

Chapter 1: Summer's Breeze: Destiny Unfolds

The wolf's howl cut through Sarah's dream like a knife—not a sound of terror, but of recognition. She jolted awake, her heart racing, sweat beading on her forehead. Something had changed. Something was coming. Outside her window, a silver-grey shadow moved with impossible grace. She didn't know it then, but everything was about to change.

Sarah Spenser was an ordinary fourteen-year-old girl navigating the ups and downs of teenage life. With her twin brother, Brian, by her side, she enjoyed a vibrant social life filled with friends, gymnastics practice, exciting summer camps, and the daily grind of school. Like many teens, she excelled in her studies when she put in the effort, but her grades would slip when her motivation waned. Her parents epitomized the typical middle-class family. They both held steady jobs, shared a solid college education, and owned a modest house nestled in the suburbs. While their lives may have seemed unremarkable, they radiated warmth and happiness, creating a stable home environment for their children. The town they inhabited was a snug little community characterized by its friendly neighbors and familiar surroundings. However, not everything was as idyllic as it seemed; a local gang of young adults lurked in the shadows, notorious for causing minor disturbances. These miscreants were more of a nuisance than a real threat, resembling cartoonish villains in their antics. Their leader, Rex—a towering figure who reveled in his bully status—believed himself invincible, bolstered by his band of equally unruly companions.

Despite her cozy life, filled with laughter and camaraderie among her brother's friends, Sarah often sensed an underlying unease. Occasionally, she was visited by peculiar dreams—vivid visions of monstrous waves crashing violently against rocky shores and a solitary wolf standing majestically on a cliff, its haunting gaze seemingly beckoning her closer. Although she felt a connection to these dreams, she often dismissed their significance, attributing it to the complexities of her teenage mind. Unbeknownst to her, Sarah's life was on the brink of a monumental transformation. The wolf from her dreams was not merely a figment of her imagination; it was a powerful omen. These dreams had been coming more frequently lately, leaving her with a strange sense of longing that she couldn't explain. Sometimes, she would wake with tears on her cheeks, though she couldn't remember why. Soon, her reality would be shaken to its core, entangled in trouble woven by Rex and his gang. A fateful encounter with a boy she never expected would ultimately become her unlikely savior, setting her on a new path.

On the other side of town, nestled near a quaint little motel with wooden shutters painted in a warm hue, a lively group of students from Wolfen Hall Boarding School was gearing up for an exciting horse-riding championship. Wolfen Hall is not just an educational institution; it's steeped in history and intrigue. With its ivy-covered stone buildings and well-tended gardens, the school exudes an air of sophistication. For nearly three centuries, its halls have echoed with the ambitions of countless students who have gone on to become influential figures in medicine, research, and academia. The school's curriculum included subjects rarely found elsewhere, and graduates often went on to careers in fields that seemed almost extraordinary. Located in the picturesque Irish countryside, Wolfen Hall attracts bright young minds from around the world, embracing diversity and talent. Its admissions process is thoughtfully designed to pinpoint exceptional students, offering scholarships to those with promise who might otherwise be unable to attend. While the entrance exam appears straightforward at first glance, it's a meticulous evaluation performed by a discerning administration aimed at cultivating extraordinary individuals. Some families, however, carry an undeniable legacy that grants them a unique position within the school community. The Nelson family is a prime example of this privilege. With roots that trace back to one of

Wolfen Hall's founders and a lineage that includes several distinguished alumni, the Nelsons have deep ties to the institution. This year, four members of the family, each brimming with potential and promise—are enrolled, all having taken their first steps into the school as bright-eyed seven-year-olds. At the helm of this family is Todd Nelson, the eldest at fifteen, whose confidence and maturity make him a natural leader among his cousins. He often assumes the role of an older brother, providing support and guidance. He shares this familial bond with the lively twins, Elisabeth and Thomas Anthony J., affectionately known as TJ, as well as with their adopted brother, Oliver 'Hayabusa' Nelson, who adds a sense of adventure to their dynamic. Up to this point in their lives, the children's world has revolved predominantly around Wolfen Hall. When they aren't attending classes or participating in extracurricular activities, they relish their time with their beloved aunt Jamie, who also serves as the school doctor, ensuring the well-being of all students. Laughter, warm meals, and heartfelt conversations mark time spent at Todd's house. Their family situation stems from tragedy, the loss of their mother mere hours after the twins were born and their father's relentless absence over the years—which has forged a strong bond between them. Despite the challenges they face, the Nelson family flourishes as a tightly knit unit, creating lasting memories and forging deep friendships among their classmates at Wolfen Hall. Their resilience and camaraderie shine brightly, making them stand out in a school filled with remarkable individuals.

