

CH 4 - KATHERINE

KATHERINE POV

– Three Years Later –

It had been three years since the snow melted under my burning skin.

Three years since I opened my eyes, with re in my veins and a new name on my lips.

I was no longer Katherine Hale.

That girl died in the woods.

Now I was Kathleen Rale. Shifter medicine student. A proud member—albeit unocial—of the Wisteria Pack.

A place where people didn't look at me like I was broken.

Where my past didn't follow me like a shadow.

Where I could be someone new.

Where I could nally breathe.

I still remember the morning after I died.

I had woken up naked, alone, and shivering in a clearing miles from the place I had fallen.

My clothes were gone. My wounds were gone. Even the blood had vanished from my skin.

But I was alive.

My heart was beating—steady and strange, like it belonged to someone else.

The re still ickered beneath my skin, and when I reached inward—tentative, scared—I felt her.

Hator.

Not a wolf. Not anything I had ever read about in books or seen in my mother's documentaries.

She was older. Ancient in ways that didn't make sense.

She didn't speak much, not at rst. She just... watched. Coiled in my chest like a shadow of ame and starlight.

I ran.

Still barefoot. Still shaking. But I ran.

I didn't look back. Not even once.

I crossed the Canadian border into Alaska within two days.

I stole clothes from a laundry line and found a pair of snow boots by someone's back porch. I didn't even feel bad.

My body was still healing, still adapting to what I had become.

My skin burned under my clothes. My senses overwhelmed me—too sharp, too fast, too loud.

But I made it to the rst town.

A dusty little place on the edge of nowhere, surrounded by pines and frozen roads.

They had a payphone outside an old gas station. I stood there for an hour before I dared pick up the receiver and call the number I knew by heart.

My father picked up on the second ring.

He didn't even say hello.

Just a broken, whispered:

"Kat?"

And I cried. The kind of sobs that broke ribs.

He had known something terrible had happened.

He'd felt it in his chest like a string snapping.

He said the bond between us—the one that had always pulsed like a quiet drum—just went silent.

He thought I was dead.

The Alpha said I had probably been kidnapped and killed by rogues, but he searched for me for days, even if no one had answers and no body was found.

And now he knew why.

When I told him what Jonas had done, my father's voice turned to steel.

I could hear his claws unsheathing, the scraping sound of his chair as he stood too fast.

"I'll kill him."

"No," I whispered, panic rushing back. "No, Dad. Please. He can't know I'm alive."

"You rejected him, and he attacked you, Kat. He left you to die. You think I'll just—"

"Dad, please, you have to. I'm not just Kat anymore, and if he nds out, he'll never let me go. And I can't..."

Silence.

"What are you?"

I hesitated.

"I'm not a wolf."

Another pause. A long one.

"What's her name?" he nally asked.

"...Hator."

My dad didn't ask anything else.

He just sighed—a heavy, trembling breath.

"The less I know, the better. You need to go underground. I have a stepsister in Alaska. She lives in Wisteria. She can help."

He sent me an address. A name. No questions asked.

He didn't call me again. Didn't visit. Didn't tell anyone.

He kept my secret like a vow carved in blood.

And I loved him even more for it.

Wisteria Pack became my home.

They didn't know who I had been.

They didn't ask about the faint scars that laced my chest, or the way I inched at silver.

My aunt—Elira—took me in without hesitation, as if she'd been waiting her whole life for me to show up on her doorstep.

She knew I wasn't a wolf, of course. The elders sensed it too.

But no one forced me to shift. No one pried.

Instead, they enrolled me in the local university's shifted medicine program, helped me get forged documents, and gave me a second chance at life.

I became Kathleen Rale.

Med student. Volunteer. Good girl.

I still had nightmares.

I still woke up sometimes with my skin hot and my nails blackened at the edges from dreams soaked in re and blood.

But I was safe.

And for the rst time in my life... happy.

Until today.

Today everything was going to change.

Because today marked the beginning of our inter-pack rotations. The nal step before graduation.

For the next six months, we'd be stationed across the continent, assisting local medical teams in other packs.

We were split into small teams, assigned to packs based on our ranking, skills, and the Goddess's very random sense of humor.

I sat on the edge of my dorm bed, staring at the envelope in my lap like it was a live bomb.

"Just open it," my cousin called from across the room. Tessa.

A young she-wolf with skin like golden oak and the most beautiful snarl I'd ever seen.

"You make it sound easy," I murmured.

"Because it *is* easy," she retorted.

I hadn't been praying for much—just not one thing.

Not Bloodhound.

Not him.

I peeled the seal with shaking hands and slid out the letter.

> Kathleen Rale,

Congratulations. Your assigned rotation will take place at Winter Pack, Great Bear Lake, Canada.

You'll be under the direct supervision of Dr. Howard House and his team.>

I blinked.

Winter Pack.

Not Bloodhound.

Not freaking Jonas.

I exhaled, long and hard, until I fell back onto the bed and stared at the ceiling.

"Where're you going?" Tessa asked.

"Winter Pack."

Her eyebrows shot up. Then she grinned like a damn cheshire cat, sitting up straighter on her bed. "You're going to that Winter Pack? Home of the Savage Quadruplets?"

I frowned. "The what?"

Tessa's eyes lit up with unholy delight. "You've been living under a rock I swear! Four twin brothers. Alphas. All mate-less. All handsome and terrifying. Rumor has it they took down a rogue den the size of a village when they were just seventeen. The oldest one—Kyle, I think—is basically a walking war crime. He insulted his little brother ." "

She sighed, dramatically. "Handsome, brutal, mate-less. And now you're going to be living right there, surrounded by glacial murderers with perfect jawlines. Lucky b'tch."

I stared at her, unamused.

"I don't want any unmated alpha in my life ever again," I muttered.

Tessa gave me a pitying look but didn't argue. She knew the truth, and was not going to push me anymore.

I didn't care about the weather. Or the guys. Or the pack's charming reputation for violence and testosterone.

All I knew was that I wouldn't have to see him.

And I was going to toast to that multiple times tonight.

That was enough.