

Chapter Eleven

The day after Will had encountered Mister Silversmith, a notice was dropped off at the diner, marked personally for him, one which Billy seemed a little annoyed by as he waved it in Will's face. "If you think this means shit's going to change here for me, you best think again or have my replacement lined up," he said, finally slapping the envelope into Will's chest.

"What the fuck are you talking about, Billy?"

"You're gonna have to find someone else to take the other shifts, 'cause Jimmy quit when he heard the news."

"What news are you talking about, Billy?"

"Fucking read, will you?"

Will opened the envelope and on top of a small stack of papers was a handwritten letter.

Mr. Bowland,

It is with great delight that I have accepted your colleague's generous offer and have transferred ownership of Sal's Diner over to you in exchange for the amount agreed upon, which has been paid in full already. As per your colleague's request, the new name of the diner will be Will's Crossroads Diner, despite the fact that the building sits in the middle of a block. I have arranged for the signs to be changed, the paperwork to be filed and the tax work to be taken care of. It's the least I can do in exchange for Mr. Silversmith's incredibly generous offer to buy me out and let me retire.

I'm old, Will; far too old to keep up with this nonsense, and I'd been looking to sell for the last several years, but couldn't find anyone interested in taking up the place. When Mr. Silversmith offered to buy it for you on your behalf, I thought he had to be joking, because you'd never seemed all that interested in the management or ownership of the place, but once the check cleared, well, I think it'll be in good hands. And if you don't like the people who are currently working there, you can obviously hire new ones. I certainly imagine as the new owner/manager, you'll want to start to move away from the day-to-day stuff, but before you do, you should take some time and personalize the place so it's more in line with your personality, instead of mine.

Change up the menu, the décor, whatever you want. It's your place now. As a thank you present, I'm having one of those new digital jukeboxes sent over, so you can program the soundtrack for the new Will's Crossroads Diner, and whenever you decide you want to work, you'll have music you enjoy instead of the piped in shit I've subjected you to for years now.

Don't think of this as goodbye, Will, but a thank you for making sure that other college students have a place to go when they're hungry and it's late. I hope the place treats you right like it did me, and whenever you feel like it's time to move on, you'll pass it on to other good owners. I hope that'll be decades down the road, though, even if you move away and run the place via remote.

Enjoy!

Sal Buenavista

Previous owner of Sal's Diner

Will read through the note a few times, trying to make sense of it, but in a school year already filled with crazy things, this barely even made the top ten. The paperwork was there, and the diner really was in *his* name. The property, the business license, the whole nine yards. There were appointments to change the signage and to deliver the new jukebox.

The first thing he did was call the girls, all of whom came to visit him, as he called in Anthony, the other chef, offering him time and a half if he could take the day's shift on such late

notice. Anthony was more than happy to take the extra work and pay and made it in before the girls did.

Once the girls arrived, he sat down with them to go over what they thought the inside of the place should look like, and surprisingly, they didn't have that many changes they recommended. The interior look was already big on nostalgia, and there didn't seem to be any cause for major changes, although there was one painting that Will had already thrown out before he'd even made any phone calls, the velvet Elvis that had been hanging against the back wall. Billy had asked if he could have it, and Will had told him that as long as he put it in his trunk immediately and Will never had to see it again, he didn't care *what* Billy did with it. The first thing Lacey had done was to recommend an early 90s style painting of two wolves howling under moonlight, and it had taken every ounce of Will's self-control not to throw a saltshaker at her.

The first thing they did was strip the menu down – Will had manned the grill long enough to know what sold and what *nobody* ordered, and he was more than happy to strike a dozen things off the menu that had probably only been there because Sal had had an affection for them. It meant several items didn't have to be ordered from the supplier anymore. It also meant he could add a handful of his own inventions to the menu, just to see how they did. All the key diner staples were there, but they could add a little bit of flavor to the menu, with some very simple things like tacos, burritos and quesadillas. And God knows he'd been bitching about wanting to add chorizo to omelets forever.