Todd may have taken charge as the leader of the group, but it was TJ who embodied an indomitable spirit—loyal yet untamed, with a will of iron that often led him into trouble. His attitude frequently resulted in detention, typically served in the kitchen where he would find himself scrubbing dishes or chopping vegetables, sometimes alone, but often alongside his cousin and brother. Clad in his school uniform, TJ's rebellious nature was unmistakable; his shirt was untucked, hanging loosely at his sides, while his tie dangled carelessly, always several inches too slack. His short hair, tousled and wild, seemed to defy any attempt at neatness. "TJ, where do you think you're going?" his sister said assertively, halting him just as he was about to step out the door. "Out. I won't be in line until tomorrow, and I plan to spend the entire day outdoors." He let out a loud yawn and stretched his arms above his head, the muscles in his shoulders flexing. "I need some fresh air and a chance to really stretch my legs."

"Just please try to be back on time!" she urged, her voice tinged with genuine concern as she studied his expression.

"Relax, Lis! I'm just going for a walk. What's the worst that could happen? You know I can handle myself." He flashed her a confident grin, one that hinted at the mischief he often sought. With that, he stepped out into the bright morning.

As he walked outside, the sun's rays bathed him in warmth, enveloping him in a comforting embrace. The air was alive with the sweet fragrance of blooming flowers, a mix of vibrant colors and

active bees buzzing around. With each step, TJ felt a sense of freedom swell within him. He smiled to himself, invigorated by the possibilities that lay ahead, and began to stroll without a specific destination in mind, eager to embrace the day.

As he strolled along a winding path in the serene park, the late afternoon sun filtered through the vibrant green leaves above, casting playful shadows on the ground. No one joined him on his walk, as was often the case whenever his sister found herself preoccupied with school or friends. While he possessed a unique charm and undeniable talents, he never imagined that this solitary excursion would change the course of his life. Nearby, a group of boys loomed over a girl, their laughter cruel and taunting. "Don't you think you could be a little

nicer to us?" one of them called out, arrogance dripping from his voice. Though she could sense the danger surrounding her, the girl stood her ground, her heart racing but her spirit unyielding. "I'll never be nice to morons like you! Now leave me alone or—"

"Or what? Are you waiting for your brother and his friends to come rescue the little princess?" Rex, taller and more intimidating than the others, stepped forward, showcasing a menacing grin. He seemed to have a particular disdain for anyone he perceived as 'privileged' or 'different,' making him especially dangerous to outsiders. The girl's confidence wavered as fear crept in; she knew she was outnumbered and outmatched. Just when the tension felt unbearable, a clear, unwavering voice broke through the commotion from high above them.

"Why don't you pick on someone your own size?" The voice was calm, almost lazy, drifting down from above. The bullies and the girl flinched, their heads snapping upward. High in the boughs of an old oak, a boy was lounging on a thick branch as if it were a sofa. He couldn't have been more than fourteen. His hands were laced behind his head, his eyes were closed, and a faint, infuriatingly serene smile played on his lips. He didn't seem to be intervening so much as commenting on a mildly interesting play. The very air around him hummed with a quiet, unshakeable confidence.

"Who the hell...?" Rex barked, momentarily distracted. The girl seized the opportunity, but two boys still blocked her escape, narrowing their eyes at the newcomer.

"Why don't you leave her and go back to your caves?" he said calmly, his tone nearly bored and still relaxed with his eyes closed.

"I don't take orders from a monkey," Rex retorted defiantly, spitting on the ground and dismissing the warning as he advanced toward the girl, a glinting knife emerging from his pocket.

"I'm not a monkey..." the boy in the tree growled under his breath, a flash of determination igniting in his eyes. Without any warning, he leaped down from the branch, landing lightly on the ground. With a swift and fluid motion, he darted forward, taking down the two nearest boys in a flurry of punches and kicks, movements so quick and precise they resembled a wild animal in combat. The girl watched in awe as the boy moved with a grace and ferocity she couldn't have anticipated, his every move executed with purpose. Within moments, all the boys were sprawled on the ground, groaning in defeat.

