

Chapter Eight

When Will woke up, the first thing he felt were cold iron shackles around his wrists and ankles, but those weren't the only bindings that he had. There were bands around his forearms, his biceps, his calves and his thighs. They were pulled tight, affixing him to a giant steel X. He'd been stripped down to his boxers, but they'd left him with that much, so there was that, at least. He'd expected the temperature to be freezing cold, but it seemed like his captors had gone the other way, because there was a raging fire in a fireplace in the corner that was pumping out warm air like they were trying to turn the room into a sauna. He almost wondered if that was simply their own personal reaction to how cold the blizzard had been.

"We're going to gut you for what you did those kids, you know?" a voice across the room said to him. His eyes moved to try and focus on it, and found it was the young woman of the trio, and she'd mostly been on the outs during whatever it was they'd been doing in following and harassing him. She looked tall, like volleyball player tall, probably 6'2" or so, with fine golden hair pulled back into a tightly wound-up bun against the upper back portion of her head. She had her arms crossed over her chest, perhaps an attempt to distract from how busty she was, but it didn't help, as the woman's prominent cleavage was strained against the grey t-shirt with the university's mascot emblazoned on it, settled right in between the two large mounds. If the shirt had read "Swedish Bikini Volleyball Team," he might've actually believed its authenticity. The bluejeans she was wearing did nothing to hide her figure. She was very much in shape and had the most striking pair of piercing blue eyes he'd ever seen in person.

"What kids?" Will asked, genuinely having no idea what she was talking about.

"The three kids you tore to shreds up in Fort Collins over 4th of July weekend," she snarled. "Did you think we wouldn't connect them with you?"

"Lady, I was working at the diner almost the entirety of that weekend, and I haven't been up to Fort Collins since freshman year," Will told her. "I don't know where you're getting your information, but it's entirely wrong." He sighed. "Not that I'm exactly surprised, considering you've treated me like, in no particular order, a vampire, a werewolf, a shapeshifter, a ghost, a faerie and I think maybe a zombie, but at this point, I think you're all basically just throwing shit at the wall and seeing if anything sticks, hoping you can figure out what I am so you can pin whatever shit you want to on me. Shit, you probably did whatever it is you're accusing me of. That wouldn't surprise me one bit."

The young woman's face scowled at him, her eyes narrowing like she was trying to catch him in a lie, but he didn't flinch in the slightest. "You're lying."

"Why would I lie? About any of it?" he said. "Shit, you can go check my timecards from the diner, or ask the owner about how basically all of my time off requests have been unceremoniously rejected unilaterally. I assume you're going to torture me or whatever, but I'm only going to say the same thing over and over again, that I didn't do it, that I have no idea what you're talking about, and that I've never hurt anybody."

"What about Tanner?"

"That punk? He took a swing *at me*, and I was defending myself," Will chuckled, rolling his eyes in her direction. "I'm some kind of monster because I won't let someone beat the shit out of me? I guess you got me there. But I barely even hit the guy. He took one swing at me, missed, so I punched him in the gut and he dropped to the floor like I'd ruptured his kidney. Somehow that makes me a bad person? I'm sorry if somebody somewhere taught you it's okay to let people walk all over you, but I just decided I'd had enough of that shithead talking trash to everyone, so when he decided to take a swing at me, it seemed only fair that I get to take one

back.”

She moved a little closer, and Will could take in the scent of her, a strange mix of sandalwood, lavender and orange, and her expression softened a little, maybe as if she was trying to recontextualize what she'd seen with her own eyes with what she'd been told by the rest of the group. “You’re telling me you’ve never wolfed out on anyone, ever?”

“As far as I know, I’ve never transformed,” Will told her, not needing to hold back even a little. “I haven’t really ever had blackouts or time loss, so I can’t imagine that happening to me either. But I think I would know, and the fact that I can look you in the eye and not flinch should tell you something, shouldn’t it?”

“It tells me we’ve got you trapped here and you’re not going to get away,” she said, although he could hear the confidence in her voice wavering just a little bit.