The next thing he did was let each girl add one item of her own creation to the menu. He didn't promise to leave them on forever if they sold absolute nothing after a year, but he would give them a chance to come up with some cool additions. Lacey designed a sort of meat lovers sandwich. April, a milkshake that had chocolate covered peanut butter pieces mixed into it. Dina had devised a sort of vegetarian salad that had citrus fruits scattered throughout it. And Freya just asked if they could serve peppermint bark year-round in her name at the counter, under the name Freya's Mix.

Within a week, the menu had been changed, the signs had been updated, a couple new employees had been hired and, most importantly, the jukebox had been delivered and programmed. Sure, it was possible for students to put money in to get the songs they wanted to hear played over the store's speakers, but whenever they hadn't, the jukebox would pull from a selection of a few hundred artists that he had chosen himself. He couldn't select track-by-track for licensing reasons, but he could make sure the jukebox was playing a combination of newer artists he liked and classic deep cut artists who would give the place a certain sense of style all its own. He could also give each artist a "preferred songs" list with some 5-10 songs chosen from their library to be the most common go-to's. When they'd turned it on, the first thing it had done was to play Soul Coughing's "Circles" and Will had felt perfectly at home.

And then things had sort of faded back to normal, with nothing unusual or frightening happening for almost two weeks.

Until...

Will had decided to work the late shift, with only April to keep him company, as all of the girls had decided to work at least one shift a week with Will, so they could spend time with him away from the other girls in the pack. And what had made it particular fun was that the girls were all having some sort of competition about who could draw in the thirstiest boys to compliment the thirsty women who were still constantly coming in so they could gawk over Will. That meant tonight April was done up just one shade shy of being the most perverted Catholic schoolgirl

he'd ever seen. Sure, all the elements of were there – in fact, they were probably hold overs from when April had had her brief flirtation with overly protective religion – but she'd managed to tweak them all so they were all contributing to the sort of look that was more befitting an adult movie than a church get together. The gold cross around her neck was so large, he expected her to start singing Madonna's "Like a Virgin" at any moment, but at least the plaid skirt insisted she was getting tips.

When there were customers, anyway. But they'd hit that sort of midweek lull when the place died down from around 1 until 5, and April had actually sat down beneath the counter, having found a nice little nook nestled right out of view where she could get comfortable when nobody was in. It actually made the diner look like he was the only one in it when she was around. Which was why a couple of slightly sketchy goth looking guys came in, Will made a gesture for her to stay down and hidden, trusting his instincts for the time being.

The two guys were pale white, dressed in long black leather trenchcoats and band t-shirts, or at least that's what Will assumed Throbbing Gristle and Killing Joke were, even if he'd never heard of either group. They both had long, black hair, one of them with it pulled back, the other letting it hang loose down against his back. They looked like they could've walked right off the set for the original Matrix movie.

"Table for two?" Will asked.

"Four," one of the two goths said. "We've got two others coming in to join us."

"You want anything?"

"Four cups of coffee and two slices of pie."

"What kind of pie?"

"Whaddaya got?"

"Apple, French silk, key lime."

"One slice of the French silk, then."

"Comin' up."

Will stood up and grabbed a piece of the French silk piece from the pie racks, then a carafe of coffee and four cups, tossing them all onto a serving tray. He brought them over and set the cups down, two on each side, followed by the piece of pie, that he put in front of the guy with his hair not pinned back. "There you go."

"Thanks man," Hair Down said to him, smiling as Will could see a couple of overly long and sharp pointed teeth differentiating themselves from the rest, before pointing over at the plaque that Silversmith had left up on the wall. "You know what that's all about?"

Will nodded. "I was here when Silversmith put it up."

Hair Down nodded appreciatively. "Good. Good good. It'll be nice having a place nearby where we can sit and have conversations like adults. It used to be we had go all the way down to Albuquerque for these sorts of meetings, since the old Denver sanctuary burned down about eight years back, and believe me, that shit's a pain."

Will filled up the two cups of coffee for them as he nodded. "Not a short drive by any stretch of the imagination."

"Not much quicker as the bat flies either."

"Don't you mean crow?"

"Nah, I said what I said."

Will shrugged a little bit. "Alright. Well, you fellas decide you want food, you let me know and I can swing by with some menus. And remember, even sanctuaries gotta pay the bills to keep their lights on."

“We’ll be sure to cover our time here, keeper.”