The boy didn't spare the groaning figures on the ground a second glance. He walked to the leader, who was struggling to push himself up, his eyes glazed with pain and disbelief. The boy crouched, bringing his face level with the bully's. A grin stretched across his features, but it held no warmth—only a chilling, predatory triumph. He leaned in close, his breath ghosting over the bully's ear. "I'm a wolf," he whispered, the words a low, guttural promise of violence held in check.

He slowly turned toward the girl, a warm smile spreading across his face as he nodded gently in her direction. "I think it's better to move. They won't be pleasant company when they wake up."

With a steady hand, he helped her lift her bike off the ground, and together they set off toward the city, the evening sky casting a golden hue around them. As they walked in silence, the air was thick with unspoken thoughts, the distant sounds of the city growing closer. When the first buildings came into view, the girl finally broke the quiet, glancing at him with wide eyes.

"You... you saved me, and I don't even know your name," the girl spoke, gratitude in her voice.

His smile widened, revealing a hint of mischief. He stretched his arms above his head, the fading light catching the contours of his face. "Thomas Anthony J. Nelson," he replied with a playful sparkle in his eyes, "but you can call me TJ."

Sarah, her cheeks flushed with warmth, extended her hand towards him, her heart racing.

"My name is Sarah, TJ..."

As their hands clasped, a spark of connection ignited between them, and they both blushed at the unexpected intimacy. TJ was the first to pull away, stammering slightly, "Nice... to... uh... meet you, Sarah..." He turned his gaze toward the cityscape, filled with anticipation.

"Well, I think that from now on, you're pretty safe. Besides, I really have to get back, or my teachers will scold me again." Exhaling a resigned sigh, he prepared to dash away.

"TJ... please wait... Are you here on a school trip or something?" Sarah called after him, curiosity lighting her eyes.

"Actually, I'm here with my school for the horse-riding championship. We'll be staying at a motel for about four days, I think. Maybe we'll see each other again..." he replied, the promise of future encounters hanging in the air between them. With that, he took off, a blur of motion swiftly disappearing into the bustling streets.

Sarah remained rooted to the spot, her heart still racing. She gazed wistfully in the direction he had vanished, whispering, "Thanks, TJ..."

As TJ entered the room he shared with his siblings and cousin, he was greeted by his sister.

"One day... just for one day... can you be ON TIME!" she shouted, playfully tossing a pillow at him. "We have to cover for you again. You know they could kick you off the team if you keep this up..." his sister persisted, her brow furrowing with concern.

TJ stretched lazily, rubbing his stomach, which growled in protest. "I'm hungry," he declared, a cheeky grin emerging on his face. Before Elisabeth could launch into another tirade, their one-year-older cousin, Todd, intervened, placing a calming hand on her shoulder. "No, Lis... we need him... let's just relax... dinner is ready..." At the mention of "dinner," TJ's face lit up like a child on Christmas morning. He sprinted for the hall, his excitement infectious, with Oliver trailing behind, still absorbed in his comic, and Elisabeth dragging Todd along, her irritation fading as the promise of a meal called to them all.

After returning to their rooms and following a tense moment, Elisabeth finally managed to calm down. TJ lay sprawled on his bed, his gaze fixed on the ceiling, lost in thought.

"So, how's it going? Hard or easy?" Todd asked, genuinely curious about his cousin's state of mind.

"Mhm," TJ mumbled, not really committing either way.

"Dude, you totally think she's nice," Todd teased with a grin.

"Yeah, whatever..." TJ replied distractedly, then suddenly bolted upright from the bed.

"Hey," Todd grinned widely. "So, my little cousin met a girl!"

Just then, Elisabeth burst into the room, catching the tail end of their banter. "Guys, time to— TJ, what?!" she exclaimed, her eyes wide. "TJ? Met a girl?!" She turned to Todd with an incredulous expression. "...you know that..."

Frustration boiled over in TJ. He jumped down from the bed with sudden force, a low growl escaping his throat as he landed. "I perfectly know what I'm dealing with... I don't need to be reminded of it every single day of my life..." His breathing quickened as his emotions surged, his eyes shifting from dull, grey-green to a faint, reddish tint—a visible sign of his agitation.

"TJ, I..." Elisabeth began, trying to intervene, but before she could finish, he was already out the window, disappearing into the enveloping darkness of the night. The next morning, the atmosphere at the stables was buzzing with excitement. All the teens participating in the

horse-riding championship were busy preparing their horses. The warm sunlight filtered through the stalls, glistening on the coats of the magnificent animals.

