

Chapter Twelve

A few days later, Clayton called to schedule an appointment with Will and Lacey to let Will get his full wolf on, and Will found himself waking up from a nightmare the morning on the day of that he couldn't get his transformation under control and had mauled one of his partners.

The sudden shift from sleep to consciousness had woken Lacey, who had immediately set about trying to calm him down. "It was just a dream, Will," she whispered to him quietly. "You're okay. You're alright. It was just a bad dream, nothing else."

"Jesus, Lacey," Will said, feeling exactly how sweaty he was. "It felt so fucking vivid."

"Nightmares are like that, Will," she said as she cuddled him with a smile. "Otherwise we could shrug them off without any real work. But you're here now, everyone's safe and you're still in control."

"Hopefully I can't shift in my sleep, but I guess that's just another question I can add to ask Clayton when we meet up with him tonight," Will said as he moved to climb out of bed, Lacey following after him, the two heading into the bathroom and into the shower.

"You said Clayton's sister Trish is going to be there, too?" Lacey asked him, turning on the hot water, letting the shower temperature equalize while they stripped out of their night clothes.

"Yeah, and some guy named EJ as well," Will said, stepping out of his boxers.

"EJ I don't give a shit about," Lacey said with a slight giggle. "April told me to keep an eye on this Trish girl, said it sounded like she might've been thinking about getting her some of my fresh young werewolf boy."

"I don't think it was like that, Lacey," Will said as he stepped into the shower. "I think she was just there because she was the aggrieved party, and the diner's a sanctuary now. She barely even looked by way until they were done with the vampires."

"Of course not," Lacey said as she moved to join him, pushing him in a little bit so they were sharing the hot water. "She had to make sure business shit got done first. That's the way it should be. April said she only got a look at the back of her but that she looked like she was at least as tall as Freya is, and a lot more muscular."

"Well, she's a werewolf, Lacey. Like me."

"*You're* not built like that, Will," Lacey told him as she started to scrub his body with soap. "Don't get me wrong – you're more muscular than you were when we first hooked up, but you're still lean, agile, not bulky like a linebacker. You're just strong even if you don't entirely look like it. But this'll be good. It'll be a chance for them to get you trained and for me to size this girl up."

"She actually looked a bit older than me, Lacey, which is another reason I don't think she'd be interested in me."

"Will, your naiveté is adorable, but let me worry about the women you've got tangled up in your life, okay? I'm still not sure you can be trusted to manage them."

"I think you're crazy, Lacey, but fine. If Tricia wants some part of me, I'll make her talk to you first, okay?"

Lacey nodded, as if the matter was closed for discussion. "That's all I'm asking for, Will, to make sure you're keeping me in the loop on what our pack looks like."

There was something territorial about the way Lacey had answered that Will couldn't help but find attractive. She stepped out of the shower first and Will followed her out a moment or two later, joining him in toweling off. "I'm just worried I'm going to be a bad werewolf," Will sighed a little bit, rubbing his eyes.

“You’ll be fine, Will,” Lacey said, hugging him gently. “You’re new to this, and you said they all grew up being trained, so expect it to take you a little longer to get it all figured out. But you’re very bright, babe, so I wouldn’t be surprised if you have it picked up before you know it.”

“Well, you’re going to come, right?”

“What do you mean?”

“Clayton said it would be good to bring one of the members of my pack with me, just so that they’d get comfortable with seeing the transformation, and since you’ve been with me since the beginning, I figured you should be the one to come along,” he told her.

“Yeah, okay,” Lacey said. “Just as long as you promise not to try and come after me with your cock in werewolf form,” she giggled. “I’m certain that’ll be way too big for a human girl to handle.”

“I somehow think sex’ll be the last thing on my mind.”

“Sex is always in the top few things of any man’s mind, even if he’s a werewolf at the time,” Lacey chastised. “But we’ll see how it goes.”

The day passed with a sense of nervous energy hanging in the air, like a combination of waiting for a big test and Christmas morning all at once. On one hand, he was excited about getting in touch with his natural werewolf side, but the idea of being out of control made him more than a little nervous. They’d promised he’d be able to keep control, and if he didn’t, he wouldn’t cause too much chaos. So during the day, he went about his normal routine as much as he could without getting distracted. In fact, he found himself more focused than he usually was, plowing through his classwork (and one of his partners) before hopping through a second shower and then into a second pair of clothes, because nobody wants to show up for the first day of class smelling of sex funk.