Will headed back to his seat behind the bar, glancing down at April, who looked up at him with an inquisitive glance, but he gave her a hand gesture for her to remain where she was. He wanted to trust his instinct, and the fact that the two newcomers had invoked Sanctuary meant he wanted to do everything he could possibly do to keep April out of sight.

He felt better about that as the next two people wandered into the diner, and they were a pair of the biggest, hulkiest bodies he’d ever seen, one a man with a shock of fiery red hair jutting from nearly every portion of his face, so much that the man’s beard and mane sort of blended together, and the other a woman with the most angular and sharp looking face he’d ever seen, her hair also a bright shade of red but hers pulled back and curled up into a bun against the back of her head, all of it pinned in place. Both of them were dressed in bright red flannel shirts and snowpants, like a pair of superheroes in lumberjack disguises.

They moved in, almost not even acknowledging Will’s presence, as they headed over to slide into the booth on the other side of the two goths, Mr. Red extending his hand to Hair Down. “Alex, good of you to agree to the meet.”

“Yeah, well, it didn’t sound like you were leaving much of a choice, Clayton,” Hair Down sighed. “I got you and your sister some coffee, wasn’t sure if you wanted pie.”

“What kind of—”

“Apple, French silk and key lime,” Will said from behind the counter.

“Ain’t gonna say no to French silk,” the big guy who was apparently named Clayton said. “You want anything sis?”

“Key lime sounds good.”

“Coming right up,” Will responded, moving over to get slices of pie out before bringing them over. “Y’all want anything to eat or...”

“I think we’re good, thanks cowboy,” Clayton’s sister said to him, shooing him back over towards the counter. “We’ll holler if we need anything.”

Will moved back over to stand in front of the counter and let his eyes relax a little bit, as if he was trying to size up the foursome and for the first time ever, he could see a sort of shimmering glow around the outside of them, a deep reddish, almost crimson aura around the two goths, and around the two larger guests, a brighter, sort of ruby red aura around them.

“You understand why you’re here, don’t you Alex?”

“He’s here bec—” Hair Up started to say before Clayton cut him off.

“Shut the *fuck* up, Andre.”

“I’m here to make sure the apology is sincere and without reservation, and that the terms of our apology extend into whatever it takes to make sure we’re back onto even territory again,” Alex said.

“You’ve seen the tape?”

“Jesus, Clayton, *yes* I’ve seen the fucking tape, okay? And yes, it was *well* fucking out of line of Andre, but he’s an idiot—”

“Hey!” Hair Up, who was clearly Andre, interjected.

“—And he didn’t know any better” Alex sighed. “He genuinely thought that the term ‘bitch’ was what the female members of a werewolf pack were called, and he was, in his own stupid way, trying to be respectful...”

It was around this point that Will felt a hand running along one of his thighs, so he looked down to see April had shifted in her position beneath the counter, and her fingertips were slowly running along the front of his pants. His eyes narrowed a little at April, who only grinned up at

him as her hands reached up to pop the button of his jeans open, and slowly started to drag down the zipper. The impish look on her face told him there was no way he was getting out of this other than through, so he put his hands on top of the countertop and pretended to be focused on the television, even though he was mostly listening to the conversation between the vampires and the werewolves happening just on the other side of his diner.

“She didn’t need to hit me so fucking hard, though, Alex!” Andre whined. “I had to go and have one of my fangs restored by a succubus, and you know how much I fucking hate owing them favors!”

“She hit you *exactly* as hard as you fucking deserved, Andre,” Alex said, clearly exhausted by this whole debacle. “In fact, I think you merited being smacked harder, so you’re lucky it wasn’t me.”

“Let’s get away from if it was hard enough or not and move onto how we’re going to fix this,” the still nameless redheaded female werewolf said, her voice calm and even, much more patient than her brother sounded.

“Thanks Trish,” Clayton said. “I think you’ll find the terms are pretty reasonable. Your brother gives up his next two hunts to Pack Colt, he agrees to one unconditional request for aide from my sister to be claimed within the next twenty years and he provides to her, here, an unconditional apology for his behavior and his choice of words, and his insistence he will never use such a word to discuss a member of our race in public again.”