"Good, Goliath," TJ murmured, placing a gentle hand on his Friesian stallion, whose glossy black coat shone like polished obsidian. The stallion neighed softly in response, seeming to understand the comfort being offered.

"You have a beautiful horse..." a voice chimed in behind him. TJ turned around and was pleasantly surprised to see Sarah, a familiar face that always brought him a sense of ease.

"And how did you find out I was here?" TJ asked, intrigued and pleased by her presence.

"I saw the news. Not many championships... So, I thought I'd come to see you since... I didn't really thank you for what you did yesterday," Sarah explained, her cheeks flushing a gentle pink as she looked away, clearly shy.

"No need for that," TJ replied, his smile widening as he continued to groom Goliath, feeling a warmth spread within him.

"Say, TJ... do you think you'll have any free time later?" she asked hesitantly, her eyes sparkling with hope.

"Not sure... maybe. How about seven o'clock tonight?" TJ suggested, feeling a mix of excitement and nerves.

"Great! Let's meet at seven o'clock right in front of the city park," Sarah said, her face lighting up with happiness.

"Sounds perfect! I promise I'll find it," TJ said, feeling a flutter in his stomach at the thought of their evening together.

At that moment, another voice cut in playfully, "So, are you coming, or do we need to send the national guard to rescue you?" The jovial tone broke the tension, drawing a laugh from the surrounding kids and adding to the buzz of anticipation for the day ahead.

"Don't worry, Todd, I'm on my way," TJ assured, adjusting his stance as he glanced around.

"By the way, this is Sarah. And Sarah, meet Todd, my cousin."

"Nice to meet you, Sarah. So, you're the girl..." Todd began with a curious smile playing on his lips. Interrupting, TJ said, "I think it's time for us to gather ourselves and head to the riding pitch." He gently nudged Todd towards the door.

"Alright, alright, no need to be rough..." Todd replied, chuckling as TJ led him out. Just then, as TJ was pushing Todd outside, he heard someone call his name from the pitch. Turning back to Sarah, he said, "I have to run now, but I promise I'll be back at seven."

Sarah nodded, a hint of excitement in her voice as she wished him luck. TJ expertly mounted his horse, the sunlight glimmering against the animal's shiny coat, and rode off toward the riding pitch. When the clock struck seven, Sarah waited at the designated meeting spot, her heart fluttering with anticipation.

"Hope you didn't wait too long," a familiar voice broke through her thoughts.

"No, absolutely not," she replied, turning to see TJ approach, his smile warm and inviting.

"So, it's nice to meet you again. What do you think about starting fresh? I'm Thomas Anthony J. Nelson, but you can call me TJ," he said, extending his hand toward her.

Sarah eagerly shook his hand, feeling a pleasant warmth in the gesture. "And what does the J stand for?"

"It stands for Jason, the Greek hero. It's a family tradition, sort of. And you? I know your name..." TJ paused, searching her eyes. "Sarah Spenser," she responded, pleased.

"Alright then, Sarah Spenser. Where are we headed tonight?" he asked with an excited glint in his eye.

"What do you think about starting with a nice slice of pizza?" she suggested, her stomach rumbling slightly.

"That sounds perfect!" TJ laughed. "I left the hotel without eating anything, and I'm absolutely starving."

As they walked towards their destination, the conversation was alive and entangling for both. "You're a horse rider, right?" Sarah asked, her stride matching his, a hint of curiosity in her voice.

TJ's face lit up. "Yep! Ride for my boarding school," he replied, his enthusiasm bubbling over. "It's kind of my thing."

Sarah's eyebrow arched. "Boarding school?" The word hung between them, loaded with unspoken questions.

"Wolfen Hall," he explained, a proud grin spreading. "Trust me, it's not your typical school. Way more interesting than it sounds."

"How can a school be interesting?" she challenged, a playful spark in her eyes.

TJ chuckled, running a hand through his hair. "Some places you just have to experience, you know? Words don't do it justice." He gestured dramatically, then winked. "You'd have to see it to believe it."

The pizzeria's warm aroma interrupted their banter. As they settled in, surrounded by the buzz of conversation and the sizzle of fresh pizza, their chat meandered. "So," TJ leaned forward, "you have a brother? Older? Younger?"