It was close to eleven o’clock at night when the knock came at the door, and Will nearly jumped to his feet. He headed over and opened it to look upon the three who’d shown up to train him. He was familiar with both Clayton and Trish, but EJ was the one he’d never met before, and the man looked like he was as much muscle as hair. He wasn’t wolfed out, but he might as well have been, because he was a barber’s nightmare. Closer to seven foot tall than six, his shoulders were broad enough across to make Will feel like a kicker staring into a linebacker’s visage.

“You must be Will!” EJ’s high-pitched squeaky voice said, completely unlike whatever Will had expected the megalith of a man to sound like. It was almost like someone had taken John Wayne’s voice and run it through a helium filter. “I’m Elijah Jackson, but most folks around here just call me EJ. Don’t worry about this. I’m sure they got you all hyped up on how dangerous and scary it is to wolf out for the first time, but it’ll be fine. I’ll keep you on the straight and narrow.” Will reached out and shook the man’s hand, not entirely sure he was going to get his hand back but found the giant had a gentle grip as well. “This the lady you’re gonna have with us? ‘llo ma’am. I’m EJ.”

“I’m Lacey, EJ. Nice to meet you! You from around here?”

“Nah, I’m from North Dakota,” EJ said with a laugh. “There’s crap hunting around here, and it’s... well, it’s more difficult for us to be ourselves around here. Will should be fine, as long as he’s not doing anything to draw too much attention to himself. Plus, he’s the keeper of a sanctuary, and that’s a lot of clout to be able to throw around if he needs to. I’ve never even met a sanctuary keeper before. They’re extremely rare.”

“How many sanctuaries exist?” Will asked him.

“Worldwide? Less than a hundred. Probably less than fifty since the last Great Conflict,” Clayton said. “It was quite the dustup. Lots of problems causing a great many deaths. That’s the

trouble with wars. Everybody loses; nobody wins.”

“What was the war about?”

“Lots of different claims. Hunting rights. Safety zones. Tribal allegiances. A whole lot of noise about a whole lot of nothing,” Trish sighed. “Nobody knows anything. It’s all a bunch of old world problems rubbing against a new world society. People so afraid of change that they’ll do anything to prevent it.”

“A bunch of fighting for no real reason and no winners or losers,” Clayton sniffed. “Just a body count and a whole lot of pain. Hopefully it doesn’t happen again.”

Will stretched his arms from side to side. “If you don’t know who caused it, you don’t know who won, you don’t know who lost and you don’t know why the war was fought in the first place. Of course it’s going to happen again. That’s the nature of such things. They’re cyclical. Nothing I can do about that, though, except be prepared to take care of me and my own. Let’s go and get training.”

The five of them headed out into the winter air and hopped into Clayton’s Escalade, the big SUV more than capable of handling all of their bulky bodies. Will noticed that Clayton had heavy chains on his tires and was obviously accustomed to driving through the hell weather that Colorado had been known to throw at an unwary traveler. He also noticed Lacey was bundled up far more warmly than the rest of them were, something he wrote off due to innate cold resistance.

If there was one thing it was not hard to find around Colorado Springs, it was a stretch of remote and secluded woodland. They’d stopped to open and close a gate marked ‘private property’ so Will assumed that Clayton’s family owned the land, or maybe it belonged to EJ. The road, if it could even be called that, looked barely used, the pathway struggling to stay visible beneath the fresh assault of snow.

They hadn’t talked much along the way, with Will feeling like they were sizing him up, and that he didn’t want to give them much to go on.

The Escalade moved through the trees and eventually came across a wooded cabin with a plume of smoke coming from its chimney. “One of my pack is in there, tending to the hearth,” Clayton told him. “It’s always good to have a warm home to return to.”

“That’s what Will’s got us for,” Lacey volunteered.

“You think *you’re* ready for this, Lacey?” Trish asked her as the Escalade pulled in beneath a little constructed overhang, designed to keep at least a little bit of snow off the vehicle.

“After the shock of the initial biting, I think I can handle just about anything the big lug can throw at me,” Lacey responded.

“Have you seen him wolfed out before?”

“Just the once, and he wasn’t aware of it.”

“Ah, when you were rescuing him.”

“Yes.”

“I’m right *here*,” Will pointed out.

“You were right *there* when we rescued you too, Will,” Lacey giggled. “Doesn’t change anything. And it’s nothing to be ashamed of. They got the drop on you.”