Beneath the counter, April had fished out his cock and was slowly beginning to run her tongue along the length of it, pressing the quietest kisses she could manage, clearly enjoying the sport of trying to work Will’s member without drawing attention to them.

“Only in public?” Alex asked with a smirk. “That’s awfully generous of you.”

“We’re not idiots, Alex,” Trish chuckled. “If I made your brother swear to that even in private, we’d be back here discussing his surrender for execution within a matter of months and who does that benefit? Because yes, I believe you, your brother really is *that* stupid—”

“HEY!”

“And that’s why we’re being so lenient in this, despite the fact that he said it in front of the entire All Hallow’s Hunt Party,” Clayton continued for his sister. “I mean, there aren’t that many bigger events I can think of where he could’ve first tried this out. Why even *were* you trying this out, Andre?”

Will’s hand curled up a little bit into a fist as he felt April’s mouth envelop his shaft, pushing her face down hard onto it, trying to cram as much of his cock into her throat as possible before drawing back, hoping her gasping breaths were quiet enough to go unnoticed.

“I was told it was a flattering thing to say, and…” Andre inhaled, closing his eyes, looking down before continuing, “I was trying to hit on you, Tricia, to see if you’d go out with me.”

Both Alex and Clayton laughed, but Trish reached over and patted Andre on the back of his hand. “Well, as sweet as that is, the answer would’ve still been no either way. Your kind and mine, they don’t mix, never have, never will. Haven’t you seen those movies?”

Andre laughed, shaking his head as he looked away from her when she pulled back her hand. “I’m trying to be real with you, and you’re using the *Underworld* movies as proof that we can’t work? I think you missed the point of those movies.”

“I wasn’t paying all that much attention during them,” she admitted. “They got so many of the details wrong that they were hard to take seriously.”

April’s mouth was suckling on his cock so hard that he was finding it increasingly

difficult to keep his mind clear and his lips quiet as she hit all his sensitive spots, keeping her lips locked tightly around his shaft.

“I can agree to these terms,” Alex said, “and so can Andre.”

“You didn’t even ask me if—”

“It’s either this, or I let them stake you, Andre.”

“... Fine. I agree to the terms.”

“Thank you,” Trish said. “I’ll expect your apology to be written and delivered to us within the next few days.”

“Anything else we need to discuss?” Alex asked.

“No, I think anything else we have can wait until the next actual meeting.”

Will finally had to lower his head so he could close his eyes as he felt himself cumming down April’s throat, her tongue working to let her guzzle up his seed as quietly as she could. The sensation of his orgasm was intense, but Will was used to having to stay quiet, and so he finally just inhaled a slow breath and looked up to notice the foursome was getting up from their table. He could feel April giving his softening shaft one last set of laps before tucking his cock away, zipping him back up.

The foursome had finished their pieces of pie and coffee and were standing up from the table, one of the two vampires, Alex, tossing down a massive wad of bills onto the table, certainly overpaying on their bill, as they moved towards the door. But as they approached the doorway, the pairs split, the vampires heading out and into the night, as the two taller and bulkier people approached the counter.

“You’re Will Bowland, right?” Clayton asked, extending his hand. “I’m Clayton Colt, of Pack Colt, and Hunt Captain for the general Mountain Time Zone of the United States.”

Will took the man’s hand and shook it, pleased to find the guy wasn’t doing one of those overcompensating crushing handshakes that big people sometimes liked to do. “Yeah, that’s me,” Will said. “I’m taking a wild guess here and betting Silversmith sent you over my way?”

“He said it wouldn’t hurt to check in on you, especially since you had such a bad first run in with the community.”

“I wouldn’t exactly call a handful of halfwit hunters a community...”

“Is it true one of them threw holy water on you?” Trish asked him with a broad grin.

“Yep.”

“Jesus, what a bunch of morons,” Clayton said. “No wonder Silversmith wanted to handle them himself, rather than letting the usual cleanup crew handle it. Anyway...” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small white card, setting it on top of the counter. “Here’s my card with my cell number and the address of my office in Phoenix, although I’ve got offices in Denver, Albuquerque, Salt Lake City and Cheyenne, so I get around plenty.”

“What made you decide to stop in here?”