“Lady, you didn’t even know what kind of creature I *was* until today, as far as I can tell,” he grumbled. “And the only reason I even know I’m a werewolf is that I had a relative come and tell me that I am, so I’ve only got his hearsay on the matter.”

“Who is this relative?”

“My uncle Pavel, if he’s to be believed, but at this point in my life, you’ll have to forgive me if I don’t trust anyone anywhere about anything,” Will said. “Any chance I could get you to get me a glass of water? You people have cranked the heat up in here so much you’d think you were trying to sweat me to death.”

“Werewolves do not like the heat,” she said proudly.

“*Nobody* likes *this* much heat except fucking lizards,” Will shot back. “I’m amazed you aren’t sweating to death in those jeans. I know it’s a fucking blizzard on outside, but you’ve got this place cranked up like it’s fucking Death Valley. Even you’ve gotta be uncomfortable in here. I can smell you sweating from across the room.”

“You’re trying to trick me,” she offered cautiously.

“Into what, bringing water near me so I can pretend to bark and growl at you? If I promise not to do it, can I get a glass of water? You can even put a straw in it, so you can stay extra far away from me instead,” Will said.

“I’ll... I’ll see what I can do.”

She stared at him for another minute or so and then eventually moved out of the room, leaving Will to study the place for any real details. It felt like he was in a basement, or maybe just an underground chamber of some kind, as the floor was unadorned, unfinished concrete, that sort of steel grey that shows either they didn’t give a shit about the room or they knew they were going to be cleaning off the floor with such industrial strength solvents that it didn’t make any sense to give a layer of polish to it. The way the room was structured, low ceiling, visible support beams, that just reinforced his idea that he was in some basement somewhere, one with a fireplace that they had stoked to utter madness in terms of heat output. He wondered exactly what kind of accelerant they had dumped onto it to keep it running at such a blistering heat, and he wondered if maybe they were some rednecks that had just slapped gasoline on top of it. He wouldn’t have been half surprised. There was a wall with a door in it that she had come through, but he suspected there was a stairwell just around the corner beyond that wall leading upstairs into some kind of house or cabin.

A few minutes later, the door opened and the older man of the two stomped in, wearing an UnderArmor workout shirt and workout shorts, clearly prepared for the heat, as he had a bottle of water with him. He looked like he was in his late fifties or maybe early sixties, with a giant bald patch atop his head, and a big almost Viking-like beard. Because of the short-sleeved

workout shirt, Will could also see that the man's arms were covered in tattoos all the way down to the wrists, stopping just an inch or so before reaching them, so that if he was wearing a long-sleeved shirt they would've been completely obscured from sight. He tossed the end of a long metal rod into the fire, the handle of it resting on the floor

"I hear you're trying to convince my niece that you've done nothing wrong, you bastard of a monster," the man spat at him.

"Look, whatever you *think* I've done, I haven't. She seems to think I'm responsible for some mess up in Fort Collins on the 4th of July but I was working basically nonstop that entire week at the diner. You're more than welcome to check."

The brutish man thrust a ham hock of a hand in Will's direction, pointing a finger as he shouted, "Then how did you *know* something happened in Fort Collins on the 4th of July? Answer me that, monster!"

"She *told* me something happened!" Will yelled back. "Fucking Christ, how dense are you people? I don't even know what the hell it is that you're claiming happened."

The man had eyebrows like massive blonde caterpillars, and a bulbous nose that made Will think he certainly liked to drink more than his fair share. His hands were heavily calloused, and it made Will wonder if he was the one who did the lion's share of the work for the trio of hunters. He certainly had the air of someone who'd been doing this a long time, perhaps *too* long, considering the man also had an aura of derangement around him, like somewhere along the way he'd lost sight of what the mission was supposed to be and had grown to like the violence of it more than the stated end goal. "You've been preying on the weak and innocent children of this fair state," the man said to him. "Killing them, eating their hearts. Your naïve ploy might fool my niece, who is very new to the hunt, but an experienced hunter like me, I can see through what nonsense you are pushing towards us and find the true monster behind those innocent eyes."