“That’s what we’re here to prevent,” Clayton said. “We’re here to train you so that if you are ever captured again, you’ll be able to shift forms and break out.”

“I’m a little surprised it didn’t come to me naturally,” Will sighed. “Although maybe it did and I just don’t remember?”

“Controlling it can be the tricky part,” Trish said. “All the rest of us, we’re trained at a very young age how to control it, how to manage the adrenaline spike of transforming... it’s a

thing we learn a little bit each day over a whole lot of days.” She moved over to lean against a giant tree. “You don’t get that kind of luxury. We’re gonna cram all that knowledge into just a few hours, and then you can spend time practicing.”

“So how do I do it?”

“It’s a little like asking how you make a fist, or hold your breath,” Trish replied. “You just sort of... do it.”

Will chuckled. “Anyone ever tell you you’re a terrible teacher?”

“That’s why I’m here, Will,” EJ said. “I’m used to having to teach those of our kind who aren’t quite natural at picking this up. What I want from you, Will, is to close your eyes and listen to the sounds of the forest.”

“All I hear is the wind, EJ.”

“Good. Start with that. Listen to the shift in tones and pitch. See if you can imagine yourself riding on the flux of it, drifting around the forest, whipping across the leaves, watching all the denizens of the woods. You are neither predator nor prey at this point, merely an observer, a watcher in the woods, a shadow among the snow. Can you start to see it taking shape in your mind?”

“I can,” Will said, “but it’s all very dark.”

“Ah yes, forgot to teach you the other thing,” EJ chuckled. “Heavens, I *am* rusty. Will, I want you to imagine your eyesight shifting, moving from color to black and white, but in doing so, everything becomes brighter, more distinguished, more defined. Do you see it?”

As EJ was describing what to do, Will could feel his vision shifting and falling, the colors dripping out of it and turning into monochrome, but in doing so, the contrast between all things kept growing sharper and sharper, and it was easier and easier to pick out things that moved from things that didn’t, using motion blur to help discern the living from the dead.

“Now, try to imagine you can see the warmth of life that the living things are giving off, like you tap into your vision to see the heat and cold in the area. See it?”

Sure enough, Will could start to see the outline of five red and orange bodies standing in the clearing, one of which was his own. “How the hell am I doing this?” he asked EJ.

“Open your eyes and look for yourself.”

Will opened his eyes and glanced back to where the vision had been coming from, and there, perched on a branch, was a large snow owl, gazing back at him from the darkness. He was still seeing things in terms of heat, so the creature stood out like a blip of color against the dark crush of the night. “Huh,” Will muttered to himself. “That’s a neat trick.”

“You’re attuned to the creatures of nature, Will,” Clayton said to him. “You’ll be able to do that with any wild creatures you run into, as long as you’re relaxed and able to keep your head clear. What we’re about to do now, though, that’s gonna be the opposite of that. It’s gonna take you right into the heart of anger and rage, and you’ll need to keep a clear head in that, which is the hard part.”

“Let’s get started,” Will said. “I don’t want to get taken again.”

“You won’t be, son,” Clayton said. “EJ, give him the juice.”

EJ moved over and placed his hand on Will’s shoulder, and chuckled. “This is going to feel a little bit strange, Will.”

Will raised a hand up suddenly. “Hang on, shouldn’t I get naked first? I don’t want to rip these clothes.”

EJ looked over at Clayton and Trish with disappointment on his face. “You didn’t tell him?”

“I didn’t know we *needed* to tell him, EJ!” Clayton said, tossing his hands up, laughing. “You’d think he’d have figured it out by now.”

“He didn’t grow up around our kind, Clayton,” Trish said. “Don’t assume he knows the basics.”

“Look, Will, this is going to sound strange, but you don’t actually *transform* when you become a werewolf – you *shift*.”

“What’s the difference?” Will asked.

“Here, look at Trish for a second,” Clayton said. “Sis, shift for us, would you?”

Within a split second, Trish had been replaced by a large red furred werewolf, her jaw open and wide, but her expression more stoic than angry. A moment later, she shifted back and Trish was standing exactly where she’d been standing, still wearing the clothes she was wearing before.

“Let me ask you a question that’ll help put all this into better context, Will,” EJ said to him. “All that extra mass – the muscle, the fur, the bone – where’d all that come from? Where did it go?”

“Wait, you’re saying our bodies don’t change... we’re, what, replacing our bodies with other bodies from somewhere else?”

