

THIRTEEN YEARS LATER

CHAPTER ONE

Betrayed

"I have a wonderful surprise for you," Sarah exclaimed.

Rebecca smiled. Her new roommate was full of enthusiasm. "Oh, and what would that be?"

"It's a surprise. It's for your birthday."

"My birthday is next week, Sarah. Come on, give me a hint. Come one, pretty please," Rebecca coaxed.

Sarah smiled. "Okay. Do you remember that I did a genealogy tree?"

"Yes," Rebecca frowned, wondering about the change in subject.

"And, do you remember I asked you all those questions and did one for you?"

"I remember. Where are you going with this?" Rebecca asked.

"Well, I know that you're estranged from your family."

"For good reason," Rebecca interrupted.

"Rebecca, you need to let it go. People need their families."

"Sarah, please, please don't tell me that"

“Yup, I got in contact with them, and they are coming to see you for your birthday. Isn’t that great?”

Rebecca covered her face with her hands. She took a deep breath before confronting her roommate.

“You were paying attention when I said that they were horrible people and that I didn’t want to have anything to do with them?”

“But...”

“I know I explained that they were abusive and that I was sent to live with my grandfather by CPS.”

“I know, but....”

“Sarah, I understand that you have a wonderful family and that you see the world through rose-colored glasses, but not everyone has a fairy tale family.” Rebecca sat down hard. “What am I going to do?”

Sarah sat beside her. “I’m sorry. I thought that this would be a good time to let go of the past and....”

“Don’t talk to me right now.”

“Well, excuse me for trying to get you to see your family. You can’t just choose to be an orphan. You need to have roots,” Sarah declared.

Rebecca stood and looked at her roommate. “My grandfather was my family, and he died. My father threw me out of the house when I was thirteen. He literally threw me out. Do you understand that?”

“You’re exaggerating. People don’t throw their children away.”

Rebecca inhaled deeply. "Your naivety is dangerous, in this case, dangerous to me."

"In my opinion, you need therapy," Sarah said. "I'm trying to help you. You live alone. You don't go out. You don't have any friends. You spend your days, and sometimes nights, playing videos games in your 'study'. You need social interaction, and family is where you start. This is for your own good."

"Sarah, I'm not going to argue with you...."

"Good. You'll see I'm right," Sarah said smugly.

"Whatever. I've got work to do. Don't disturb me," Rebecca added angrily. She stomped to her office, muttering under her breath.

"The nerve of that girl. Playing video games. I'm working. If she can't see the difference between coding and playing ... argh." She slammed the door. "I can't be here when the 'family' gets here."

Rebecca worked through the afternoon. She had to complete her latest commissioned project before she left.

Sarah knocked on her door.

"What?" Rebecca growled.

"I made supper."

"That's nice. Not hungry."

"Don't be that way. You need to talk about this," Sarah said.

"No, I don't. I'm working. Go away."

"But..."

"I'm busy and still angry with you."

There was a moment of silence. "Fine then."

Rebecca heard Sarah stomp away. She shook her head at her roommate's audacity. Sarah was only supposed to be here a few weeks as a favor to a university classmate. The girl obviously didn't understand boundaries. Rebecca thought that Sarah should be taking social work instead of teaching since she seemed to enjoy meddling in other people's lives, thinking she was right based on her own, very limited life experience.

"What a mess."

Rebecca finished the project just before midnight and sent it to her client. She could now focus on the 'family' problem. She knew she couldn't be here when they arrived. Where to go? It had to be driveable, so nothing overseas. It had to be somewhere her father had never been. Oh, and it had to have internet so that she could keep working. Hum. There was one place. She hadn't been there in years, but it met all the criteria. Decision made, she closed everything down and went to bed. She had a lot to do tomorrow.

As soon as Sarah left the next morning, Rebecca put her plan into action. First, she notified the property management that she was going away for an overseas project and would be gone for at least a year. The young woman living with her was a temporary guest and would be moving to student housing by the end of the month and could they moth-ball her apartment at that time.

Rebecca trusted them but also had cameras in the apartment to make sure that it happened. Next, she boxed up her computers and loaded them in her SUV. Finally, her clothes.

“Good thing I splurged on an oversized SUV,” she said, closing the hatch. She went to the bank and drew out seven thousand three hundred and fifty-two dollars.

“That’s a weird amount,” the teller commented.

Rebecca smiled. “I’m buying a motorcycle, and the seller wants cash,” she replied.

The teller accepted the explanation. Rebecca kept her smile. She really wanted the cash so that there wouldn’t be any credit card transactions to follow. She didn’t know how computer literate her family was, but she wasn’t taking chances.

She headed out of town and stopped at a rest stop. She filled her tank and got a sandwich and two sodas to go. The second soda was for her phone. She backed up over the phone and then stuffed the remains of the phone in the cola. The cup went into the garbage, and she was finally on her way.

Rebecca had been driving for three days. She was running for her life, staying under the radar. The stress was taking its toll. She’d planned to stop tonight, but she was so close, less than two hundred miles, that she decided to keep going.

Rebecca hadn’t been to her grandfather’s getaway cottage a few times in years. It was quite hidden away and, while she had destroyed all her electronic GPS devices, including the one in the SUV, she wasn’t worried about finding her way. Fortunately, she had a photographic memory.

She'd stopped in Helena to eat and get groceries. She bought staples and perishables, not knowing what she'd find. She hadn't been able to find any online transactions regarding the property. This was good. She knew if she couldn't find anything, there wasn't anything to be found. Her grandfather might have been good at his job, but he wasn't a computer whiz, like her internet friend Greybeard. She smiled. Between the two of them, they could conquer the world if they set their minds to it.