"I think you've lost your mind, old man," Will sneered. "Look at me. I haven't done anything to anyone, and yet, here you are, ready to play judge, jury and executioner, without a scrap of proof, without a single witness, without anything pointing you in my direction other than the fact that I'm not entirely human. That's insane, thinking you've the right to play God."

"I am one of the Keepers of Humanity, abomination!" the man cackled. "I am the thin line between sanity and madness! I am watcher on the wall, one of the chosen to cull the filth from the favored, to remove the infection that from the strain of humanity meant to live on. I am the final say about whether you live or die."

Will shook his head, as much as he was able to from his shackled and bound position anyway. "Then you may as well go ahead and kill me now, because it seems like you've already made up your mind without so much as giving facts or logic a try, and I'd rather not waste any more of my time sitting around in this sweltering room. If I'm going to die, let's hurry it along."

"I have not decided if you will die immediately, or if there is information to be gleaned from your mind before you will die," the man said. "You could tell us much about your kind, where they nest, where to find them, who they are and what plans they have in motion."

"I've never transformed in my entire life, I have no idea where any of them call home or where they nest, if that's even a thing. Isn't that vampires? Anyway, I've only met one other of my kind, he said his name was Uncle Pavel, but he didn't tell me how to get in touch with him or where he's staying. Right now, I've only his word, and yours, that I'm even really a werewolf, like you claim that I am, because none of those things I thought about werewolves aren't apparently true. He claims my father's a werewolf, but I've never *met* my father, so how the hell

would I know if that's true or not?"

"He will feel your cry of pain, your father, and he will come running to save you," the man said, moving over towards the fire. He crouched down and grabbed the handle of the long rod he had dropped the end of into the flames, pulling it to show the end of it, glowing an angry and visceral red, smoking just a little bit. "We will brand you, marking you as our captor, so that even if you should somehow escape our custody, or should we decide to release you, you shall never forget that your fate was held in the hands of the Halvorsen family."

"The who now?"

"The Halvorsens!" he shouted and suddenly thrust out with the glowing hot tip, a stylized H made up of two swords and a dagger crossing along the center to form the mid bar, until that flat H pressed hard against the top of his thigh, and Will began to scream, the smell of burning flesh and hair filling his nostrils while the pain receptors in his body went into overdrive.

The pain finally proved so much that Will's body decided to try and do something about it.

For Will, the sensation was like jumping into arctic cold water, knowing that whatever was happening to him was both a shock to his system and probably insanely bad, but the sudden snap of alertness allowed him to push back past the pain, shoving it to the back of his mind, as the change began to ripple through him. His arms bulked out against the bands, trying his damndest to rip through them, but the bands of steel had been given just enough leeway that that expanded enough to constrict his new powerful limbs. The same was true for his legs, despite the blooming pain in his left thigh, where the man was jamming the burning piece of blistering metal against his skin.

He could feel the fur erupting from his skin, his fingernails turning into thick, powerful claws, ready to rend flesh from bone, vicious fangs dropping from his gumline, turning previously docile canine teeth into the sort of weapon that could rip a victim's throat open with one hard bite. His eyesight had changed, and everything had a slight reddish tinge to it, making it a little more difficult to see details for anything.

His entire body had felt trapped before, but now it felt like it was almost being strangled within an inch of his existence. He thrashed and pulled at the bindings, feeling the metal start to give just the tiniest amount, but in the end it felt like it was for naught, as however they had strung him up, despite the fact that he'd changed into what he assumed was his werewolf form, although it was difficult to turn his head with how much the restraints on his chest bound him to the iron X behind him.

Will wanted to rage, to howl, to break free and to rip that brand from the man's hand and shove it into his eye socket. He wanted to let the primal core that had emerged from within him rip the man asunder, to shred him into pockets of flesh no larger than the palm of his hand, even the man's bones ground to a fine powder within the might of his fury.

Instead, he was trapped against the beams of steel, unable to get loose as the pain ripped through his nervous system. It wasn't just more vivid, he could *smell* the damage being done to him, both fur and flesh being scalded and scarred, and he hated this man with more intensity than he'd ever hated anything in his entire life.