“That’s the theory, Will,” Clayton said. “We can’t prove it, obviously, but that’s how it all seems to work, as best as we can tell. All our clothes are the same. The contents of our pockets don’t change. We’re just suddenly in our werewolf bodies and our human bodies are... in storage, I guess is how we like to think of them.”

“I saw my uncle transform just his hand, though...”

“Well, we can shift parts of us when needed, but it’s usually restricted to either just our hands or just our heads, and we can’t hold it for long, because obviously, your werewolf head’s going to weigh a lot more than your regular head, and your human spine isn’t built for that.”

“Can we communicate when in werewolf form?”

“Sort of,” Clayton said. “You’ll notice it’s not quite telepathy, but sort of a pack understanding, that you’ll know generally what others are trying to communicate to you. If you want to make a plan or have an actual conversation, you’ll need to shift back into human form. The werewolf form is really only for attack, defense or hunting, and for everything else, there’s human form.”

“You don’t have sex as werewolves?” Lacey asked with a giggle.

Trish winced, shaking her head. “Werewolf cocks have a knot about halfway up them, and our mothers would always tell us, you can believe your parents or you can try having sex as a werewolf once and then never do it again. Like most kids, we didn’t think our parents knew any better, but my stomach still churns thinking about the one time I tried it. Neither me nor my boyfriend at the time walked right for a week. Far more pain than pleasure, and that was between two werewolves. If he came at you with that monster, I’m not sure you’d survive. Don’t even think about it, Lacey. You seem nice enough, and I’d hate for him to accidentally wound you.”

Will had debated if they were pulling his leg, but the look of remembered pain on Trish’s face looked far too genuine to be anything but real, so he decided to let it drop. “I guess the fact that I’ll still have my clothes on means I’ll still have my keys on me.”

“I’m surprised you’re not more pleased about not having your junk hanging out,” EJ said.

“It’s very *nice* junk,” Lacey laughed.

“If we could move it along?” Clayton said. “It’s fucking freezing out here, and I’d rather we get to training Will instead of standing around like a bunch of tourists.” And with that,

Clayton shifted into a large werewolf, his fur a golden brown, about the size of his sister when she had shifted, and in fact, Tricia shifted into her werewolf form as well, as both her and Clayton suddenly went bounding off into the treeline.

“I won’t feel the cold as much as a wolf?” Will asked EJ, the two of them and Lacey the only ones left standing next to the building.

“You’ll be under a great big fur coat, what do you think?”

“Fine, so how do I get there?”

“It’s a little like meditation in that the idea is to sort of clear your mind and just focus on being the wolf, inhabiting the wolf, applying the wolf. Don’t think about what you’re having for dinner or anything other than being the wolf.”

“That’s it?”

“Well, if you can avoid thinking *at all*, that’ll make it even easier. You just have to relax and embrace the wolf and let go,” EJ said. “And don’t worry if it takes a while. We can be here all night if that’s what it takes. All of us grew up learning how to control this, so if it takes you a bit, tha—”

Mid-sentence, Will felt the shift take hold of him, and suddenly his body had shifted from his normal human body to that of a lean, lumbering black furred werewolf, much a similar shade of fur to his uncle, as Will decided to test his body with a jump.

The leap was a little less coordinated and calculated than Will had assumed it would be, simply because he’d expected his new body to be able to leap a few feet, not a few *dozen* feet. So he found himself colliding with a tree, but the tree bent before Will slid around it, his body clearly having enough mass that he could’ve broken the tree if he’d hit it dead on.

His vision had shifted into thermal, and he could see the pawprints in the snow, so he started sprinting after them, running through the forest at speeds he wouldn’t have dreamed imaginable. He must’ve been running thirty or forty miles an hour without so much as breaking a sweat. He didn’t feel angry or upset or even tired.

He felt free.

Within moments, he’d caught up to Clayton and Trish, and the three of them took off sprinting through the woods, and while he was certain Clayton and Trish were bigger and stronger than he was, it seemed relatively clear he was faster than they were and was able to keep several jumps ahead of them in the sprinting sections. When they’d gotten far enough, he could feel Clayton’s brain telling him to turn back, that it was time to return towards the cabin, so he wheeled around, using a tree to redirect his energy and start bounding back towards where they’d started, overshooting the mark and skidding in the snow before he trod back towards where he’d begun what felt like hours ago.

“Now think back to what Will looks like,” EJ said, standing next to him. “Imagine Will’s form, Will’s hair, Will’s muscles.”

