, guys. The last year was weird, but I wouldn't change a second of it."

I could see my friends standing at the edge of the woods. Even though I had only spent a few months with them, I felt like I had known them for years. I hope that I can remember them and everything we have done together. It had been a long road to this point, and I still had a long way to go. I still didn't know what would happen, but I had only one way of knowing.

I nodded before turning away and walking about twenty feet away from the woods. I took a deep breath and relaxed. It felt like a cool breeze blew over my body as I let go. I held my wings out slightly as I felt a small amount of pressure in my head. My entire body had this light pressure to it as another cool wave surged across my body. I peeked with my eyes to see the ground was closer than before.

Looking carefully, my body was slimming, becoming more streamlined. I

could feel my head squeezing ever so slightly as my skull flattened. The cool feeling held on as my balance shifted, and I found myself leaning forward to stay standing. My head began compensating for my body's movement as my head stayed still when I leaned forward. I looked at the ground again as I was growing ever closer.

I closed my eyes and held my wings out proudly. The light breeze slowly blew across the surface of my wings, feathers moving with the wind as I was only seconds away from finishing. I felt the pressure relieve itself, and at that moment, everything felt right. I looked back at the crew, looking up from my new perspective. They all watched as I lifted my wings and brought them to the ground with a hard, forceful push. Kicking my little legs off the ground, I was up. My wings pulled in and stroked upwards before unfolding and pressing down again, giving me another boost forward and into the air. My tail was making minor corrections to keep me stable as I climbed higher and higher.

After climbing to about twenty feet, I turned back toward the crew and lowered my altitude, letting my glide carry me without a hint of a flap. I turned a 180 around them six feet from the ground before heading toward the field, away from the crew. As I flew out, I felt something almost "click" in my mind. It felt as though I had always known to fly, like I was just remembering how to control my wings and tail as I beat them harder, climbing yet higher until I was just above the tree line when I held my wings out and let my body glide quietly away.

Away from what I used to be.

PATIENT TERMINATION REPORT

DATE: March 17th, 2023

NAME: Lyall Williams

AGE: 20

SEX: Male

SPECIES: Red-Tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*)

DESCRIPTION: Changes completed at a local nature park. Peers confirmed total transformation. Previously test subject of the mental inhibitor program.

STATUS: Integrated with local fauna

CASE CLOSED

END OF REPORT

I opened my eyes to find I was perched in a tree. It was early morning, just minutes past sunrise, as the world slowly lit up—the brighter light allowing my eyes to make out the details around me. I don't think I expected to be in control still, but I felt nothing in the back of my head. I was totally and wholly in control of my mind and body. I could feel the instincts from my body, but they felt like instincts and not an entire other mind. Almost as if something was disconnecting the two minds, I swore I felt before. Maybe I had done something that broke the connection, or maybe there was no connection. All I felt was myself and the instincts I had slowly grown to know, now stronger than ever.

I didn't want to dwell on it much longer as I was thirsty. I leapt from the tree the flew down to the creek. Taking a drink of water using my beak to scoop it up before lifting my head high. I had much to learn, but I can't argue how natural the control of my body felt. I could be fooled into thinking I was always a hawk. All of the motions seemed to come naturally. It took a few days before I learned how to hunt properly, and by that, I mean to bring myself to go through with the hunt. The first time I grabbed a squirrel, it screamed in pain and fear. I felt horrible, like I was torturing the poor creature, and let it go. Realizing later that, at some point, I would have to go through with it.

I did not even want to attempt hunting again, but after some time, the pain of hunger forced me to try again. My second attempt was easier, though, gripping with my talons and biting with my beak, not giving myself a moment to think about it. Once again, feeling the warm meat that I remembered so well. The more I leaned into my instincts, the more challenging they became to ignore. Quickly hunting became second nature, a fact of life I had to get used to if I wanted to survive alone.

Most days are spent perched, hunting, or flying. I never thought about how alone I was, too busy with other vital matters to dwell on. I had things I needed to do, and being alone made that more manageable, or so I thought. I occasionally flew around to different points to look closer at the walkers. Hoping to see someone I knew, and maybe they would recognize me...