Eventually, however, Will could make the rational decision that straining against the bindings was only likely to do himself harm, and he slumped back against the warmed metal, his eyes turning to focus on the man, who had just pulled back the brand, holding it up towards Will's face, so he could still see the rivulets of his own blood boiling on the surface of it.

"You're angry," the man laughed. "Good. Good good. Now, you will tell me where the

rest of your kind is holed up.”

“GO FUCK YOURSELF OLD MAN,” Will heard an unearthly howl say from his own throat, the sound of his voice unfamiliar to him, bestial and primal, unlike any sound his body had ever made before, and the timbre of it clearly frightened the man a bit, as he jumped back, dropping the brand onto the floor.

Then the old man laughed.

“You’ve still got spirit, even all bound up. It’s almost admirable, seeing how much resistance you’re putting up, despite the fact that you have no chance of ever walking out of this room alive,” he chuckled, shaking his head. “Ah, the folly of youth. To believe that nothing can or will stop you from your goals. We’ll break that from your body soon enough. Perhaps you just need a bit of time to sweat it out. Let that wound fester for a bit, until it’s good and infected. I’ll come back in tomorrow and see if you’re in a more talkative mood then.”

And then the man moved to the door, opened it, stepped out and closed it once more, leaving the brand to just fizzle out in the air, the room warm enough that it didn’t cool down any time soon.

Somewhere in the next hour or two, Will felt his body shift back to its normal form, the pain still aching and brutal in his lower leg, although the fact that his body lost so much muscle mass made the bindings around his arms, legs and chest feel much looser than they had previously. He started to wonder if maybe he’d done enough good to pull them apart and work them open enough for him to slip out, but the cuffs at the ankles and wrists were still secure enough to keep him held in place.

A few hours later, the third of the trio made his way into the room, as if he just couldn’t help himself and needed to take a look at Will, now that he was securely captive and unable to cause problems for the younger man. “You don’t seem so tough all tied up like this,” the younger man said to him.

It was Will’s first chance to get a decent look at the young man, who looked like he might barely be in his twenties if Will was giving him the benefit of the doubt. There was something slight and scrawny about him, and Will realized why he had found it so difficult to give a description of the guy to his uncle – he was probably one of the most forgettable looking people Will had ever seen. It was almost like the guy was *designed* to blend into backgrounds and just disappear amidst a crowd. Average height, average weight, completely non-descript face. It took several seconds for it to even register that the guy had blonde hair and blue eyes, and was probably related to the other two, because Will’s mind had already basically disregarded the guy as quickly as he’d seen him.

“You could always let me out of these bindings,” Will countered, “and then you can see exactly how tough I am.”

“Yeah, don’t think so, friend,” the young man said. “It took us long enough, but we finally got your number. Lycanthrope. Werewolf. Still not sure why the wolfsbane didn’t bother you, though.”

“Because that’s a myth, you idiot,” Will sighed. “All that shit about werewolves is completely made up and doesn’t *do* anything.”

“Course it does something,” he shot back. “Maybe it was just because you hadn’t had your first transformation yet. Still, we could see the aura about you with Kelvin’s Spyglass, so we knew you were going to be blossoming into something – we just couldn’t tell what.”

“Is that why you tried throwing holy water and garlic on me?”

“Had to figure out what kind of beastie you were going to become to figure out how to

deal with you.”

“How about dealing with me by leaving me alone?” Will said. “I haven’t done anything to anyone and you’re treating me like I’m some kind of war criminal.”

“But you *are* a war criminal, William. A criminal in the war of monsters against humanity. It’s you against us, and we’re not going to lose. We’re not going to let your kind wipe us off *our* planet. We were here first, so you lot can all go somewhere else.”

“Up until recently, I was just as human as you are, kid,” Will said. “And there’s nowhere else for us to *go*.”

“You can go back to Russia or Africa or whatever place it is your kind comes from and leave us civilized people alone.”

“You know that in this room, one of us has kidnapped and tortured an innocent person, and one of us hasn’t,” Will sneered. “You’re on the wrong side of history here, kid. I haven’t hurt anybody and you’re here branding me for shits and giggles.”