“I’m based in Denver,” Trish said. “And we haven’t had a sanctuary in Colorado in a long time, so we figured we could kill two birds with one stone to come and have our meeting here, and it lets you see a little bit what intertribe politics looks like, typically.”

“Silversmith said he was going to bring you to the Spring Gala in Chicago, just so that you’d have a guide for your first society party. Both Trish and I will be there, and as your Hunt Captain, your behavior reflects on me, so I figured I’d make sure you were the kind of person we wouldn’t be bothered with, and everything about you checks out.”

“I hadn’t decided for sure that I was going, but I guess I have to at this point,” Will said.

“You should,” Trish said. “It’s a good chance to meet loads of people in the community,

and if Silversmith's giving you the benefit of his protection, you should absolutely take him up on it. That's the level of protection you'd never get anywhere else, and I'd *kill* to feel that safe amongst the assholes we usually put up with at the Galas."

"If it's only assholes," Will asked, "why go in the first place?"

"It's not *only* assholes," Clayton said. "But the assholes tend to be the most memorable. Still, the party's a riot, and it's worth showing up to meet a bunch of the people in the community who may be coming through your establishment. Having a sanctuary in your possession certainly is a nice jewel to keep in your back pocket, but it's going to make it so you can't really duck out of being a part of the community, so I'm guessing that Silversmith decided that you were going to be entangled with this bunch of hooligans whether you like it or not. He must've liked you, by the way, because I've never heard of him being so generous to anyone."

"Is he notoriously stingy or something?"

"No, he's just cantankerous but if he likes you, that's good for you and bad for anybody who doesn't like you," Clayton said. "But he's the perfect sort of protection you'll need at your first Gala, having not grown up in the community. And you can ask him any questions that might be borderline offensive to anyone else."

"Or even *not* borderline, and *just* offensive," Trish giggled. "But it's good. It's the kind of bodyguard that everyone would love to have. Nobody in the goddamn world is going to take a swing at you at the Gala unless it's Morgana La Fey or Merlin himself, and even they'd probably think twice about how *anything* you could've possibly said or done would be worth that kind of dust up. It's *carte blanche* to walk around and get a first-hand tour from one of the most powerful sorcerers *alive*. You take it, Will," she said, putting both of her hands on top of his. "You take that trip and you enjoy the *fuck* out of it, because know that everyone else in the *world* would kill for that kind of insight and that kind of safety."

Will chuckled, nodding. "Fair enough. I'll make a point of going to the Gala then. On my own, I take it?"

Clayton nodded. "You probably don't want to bring any of your pack with you, considering it's one more person Silversmith would have to keep an eye on, but you could always ask him and see what he thinks of the idea."

"Nah, probably not to bother him with such trivial shit," Will admitted as Trish pulled her hands back. "I can imagine he's the kind of guy whose day is packed with all sorts of overwhelming problems."

"Yeah, today he's off settling an argument between a dragon and another wizard."

"What's it over?"

"Drilling rights."

Will looked at Clayton to see if the other werewolf was joking, but Clayton only shrugged in return. "What can I say, man? Dragons get super protective about their land and what it's used for. That's why they're known as hoarders." He and Trish started to walk to the door but stopped partway there as Clayton looked back over his shoulder at him. "Hey, you had a full wolf-out moment yet?"

Will shook his head. "Not yet."

Clayton nodded. "I'll swing by in a few days before I head back to Phoenix and we'll take you out and give you your first full change with a couple of us around to make sure you don't get out of hand. Late Friday night good?"

"Sure, I can do that. Just me?"

"It wouldn't hurt to bring one member of your pack with you, simply so she can see what

you're like when it happens, and then you can slowly get other members to see one at a time."

"Got it. Meet here?"

"Yeah, we'll pick you up, me and Trish and another local named EJ. Best to have the locals know you on scent so that you can all recognize each other."

Will frowned a little. "I can't recognize people on scent."

"Yet," Trish corrected. "And you will." She headed out the door and Clayton made it halfway out before turning back to get the last word in.

"You can tell your old lady it's safe to come out now, and that it was hellish fun hearing her work only a few feet away. You're a lucky man."

With that, Clayton stepped out into the cold and closed the door, and beneath the counter, April devolved into the hardest giggling fit he'd ever heard from her.