

Changes

Clayton doesn't do "unobtrusive" well. Not even when he tries, and that afternoon, he was trying his damndest. He was downwind of me, at least two hundred feet away, so I couldn't smell him, see him or hear him. But I knew he was there.

As I stood under the oaks, I couldn't suppress a twinge of resentment at the pressure his presence added to an already gut-twisting situation. Yes, I'd been the one to suggest the run, leaping up from the lunch table and declaring I was ready. He'd asked if he should stay inside—possibly the first time in our fifteen year relationship that Clay had been willing to give me space. But I'd grabbed his hand and dragged him out with me. Now I was blaming him for being here. Not fair. But better than to admit that what I felt was not resentment but fear— fear that I would fail, and in failing I would disappoint him.

I took a deep breath and filled my lungs with the loamy richness of a forest emerging from winter, the first buds appearing, tentatively, as if still uncertain. Uncertain . . . good word. That was what I felt: uncertainty.

Uncertainty? Try abject, pant-pissing, stomach-heaving terror—

I took another deep breath. The scent of the forest filled me, called to me, like Clay's presence out there, beckoning—

Don't think of him. Just relax

I followed the sound of a rabbit thumping nearby, upwind and oblivious of me. As I moved, I saw my shadow and realized I was still standing, with my clothes on. Well, there was the first problem. I'd undressed, but how would I Change if I was still on two legs?

As I started to crouch, a pang ran through the left side of my abdomen and I froze, heart pounding. It was probably a random muscle spasm or a digestive complaint. And yet . . .

My fingers rubbed the hard swell of my belly. There was definitely a swell there, however staunchly Jeremy swore otherwise. I could feel it with my hand, feel it in the tightening waistband of my jeans. Clay tried to avoid the question—smart man—but when pressed he would admit I did seem to be showing already. Showing, when I was no more than five weeks pregnant. That shouldn't be. Yet one more thing to add to my growing list of worries.

At the top of the list was this: the regular transformation from human to wolf that my body required. I had to Change, but what would it do to my baby?

My fear over losing my child came as a revelation to me. In the nearly three years I'd wrestled with the thought of having a baby, I'd considered the possibility that the choice wouldn't be mine to make, that being a werewolf might mean I wouldn't be able to conceive or carry a child to term. I'd accepted that. If my pregnancy ended, I'd know that I couldn't do it. That would be that.

Now that I was actually pregnant I couldn't believe I'd been so cavalier. This was more than a collection of cells growing in me, it was the actualization of a dream I'd thought I'd lost when I became a werewolf. A dream I was certain I'd given up when I decided to stay with Clay.

But I had to Change. Already I'd waited too long, and I could feel the need in every muscle spasm and restless twitch, hear it in my growls and snaps whenever someone spoke to me.

Twice I'd come out here with Clay, and twice I'd been unable—or refused—to Change. Make it a third, and Clay and Jeremy would be flipping coins to see who locked me in the cage. That was a safety precaution—being Change-deprived makes us violent and unpredictable—but given my surly behavior this past week, I wouldn't blame them if they fought over the privilege.

Just Change, goddamn it! Get down on your knees . . . See? That feels fine, right? Now put your hands on the ground . . . There. Now concentrate—

My body rebelled, convulsing so hard I doubled over, gasping. Change into a wolf? With a baby inside me? Was I crazy? I'd rip, tear, suffocate—

No!

I pushed up onto all fours and cleared my head, then opened the gate only to thoughts bearing the pass-code of logic. Was this my first Change since I'd become pregnant? No. It was the first since I'd learned I was pregnant, two weeks ago. I must have Changed a half-dozen times between conception and testing.

Had anything happened during those Changes? Bleeding? Cramping? No.

So stop worrying. Take a deep breath, smell the forest, dig your fingers into the damp soil, hear the whistle of the April wind, feel the ache in your muscles. Run to Clay, who'll be so happy, so relieved . . .

My skin prickled, stretching, itching as fur sprouted—

My brain threw up the brakes again and my body tensed. Sweat trickled down my cheeks. I growled and dug my fingers and toes into the soft earth, refusing to reverse the process.

Relax, relax, relax. Just stop worrying and let your body do the work. Like constipation. Relax and nature takes over.