"Twin, actually," Sarah replied, her eyes dancing with shared memories. "Brian."

TJ's jaw dropped. "No way. You're serious?"

She laughed. "Absolutely! Why the shock?"

"Because," he said, spreading his hands wide, "I have a twin sister—Elisabeth. We call her Lis." His grin was infectious. "What are the odds?"

Their laughter mingled, a moment of unexpected connection. Then Sarah's tone softened. "Your parents must be pretty busy, sending you to a boarding school..."

TJ's smile flickered. The lightness dimmed slightly. "It's complicated," he said quietly. "My mom... she passed away when I was born. And my dad? He's always somewhere else. Research, expeditions—always somewhere far away."

Sarah's hand instinctively touched his. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"Hey," TJ interrupted, his smile returning—though something fragile lingered beneath it, "it's ancient history. I have my cousins and friends. More family than most people, honestly." The vulnerability in his eyes told a different story—a mix of pain, resilience, and hope.

As she watched him, Sarah marveled at how a boy who had endured such a painful past could radiate so much happiness and vibrancy.

They strolled through the quiet streets under the starlit sky, lost in conversation, delving into their dreams and fears, forming a genuine connection with each step. After what felt like a magical evening filled with laughter and stories, TJ walked Sarah to her front door.

"Thank you for such a wonderful evening," he said, his voice soft and sincere. The moon cast a silver glow on his face, making his eyes shimmer with unspoken feelings as he turned to face her. Sarah felt a flutter of anticipation in her chest as she stood there, rooted to the spot.

"It was a pleasure for me too," she replied, her voice soft and trembling slightly. Each step closer to him felt like crossing an invisible boundary, the warmth between them electric and charged with unspoken possibilities. Their eyes met—a moment of absolute stillness where the world seemed to pause, holding its breath.

Sarah's heart thundered in her ears. Was this real? The connection they'd shared all evening—the laughter, the stories, the unexpected understanding—crystallized in this single

moment. Before she could second-guess herself, she leaned forward, her lips brushing against TJ's with a gentleness that belied her racing pulse.

For a breathless second, everything aligned. TJ responded, his own emotions surging—and then, abruptly, he pulled away.

The rejection was immediate and jarring. Sarah froze, her cheeks burning with a mix of embarrassment and confusion. "I'm sorry, I didn't—"

"No," TJ interrupted, his voice cracking. His hands were shaking—she could see them trembling slightly at his sides. "It's not you. It's... complicated."

His eyes darted everywhere but her face—to the streetlight, the pavement, the distant trees. When he finally spoke, the words came out in a rush. "I like you. More than I've ever liked anyone. And that terrifies me."

Sarah waited, her breath caught in her throat.

"I'm scared," TJ whispered, and in that moment, he looked younger than his years—vulnerable, raw. "What if I'm not enough? What if I can't... be what you need?"

The vulnerability in his voice was unlike anything she'd expected. This wasn't rejection—this was fear—pure, unfiltered fear of connection. "TJ," she said softly, taking a step toward him, "whatever you're afraid of—"

But he was already backing away, panic rising in his eyes. "I can't. I'm sorry. I have to go." Before she could respond, he'd transformed into a shadow, dissolving into the night's darkness.

Sarah stood frozen, the night air cool against her flushed skin. The kiss—their almost-moment—hung suspended between reality and memory. She'd known TJ for mere hours, and yet something profound had shifted. Something inexplicable.

A dark silhouette darted through the towering trees as the full moon cast its silvery glow across the forest floor. "I knew I would find you here," a soft voice echoed, as the moonlight revealed a striking, snow-white female wolf, her coat shimmering like frost on a winter morning.

"C'mon, it's not difficult for a wolf to track down her brother," replied a much larger wolf, his fur a shimmering blend of silvery grey, standing proudly at the edge of a rocky ledge.

"So, are you going to share what's on your mind or just keep me in suspense?" she teased, her ears perked up in anticipation.

"Alright, alright... She's stunning—beautiful, smart, and, Lis, she's the girl I've always dreamed of finding," TJ admitted, his heart racing at the thought.

"But she has no idea that you're a mysterious creature, something akin to a werewolf, and that you spent your first four years living with a pack of wolves," the white wolf replied, shaking her head with a mix of disbelief and amusement. "Yeah... I really don't stand a chance..." TJ sighed, lowering his head in defeat, his silver-grey fur catching the moonlight as he did.