Rebecca almost missed the turnoff to Justice lane. She slowed down as this was a gravel road. She'd been driving for fourteen hours, and her attention was waning. She didn't see the deer until the last minute. She swerved to avoid it but went off the road and down a shallow slope. She managed to brake before hitting a tree.

The seat belt locked up, and her head snapped forward and then back. Rebecca exhaled in relief. She was alive. She sat still for what seemed like hours but was probably only minutes. Her hands ached from the tight grip on the steering wheel. It took her a few moments to release it, finger by finger. She released the seat belt and tested her limbs and, while achy, everything worked.

"Okay. I'm stiff. Probably bruised, but nothing's broken, and nothing's bleeding." She exhaled in relief.

Rebecca turned off the still-running engine, and the headlights slowly died. It wasn't too bad once her eyes adjusted: the sky was clear, and the moon was waxing gibbous. She couldn't stay here all night. She needed help.

She had seen some lights further down the lane. "No biggie. I just need to get out, climb the embankment, trudge down the road, and hope that the people don't kill me when I get there. Deep breath. I can do this."

She opened the SUV door and stumbled out. She wasn't as steady as she'd thought but caught herself on the door handle and deliberately straightened.

"You can do this. You have to do this. No one is going to rescue you. You know how this goes."

She continued her self-directed pep talk as she made her way up the embankment. She slipped a few times, tearing up her hand and knees before standing on the graveled road. She turned around a few times before seeing the lights in the distance. She squared her shoulders. "Ouch. Let's not do that again," she exclaimed. She blew out a heavy breath and started to walk.

Piers had been out for a late-night run. His wolf had been restless lately, which was unusual. He stilled when he heard the sound of a car braking hard. Someone had tripped the security system and activated the deer hologram. This was a private road, and no one had any business coming down here at night.

So much for a peaceful run, he thought. He was going to have to investigate. He picked up speed and flew through the forest. His wolf reveled in the stretch of muscle. All too quickly, he arrived at the projector location.

They must have been speeding to have made the tracks on the road. He followed them down the embankment to find an SUV. He was surprised that the driver had

managed to stop the vehicle before colliding with a tree. He paced over to the driver-side window and lifted himself up to see inside. The SUV was empty, but... there was something that caught his attention, some scent. It wasn't blood. Curious, he twisted and used his jaw to open the door. The scent inside overwhelmed his senses. MATE. He breathed deep, and his wolf howled his joy. Piers couldn't believe it. She was here. Well, not here exactly. He just had to find her. He dropped his jaw in a lupine grin. He was good at tracking. He set out at an easy lope. She couldn't have gotten far.

Piers stopped as he climbed the embankment. Blood. There wasn't much of it. His mate must have slipped and cut her herself on the loose gravel. Fortunately, the only predators in the area also walked on two legs. All the members of his family were werewolves, and most lived nearby. In fact, the only people who used this road were family members.

What was his mate doing on this road, late at night? Piers trotted after her. He stopped her ahead, weaving a bit from center to edge. She was carrying a branch. He tipped his head in puzzlement. It was too short to use as a walking stick, too thin to use as a bat.

"I was so close," she said. "A deer. A freaking deer. There's a reason I live in Kansas City. You only have to worry about dog shit. Now, I'm stuck walking down a gravel road at night ... in the dark. What next? The way my luck is going, it'll be zombie skunks."

Piers laughed. His mate heard the small yip and twirled around.

“No, no, no,” she cried and threw the branch at him. Her eyes opened wide when she realized that she’d lost her only weapon. “Oh shit! That was a bad idea.” She started to back away slowly.

Piers could smell her fear. He looked at his mate, looked at the branch which had landed far short of his position, and sighed. There was only one thing to do. He walked over to the stick, picked it up in his jaws, and bounded over to her. He dropped the branch a few feet from his mate, sat down, and wagged his tail.

She kept backing up. Piers picked up the branch, walked closer, and, once again, dropped the branch, sat and wagged his tail. He had to repeat this exercise twice more before she stopped and just looked at him.’

“Nice doggie?”

Piers stood and play bowed, wagging his tail.

“Okay. Looks like a wolf but just a big dog that wants to play.” She cautiously stepped forward, picked up the branch, and threw it overhand towards the trees. She missed. The arc of her swing sent the branch further down the road. Piers stood and looked at his mate in astonishment.

“Okay. I get it. I suck at throwing ... well, anything. I guess you’ll have to go home to find a playmate.”

Piers decided this was a good idea. He trotted past her. He stopped about ten feet away, turned his head towards his mate, and waited. He didn’t move until she started to walk. He debated whether to run home, change and come back with his truck. While it would probably be faster, he didn’t want to leave his mate alone.

His grandfather's house was less than a mile away. Piers kept moving, slowing his pace surreptitiously until he was walking by his mate's side.

Her monologuing had stopped. Piers assumed that the night had caught up with her, and she was running on fumes and didn't have the energy left to spare. She stumbled occasionally, and he used his bulk to steady her.

"Good dog. Thank you," she whispered.

Ten long minutes later, they had reached the entrance to Tryggr's driveway. Piers licked her hand and took off for his grandfather's house. He needed to change and explain what was going on. He ran to the back. His family members all kept a changeroom with a wolf-friendly door. His grandfather came in just as he completed his change. Piers panted and explained quickly.

"Granddad, my mate is coming up the drive. She was in an accident. Please, I'll be right out."

Tryggr nodded. "Congratulations. We'll work everything out later." He didn't pat or hug Piers when he stood up. Freshly changed, his skin felt as though he had a bad sunburn. The feeling would quickly dissipate, but Piers didn't want anything on his skin for the next few minutes. He took deep breaths and moved to his locker. Everyone kept clothes for changing but, at his grandparent's home, there were assigned lockers. He was putting on socks when the doorbell rang. She was here. Showtime.