Constipation? Oh, there was a romantic analogy. I laughed, and my changing vocal cords squeezed the sound into a hideous screech, more worthy of a hyena than a wolf, which only made me laugh all the harder. I toppled sideways and, as I lay there, laughing, I finally relaxed.

The Change took over, spontaneous. My convulsions of laughter turned to spasms of pain, and I twisted and writhed on the ground. The pain of a Change. Yet some still-panicked part of my brain convinced me this wasn't the normal kind of pain—I was killing my child, suffocating it as my body contorted.

I must— Must stop— Oh God, I couldn't!

I tried to stop—fighting, snarling, concentrating on reversing to human. But it was too late. I'd waited too long, and now my body was determined to see it through.

Finally, the pain ended, gone without so much as a lingering ache, and I lay on my side, panting, then leapt to my feet.

Damn it, not so fast! Be careful.

I stood there, motionless except for my tail, which wouldn't stop whipping from side to side, as if to say "Well, we're Changed. What are you waiting for? Let's run!" The rest of my body didn't disagree with the sentiment, though it let the tail do the shouting, settling for subtler displays of restlessness: heart tripping, ears swiveling, muscles tensing. I refused to move, though; not until I'd taken inventory, made sure everything was as it should be.

First, my belly. No obvious signs of distress. I panted, letting my chest rise and fall, testing whether the movement seemed to hurt anything. It didn't, though my stomach did let out a growl as that nearby rabbit's scent wafted past. You wouldn't know I'd just devoured a three-course lunch. Ungrateful stomach. But the other part of my belly, newly filling with life, felt fine.

I lifted my paws one at a time, stretching and rotating my joints. Good. My nose and ears had done fine picking up that rabbit. And the still-wagging tail was obviously working. Okay, enough of this.

I stepped forward. One paw, two, three, four . . . No sudden scream of complaint from my belly. I broke into a lope, then a run, then a headlong dash across the clearing. Still no signs of distress.

Next, the tougher moves—the wolf maneuvers. I crouched, wiggled my hindquarters, then leapt at an imaginary mouse. As I hit the ground, I wheeled around, teeth bared as I snapped at an unseen foe. I bounded across the clearing. I jumped and twisted in midair. I pranced. I lunged. I charged. I chased my tail—

A wheezing sound erupted behind me and I froze, the tip hairs of my tail still caught between my teeth. There, across the clearing, was a huge, golden-haired wolf, his head between his forepaws, eyes closed, hindquarters in the air, body quivering with that strange wheezing noise. His eyes opened, bright blue eyes dancing with relief and amusement, and I realized what that noise was. He was laughing at me.

Laughing? I'd just gone through a horrible trauma, and the guy had the nerve to laugh? I knew half of that laughter was relief at seeing me Changed, and I admit I probably looked a little silly gallivanting alone in the clearing. But still, such indignities should not be tolerated.

With as much grace as I could muster with tail fur hanging out of my mouth, I swept around and stalked in the other direction. Halfway across the clearing, I wheeled and charged, teeth bared. His eyes widened in “oh, shit” comprehension and he backpedaled just in time to get out of my way, then bolted into the forest.

I tore after him.

I loped along the path, muzzle skimming the ground. The earth was thick with the scent of my prey—a deliberate move, as he weaved and circled, permeating this patch of forest with his smell, hoping to throw me off the trail.

I untangled the web of trails and latched onto the most recent. As I picked up speed, the ground whooshed past beneath me. Ahead, the path opened into a clearing. I pitched forward, straining for the open run, but before I hit the edge of the clearing, I dug in my claws and skidded to a graceless stop.

I stood there, adrenaline roaring, urging me to find him, take him down. I closed my eyes and shuddered. Too eager. Keep that up and I'd run straight into a trap. After a moment, the adrenaline rush ebbed and I started forward again, cautious now, ears straining, muzzle up, sniffing as I walked.

My eyes saved me this time. That and the sun, peeking from fast-moving clouds. One break in the cloud cover and I caught the glint of gold through the trees. He was downwind, crouched to the left of the path's end, waiting for me to come barreling out.

I retraced my last few steps, walking backward. An awkward maneuver—some things easily accomplished on two legs are much more difficult to coordinate with four. Once I'd gone as far as I could, I craned to look over my shoulder. The trees closed in on me from either side. Not enough room to guarantee a silent about-face.