"TJ, have I ever mentioned how utterly pathetic you can be when it comes to girls? Just ask her how she feels about you!"

"Actually... we kissed, and I'm pretty sure she accepted me well..." he said, a hint of hope filling his voice.

"That's interesting," the white wolf said, her eyes narrowing playfully as she growled, a teasing smirk playing at the corners of her mouth.

"C'mon, stop it..." TJ protested, feeling embarrassment flush through him.

"Seems you're growing up and leaving your cub days behind," Elisabeth chuckled.

"Come here, you!" he exclaimed, lunging playfully at her.

"Remember, we have another round tomorrow..." she reminded him with a mischievous glint in her eyes. With that, the two wolves leaped into action, playfully chasing one another through the moonlit forest, their laughter echoing among the trees as they embraced the joy of their bond.

The following morning hung heavy with unresolved tension. TJ remained at the motel, emotions churning like a storm beneath a calm surface. The championship games had concluded, but his mind was elsewhere, replaying his abrupt departure from Sarah, wrestling with a maelstrom of uncertainty. Restless, he decided a walk might quiet his racing thoughts. The creaky wooden stairs groaned beneath his steps as he descended into the dimly lit hallway. And there she was—Sarah—standing by the exit, her presence both unexpected and inevitable. For a heartbeat, time suspended. TJ froze, uncertainty etching itself across his features. How could he possibly explain?

Sarah's eyes found his, cutting through his hesitation. "I wanted to check on you," she said softly. "What happened yesterday? You just ran off, and I'm afraid it's my fault..."

"No," TJ responded quickly, his voice raw with vulnerability. "It's not you. It's... complicated." He struggled, searching for words that might bridge the chasm between them. "I'm not... I'm not like other guys you might know."

A heavy silence stretched between them, laden with unspoken fears. "Look. I live miles away," he continued, his voice dropping to almost a whisper. "I'm the kind of person adults warn you about. Sometimes I feel like I'm of no use to anyone." The words tumbled out, a mixture of self-doubt and desperate honesty.

Sarah stepped closer. "I don't believe that," she said firmly. "I can't explain it, but I know I can't forget you." Tears welled in her eyes, catching the soft hallway light. "I love you. I know it sounds crazy, and maybe we don't fully understand what that means, but..."

Her vulnerability was a key that unlocked something deep within TJ. In that moment, he decided to shed the weight of his doubts—the complicated relationship with his father, the shadow of an ominous prophecy, the constant feeling of being different. He cupped her face, their connection transcending words. "I love you too," he whispered, kissing her with a tenderness that spoke of both passion and fragility.

As they pulled apart, TJ's expression grew serious. "There's something important I need to tell you," he began, a hint of apprehension in his voice. Sarah's playful finger pressed against his lips. "Whatever it is, it doesn't matter," she murmured, her eyes sparkling with an innocence that both thrilled and terrified him. "But this is significant—" TJ started to protest. "TJ!" His sister's voice echoed down the hallway, shattering the intimate moment. "You won't believe what just happened—" She stopped mid-sentence, her gaze landing on Sarah. A welcoming smile spread across her face. "You must be Sarah," she said, extending her hand.

TJ sighed inwardly, realizing his moment was slipping away, but he introduced Sarah to Elisabeth with a nod. The two girls quickly fell into conversation, as if they were long-lost friends reconnecting after years apart. Elisabeth was animated as she shared stories about their school, family, general life, and about their father, Ulysses Anthony Nelson. She described him as a genetic researcher, although the nature of his work was often shrouded in secrecy. Each time they received a call from him, he seemed to be in a different corner of the globe—one moment in a bustling city, the next in a remote village. As TJ listened to the two of them bond over shared stories and laughter, an edge of annoyance crept into his mood. He finally interjected, raising an eyebrow. "Excuse me, you two, but..."

"Absolutely!" Sarah exclaimed with bright enthusiasm, her eyes sparkling. "Listen, my school is hosting a dance tonight, and you're definitely invited!"

TJ beamed at her invitation, but it was Elisabeth who stepped in to respond for both of them as the atmosphere grew livelier. Just as their conversation began to flow, they were joined by Todd, a friendly face familiar to Sarah, and Oliver, who introduced himself with a warm smile. Without hesitation, they all accepted the invitation, eager for the fun ahead.

"By the way, how long will you be staying in town?" Sarah asked, her gaze fixed on TJ with curiosity.