“You’re branded so people know you’re a danger, that you can’t be trusted, that you’re a monster who’s going to eventually kill again.”

“I haven’t killed *before*, although I’m not so sure I can say the same about you people.”

“We’re defending humanity.”

“You’re hunting innocent people who haven’t done a damn thing apparently as much as you might be fighting dangerous monsters,” Will said.

The young man reached out and slapped Will, who only sighed and shook his head. “You shut your mouth!”

“You hit like a child,” Will taunted. “And your old man needed to use a brand on me, since he was afraid of getting his hands dirty. Why don’t you let me out of these shackles, and we can go a few rounds?”

“Do I look stupid?”

“Since you’re asking—”

“Shut up!” the young man said, trying to punch Will in the stomach, but his hands were soft and didn’t have the kind of impact that Will imagined the boy wanted it to have.

“I’m sorry I said you hit me like a child. That’s probably offensive to kids. They *have* to hit harder than that.”

Will wondered if he had pushed too hard, but the young man just sneered, turned around and walked out of the room.

For hours more, he was left to his own devices, stuck in the heat, hungry and thirsty, sweating out what little precious water he had left in his body. The furnace of the fire was insane, but thankfully it started to eventually burn itself out, as nobody came back in to put more logs onto the fire. With that, the room began to slowly cool down, and Will began to worry about a new problem – hypothermia. The room wasn’t all that well insulated, and with the flue open, all the hot air was draining out of the space at a decent clip, being replaced by that high blizzard chill.

A few hours later, he was starting to wonder if they were going to let him freeze to death, and he started getting sleepy, doing his best to try and keep himself awake and alert, but it was growing more difficult, the bitter temperature starting to sink into the cold metal he was attached to.

For a few minutes, Will was starting to wonder if this was where he died.

His vision had started to blur when he heard a loud crash somewhere above him, followed by a crack, then another loud crash. Normally, he felt like he would’ve had a better idea

of what was happening, but at that moment, the sounds were basically impossible to discern beyond their volume and their chaotic nature.

Someone came rushing down the stairs and the door got kicked open, but he couldn't clearly see who it was, at least until she got closer to him.

"Jesus, Will, you look like dogshit," Lacey said to him, as she reached behind to unfasten the latches on the bands one at a time, until finally he could pull loose from the bindings, nearly collapsing onto the floor as he did, Lacey moving to slide beneath him, wrapping his exhausted arm around his shoulder, as he glanced to the door, seeing April standing there, holding a baseball bat that looked like it might have a little bit of blood on it.

"What the fuck did they do to him?" April asked, as she dropped the bat to the floor.

"I don't know, but it's not good," Lacey said. "Help me carry him to the car."

"Are we sure this is a good idea?"

"I'm sure we don't have a better one!"

"Hi Lacey, April..." Will said woozily, as April slid beneath his other shoulder, the two women moving to help keep him from collapsing, practically hauling him out of the room and up the stairs. At the top of the stairs was a kitchen, where the young man's unconscious body was sprawled out, having knocked over the kitchen table. "Looks like you interrupted dinner..."

"He's still making jokes," Lacey said. "He can't be *that* bad off."

"Get him out front and into the fucking car!" April said.

The two women dragged him through the living room, where Will saw the older man also unconscious on the floor, although he thought he might have seen a bit of blood leaking from the man's ear onto the cheap rug. It *did* look more like a kind of log cabin when he was upstairs, but he didn't get much of a chance to look at it as he was pulled through the living room and out the front door into the sheer cold, whiteout conditions almost blinding him immediately.

He got loaded into the back of a car, wrapped in a blanket and stuffed closely between Lacey and April, both of whom slammed their doors, as he heard Dina's voice in the front passenger seat say, "Freya, go!"

'Freya?' Will thought to himself, as he turned to glance at the driver's seat, and saw the athletic blonde who'd been interrogating him some twelve hours ago behind the wheel of the car, as she slammed her foot on the gas and the vehicle began to take off into the storm.

'Huh,' he thought. 'Didn't see that coming either.'