I lost track of how many days had passed rather quickly. The lack of an accessible clock made it hard to figure out the day or even how far into a season it was, and I had no reason to keep track. There was no break from my new life; I had to provide for myself. I would find myself busy hunting or trying to ward off other hawks from my territory, the instincts urging me to claim my place in the world. I may be the new hawk around, but this was MY field.

Before I knew it, the leaves changed and began to fall to the ground. Walkers seemed to increase, and some would even stop to try and photograph me. I seemed to get more attention as a bird than I ever did as a human. I would keep my distance but try to give them at least an interesting subject to photograph. Once while getting a drink, two humans caught me in some large net. Taking me by surprise as they removed me using a leather glove and held my wings so I could not unfold them.

They scanned my back and were surprised to hear the small device they used to make a sound. The man messed with the device and eventually removed a small bag of rings from his backpack.

"What's that mean?" The other man asked, holding me in his hands.

"Looks like this was a Mr. Williams at one point. Poor guy," The man said as he removed a pack of tools from his bag.

"He's a shifty?" The man holding me asked.

"Looks like it. Let's get little Lyall here a proper band," He said, removing a hand tool from his pack.

"Do we count him still?"

"Yep, no different from the rest."

I wanted to try and give them a sign I was still in control, but my natural fear paralyzed me. They then pulled a small metal ring, the same color as Benji's, and crimped it loosely around my leg before releasing me. At first, flying around with it around my leg wasn't enjoyable, but with time I got used to it. It acts as a piece to remember my previous life and make sure I remember the folks who helped me to this point.

The winter came, and for the first time, I felt some struggles. The snow made hunting a different game, and water was usually harder to reach. The cold itself did not bother me that much, and my feathers could keep me warm more than enough. Sometimes I would find myself going longer between my meals and finding water. But when I was able to find something, I made sure to take advantage of the opportunity.

It has been months since I last looked for anyone. Not that I haven't been trying, but remember that finding food and water in the rough winter has

been difficult. Every hour of daylight matters, and I can't waste a moment. Trying to find someone fruitlessly when hardly any walkers visit during the winter was not worth the energy expended. I envied the birds that migrated months ago as I ate for the first time in days.

Springtime came with warmer weather, easier food access, and new instincts. I knew I was more irritable than usual, but what would it hurt when I was alone? While on a hunt, I flew around the field's perimeter and spotted another large bird. As I approached, I could see it was another red tail. I scrambled quickly toward it, needing to defend my territory yet again. But as I flew past, it seemed to loop over me nonthreateningly. It swooped around me as I passed. At first, I tried to scare it off but felt the urge to fly along.

After a few days, I found myself perching with the other hawk, finding it friendly after being entirely alone for the last year. Not sure If I should feel bad for myself for trying to find some source of socializing or happy that I was getting along with my kind. I would bring food for it, and we would fly together in our free time. Shortly after, I found out through other means that the other hawk was a female. At first, that made me want to distance myself, but that did not last long until I desired companionship again. We spent more time together, flying together, preening each other's feathers, and finally feeling like I wasn't alone

We spent days, if not weeks, together before it happened. My instincts were getting quite strong at that point, and I was enjoying myself too much to resist. We had built a nest in the days prior, high up in the treetops. But piecing it all together was not immediate until I saw the eggs. Four white orbs covered in brown speckles adorned our nest, and she spent most of her time sitting on them as I attended to her needs. For the first time in a while, I felt happy and had something to look forward to.

Maybe Damien would be proud. Not only had I taken the jump and accepted my new life, but I also found myself a place and gotten myself established. But for now, I have much to do. I have a partner to feed and a clutch of eggs to care for. Even after the change, I still would not change a moment of everything I have been through. I have no regrets. I am who and what I am supposed to be.

I am Lyall Williams,  
A Red-Tailed Hawk.

## THANK YOU

I want to thank you once again for the support I have graciously given while writing this story. It has been a dream to write this since I began the rough outline and brainstorming of ideas in 2020. This book would never have existed without the community's feedback and help. This may be my first foray into writing, but I believe I have been able to make something I am truly proud of. Thank you for enduring my green writing. Looking back at my first drafts, your help made me a more confident and better writer.

If you want to give feedback, leave a review or scan the QR code on the back to find ways to get in touch. I love hearing from everyone and try my best to respond to any messages!

-Eric