"Um... We'll probably head back home in two days," he replied, the hint of reluctance evident in his voice. "I see..." The weight of their impending departure cast a slight shadow over the group's excitement. Sensing the mood shift, Elisabeth quickly interjected to brighten the atmosphere. "But since the championship is over, we have two whole days and nights just to enjoy ourselves! Isn't that right?"

"That's my sweet cousin!" Todd erupted, his enthusiasm infectious. He then leaned forward, eyes gleaming. "So, what's the plan, everyone?"

"I'll come and pick you all up!" Sarah announced, her voice full of determination.

"Then we'll see you tonight!" Todd replied with a grin. He scooped up Elisabeth and Oliver, leaving TJ and Sarah momentarily alone, standing amidst the bustle of the hallway.

"That's my family for you—quite the cast of characters, right?" TJ chuckled, shaking his head in amusement.

"Interesting... and wonderfully unique," Sarah said, her face lighting up with a warm smile. Yet, as TJ turned serious, concern flickered in his eyes. "You heard that we're leaving in a few days, so I don't know if we should..." he started, his voice trailing off.

"Don't say that," she interrupted gently. "You heard your sister. We have two days and two nights..." In a sudden moment of sweetness, she leaned in and kissed him again, leaving him momentarily dazed. As they broke apart, she turned and dashed away, her laughter lingering in the air, while a worried expression crossed TJ's face.

"I'll pick you up at seven!" she called over her shoulder, waving as she sprinted out of the hall, her blue dress fluttering behind her like a comet's tail. Later that evening, the boys prepared for the dance. TJ adjusted his tie, and Oliver smoothed his shirt; the room hummed with nervous

anticipation. Elisabeth burst through the door, her excitement electric. "You guys ready?" she demanded, her eyes dancing with mischief.

"Almost," TJ muttered, wrestling with his collar.

Oliver chuckled. "Nervous?"

"Me? Never," TJ replied, but his trembling hands betrayed him.

"Okay. I think it's time to go," TJ finally announced, looking at the clock. "Good call!" Todd agreed, straightening up. The four of them made their way down the hall after receiving their teachers' approval. As they reached the entrance, they spotted Sarah waiting for them, her presence radiant in a stunning blue dress that flowed gracefully around her.

"You are... um..." TJ started, momentarily speechless, his breath taken by how beautiful she looked under the soft glow of the evening lights.

"Probably he's trying to say that you're gorgeous, right, bro?" Elisabeth chimed in, her voice lighthearted as she always was, saving TJ once again.

"Yes," he confirmed, his gaze still lingering on Sarah, feeling an overwhelming sense of admiration.

After exchanging a few light-hearted words, TJ and Sarah made their way to her school, excitement buzzing between them. Upon arrival, they were greeted by Sarah's brother, Brian, whose expression betrayed a mix of skepticism and protective instinct. He eyed TJ warily, typical behavior for a brother concerned about his sister's date. Sarah glanced at

Brian, her expression pleading for his acceptance, and then confidently took TJ's hand as they headed toward the dance floor.

"I don't think I'm welcome here," TJ said, his voice laced with uncertainty. "Don't worry, it'll be over before you know it," Sarah reassured him, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm.

"TJ," Sarah's voice was soft, almost hesitant, "there's so much about you I don't understand." He tensed, a defensive smile playing at the corner of his mouth. "I thought we were here to dance, not do a deep dive into my life story." The lightness in his tone didn't quite mask the underlying vulnerability.

Sarah recognized the wall he was building. Instead of pushing, she simply squeezed his hand, letting the music wash over them. They moved together, finding a rhythm that spoke more than words could.

The night air hummed with music and possibility—until the silence shattered.

Motorcycle engines roared like thunder, cutting through the dance's melody. The gang TJ had confronted earlier had returned, and they weren't alone. New faces joined them, each more menacing than the last. Firecrackers exploded into the crowd. Screams erupted. Panic spread like wildfire.

"Prey becomes predator tonight," the gang leader growled, his eyes locked on TJ with murderous intent.

TJ's response was a low, dangerous rumble rising from deep in his chest. But before he could move, a brutal blow struck him. He crashed to the ground, vision spinning. Through the chaos, Sarah was ripped from the dance floor. Elisabeth's voice cut through the mayhem, urgent and sharp. "They've taken Sarah!"