I took a careful step off the path. The undergrowth was soft and moist with spring rain. I prodded at it, but it stayed silent. Hunkering down to stay below branch level, I started forward, looping to slink up behind him. Once close enough to see through the trees, I peered out. He

was crouched beside the path, as still as a statue, only the twitch of his tail betraying his impatience.

I found the clearest line of fire, hunched down, then sprang. I hit him square on the back and sank my teeth into the ruff around his neck. He yelped and started to rear up, then stopped. I let out a growling chuckle, knowing he didn't dare throw me off in my "condition." All I had to do was hang on—

He dropped, letting his legs fold, his body cushioning my drop, but the suddenness of it enough of a surprise that I let go of his ruff. As he slid from under me, he twisted and pinned me, his teeth clamping around the bottom of my muzzle. I kicked at his underbelly. He snorted as my claws made contact, but made no move to fight back.

He looked down at me, indecision flickering in his eyes. Then he released my muzzle and his head shot down to my throat. I wriggled, trying to pull out of the way, but he only buried his nose in the ruff around my neck and inhaled deeply. He shuddered, legs vibrating against my sides. A moment's hesitation. Then a soft growl, and he twisted off me and dove into the woods again.

I scrambled to my feet and set off in pursuit. This time he had too much of a head start, and I could only get close enough to see his hindquarters bounding ahead. He flicked his tail up. Mocking me, damn him. I surged forward, getting close enough to hear the pounding of his heartbeat. He veered and crashed into the forest, off the trail, and I chortled to myself. Now I had him. Cutting a fresh path would slow him down just enough to let me—

A brace of ptarmigan flew up, almost under my feet, and I slid to a halt, nearly flipping over backward in my surprise. As the panicked birds took to the sky, I got my bearings again, looked around . . . and found myself alone. Tricked. Damn him. And damn me for falling for it.

I found his trail, but before I'd gone a hundred feet, a gurgling moan rippled through the silence. I stopped, ears going up. A grunt, then panting. He was Changing.

I dove into the nearest thicket and began my own Change. It came fast, spurred by a healthy double shot of adrenaline and frustration. When I finished, he was still in his thicket.

I crept around to the other side, pulled back a handful of leaves and peered through. He was done, but recovering, crouched on all fours, panting as he caught his breath. By the rules of fair play, I should have given him time to recuperate. But I wasn't in the mood for rules.

I sprang onto his back. Before he could react, my arm went around his neck, forearm jammed against his windpipe.

I leaned over his shoulder. "Did you think you could escape that easily?"

His lips formed an oath, but no sound came out. His shoulders slumped, as if defeated. Like I was stupid enough to buy that. I pretended to relax my grip. Sure enough, the second I did, twisted, trying to grab me.

I slid off his back and pulled him down sideways. Before he could recover, I was on top of him, my forearm again at his throat. His hands slid up my sides, snuck around and cupped my breasts.

"Uh-uh," I growled, pressing against his windpipe. "No distractions."

He sighed and let his hands slide away. I eased back. As soon as I did, he flipped me over, still far more gently than usual, and pinned me as securely as he had in wolf-form. He eased down, belly and groin against mine. He slid his hands back to my breasts and grinned at me, daring me to do something about it now.

I glared up at him. Then I shot forward and sank my teeth into his shoulder. He jerked away. I scrambled up, then pinned him, hands on his shoulders, knees on his thighs. He struggled, but couldn't get me off without throwing me.

“Caught?” I said.

He gave one last squirm, then nodded. “Caught.”

“Good.”

I slid my knees from his thighs and slipped over him. He tried to thrust up to meet me, but I pushed down with my hips, keeping him still. I moved into position. When I felt the tip of him brush me, I stopped and wriggled against him, teasing myself. He groaned and tried to grab my hips, but I pinned his shoulders harder. Then I closed my eyes and plunged down onto him.

He struggled under me, trying to thrust, to grab, to control, but I kept him pinned. After a moment, he gave up and arched against the ground, fingers clenching handfuls of grass, jaw tensing, eyes closing to slits, but staying open, always open, always watching. When the first wave of climax hit, I let him go, but he stayed where he was, leaving me in charge. Dimly, I heard him growl as he came, and by the time I finished and leaned over him, his eyes were half-lidded, a lazy grin tweaking the corners of his mouth.

“Feeling better?” he said.

I stretched out on top of him, head resting in the hollow below his shoulder. “Much.”