Will could feel his other form calling to him, his original body yearning to get back out of whatever slipspace it was imprisoned in, and within the blink of an eye, the werewolf form was gone and Will’s body had returned. He glanced at his watch.

Exactly three minutes had passed.

“Good lord,” Will said, finding himself a little out of breath. “It felt like time wasn’t moving quite right there, like I was moving faster than I should be able to.”

“That’s part of the shift space,” EJ said to him. “And is also why you feel like you’re out of breath. It’s hard to explain, but the two forms are linked in terms of some things, so if you get wounded here, or there, it’ll transfer across, but your werewolf form heals faster than your

human form does. That's probably why you don't have the brand that Lacey was asking about on the car ride up."

"I just healed it up?"

"Well," EJ said with a smile. "You remember how I told you that you could shift parts of yourself? When you started to feel the heat, you probably shifted that portion of your leg into your wolf form and let it burn the werewolf leg. Your werewolf form can heal from almost anything given two day's rest. You kept that part of your body in werewolf form as long as it took to heal, and then let it switch back to your normal leg. You never even noticed."

"Almost anything?"

"Missing limbs take a few weeks, sometimes even a few months to recover, if they even do. There's a decent chance if you lose a limb in werewolf form, it's just gone forever."

"What about wounds to my human form?"

"Those will do *some* healing while you're in werewolf form, but nowhere near as much. It's not a good thing to do, getting your human form injured. If you can help it, if you feel like you're in danger, go wolf and worry about getting out first and foremost."

Will moved over to sit down on a little wooden bench next to Lacey, as she took his warm hands into her cool fingertips. "How come I'm out of breath if this body was just standing still when my werewolf form was out and about running around?"

"It's all connected, and there's a strong link, so you can't just switch back and forth between the forms to avoid getting tired," EJ said. "Transforming takes a good amount out of you."

"Okay. Then what's all this about hunt quotas that I heard Clayton and Trish talking about at the diner?"

"You can ask him yourself," EJ said as Trish sprinted back to the cabin, followed by her brother, both quickly resuming their human forms. "You want to tell him about the hunting quotas, Clayton?"

Clayton sighed, moving to lean against the porch of the cabin. "It might feel like we've all got these werewolf forms under complete control, Will, but the truth is that if we don't let them out every now and again, to *hunt*, they can sometimes overwhelm us. That's where the old myth about werewolves being monsters come from. That's true for all the various nocturnes."

"Nocturnes?"

"Night creatures. Us. The vampires. The whole lot of supernatural beasties, except for the mages, naturally," Trish said. "We all need to hunt, so that's where the Accords come in. They let us hunt undesirable humans – criminals, rapists, drug dealers and the like – and we don't go hunting on the innocents, and we help them keep the peace. If we don't follow the Accords, the human hunters can come after us, usually with the blessing of the rest of our kind."

"That's why Silversmith said the hunters coming after me were in defiance of the Accords," Will said. "Because I hadn't broken them. I hadn't been hunting at all, and they thought that I had."

Trish nodded at him. "Exactly. If you had been hunting humans outside of the allotted hunt, then you'd have been a very bad boy, and they could take their time torturing and killing you. Except that their evidence was crap, and they knew it, and they just wanted to hunt something they thought would be too weak to fight back."

"They weren't even sure what you were, which I suppose I can understand considering *you* didn't know what you were, and you didn't give them any real reason to suspect you were any one thing or another," Clayton said with a chuckle.

“Can you imagine if Will here had been a dragonborn?” EJ laughed. “He would’ve destroyed all three of them before they’d even gotten a chance to ask him their first question.”

“God help them,” Clayton said. “At least the female didn’t seem all that stupid.”

“Freya’s a bad ass,” Lacey said, defending their newest partner. “She’s just got a bad family link, but she’s free of them now.”

“Easy Lacey,” Trish said. “My brother didn’t mean anything by it.”

“She’s part of my pack,” Will said, “so I certainly hope he didn’t.”

Clayton grinned a little bit, nodding confidently. “You’re gonna fit right in. Anyway, that’s about all you need to know for your first training session. One of the three of us will be around each month to continue training you, and I’ll be back as soon as you get back from the Spring Gala in Chicago. I’ll be there, but it’s best to let you and Silversmith have your run of the place.”

“Why not talk just after the gala?”

Clayton frowned a little. “Silversmith scares me, man. The less I can do to attract his attention the better.”

That didn’t make Will feel any better.