TJ's world snapped into focus. Rage burned away the last vestiges of confusion. He was on his feet in an instant, a wild energy crackling around him. "I'm going to tear them apart!" he snarled, something primal and dangerous flickering in his eyes.

Elisabeth grabbed his arm. "TJ, wait—"

But he was already moving, a storm of fury and fear, ready to tear apart anyone standing between him and Sarah.

"It would be safer to call the police. They know how to handle situations like this..." Brian urged, his brow furrowed with anxiety for Sarah's safety. He also understood that facing the gang without assistance was a daunting challenge. "He can't take them on alone."

"Don't worry; he'll manage," said Todd, trying to remain calm. He glanced at Elisabeth and Oliver and added, "Let's call the police..."

The night consumed TJ, shadows blurring as he pursued Sarah's captors. Human speed was too slow; instinct took over. In a fluid motion, he transformed, wolf senses igniting. The world sharpened: scents became landscapes, sounds transformed into precise coordinates. He tracked them through back alleys and forgotten streets, a silver-grey blur of determination.

When he finally found them, hope surged. "Sarah!" he called out, rushing to untie her.

"TJ, behind you!" Her scream came too late. A crushing blow sent him reeling.

Consciousness flickered like a dying flame. When he awakened, pain was his only companion. Chains bit into his wrists, Rex's sneering face inches from his own.

"Let's see how tough you really are," Rex taunted, each word punctuated by a brutal punch. Sarah's anguished cries echoed in the background. Blood filled TJ's mouth, but something more profound was rising—a primal fury that transcended human limitation. His eyes ignited—not just red, but a burning, otherworldly amber that seemed to pulse with ancient power.

"TJ!" Sarah's voice was a lifeline, a desperate prayer.

The chains shattered like glass. But this was no ordinary escape—TJ's transformation was visceral, terrifying. Muscles rippled, bones reshaped. Where a boy had been, now stood a creature that was neither fully human nor completely wolf—something infinitely more dangerous.

"I told you," his voice rumbled, no longer human but not quite animal, "I'm no monkey." Rex's bravado evaporated. Fear replaced his earlier confidence. TJ moved with impossible speed, a blur of fur and fury. Each strike was calculated, precise—not just revenge, but protection. When he finally stood over Rex's unconscious body, something profound had changed. "I'm a wolf!" he growled over the now unconscious Rex. He turned to Sarah, vulnerability replacing the wild energy. The distant wail of sirens approached. His friends would be here soon. For a moment, TJ hesitated—caught between escape and something more.

"Wait, TJ..."

"I'm sorry... but this is who I am," he replied, his voice filled with regret. "It's my nature, my past, my present, and my future... I hope you'll be safe." In one swift motion, he shifted back into his majestic wolf form and sprinted into the encroaching darkness of the forest, disappearing.

"Sarah! Are you okay?" Brian asked urgently, his face etched with worry as he rushed to her side.

"Yes... TJ was here, and he saved me..." Her voice trembled, and tears streamed down her cheeks, each drop reflecting her relief and lingering fear.

The police officers surveyed the group of disheveled gang members sprawled on the ground. Some were still incoherently muttering about being attacked by a wild animal, their eyes wide with shock. The officers exchanged skeptical glances, attributing their bizarre claims to the effects of drugs and alcohol, dismissing them as hallucinations stemming from their intoxication. They turned their attention to Sarah, gently asking if she was aware that the story the gang members had provided seemed too far-fetched. Understanding that they wouldn't take her seriously, she opted for a safer explanation, stating that the gang had turned on each other while under the influence of some substance. Elisabeth, Todd, and Oliver, glancing at one another with knowing expressions, quickly supported her narrative, deliberately omitting any mention of TJ. After a moment of silence, Todd, who had a determined look in his eyes, addressed his cousins, saying, "I think it's best if we leave now." The following day dawned without any mention of the harrowing events from the night before. TJ sat with a somber expression, his mind heavy with thoughts as Elisabeth gently placed a comforting hand on his shoulder, trying to reassure him. They worked in silence, packing their belongings, the tension palpable in the air. Finally, it was time to reunite with the other students, who were buzzing with anticipation for their journey to Wolfen Hall Boarding School. TJ retreated to the corner of the bus, his body curled inward as he tried to disappear. His heart weighed heavily in his chest, haunted by the fleeting feelings of joy and love that Sarah had momentarily ignited within him. He couldn't shake the thought that he might never experience those emotions again, leaving him feeling more isolated than ever.