

## CH 8 - KATHERINE

KATHERINE POV

In the last couple of days, I tied every loose thread I had left behind.

Packed the books, returned the borrowed scalpel sets, canceled the tiny little lease I was barely affording near the med campus, and said goodbye to the few people I dared to care for. I wasn't exactly popular—being the odd shifter girl in a mostly werewolves program will do that to you—but I'd made my presence known. And now I was leaving, heading south to the Winter Pack. Land of snow, ice, and four freaking gorgeous Alphas.

Not that I care. Obviously.

My training placement had been confirmed. There was no backing out.

Not that I wanted to.

Mostly.

"I swear I'm not gonna step foot anywhere near the Bloodhound Pack," I had promised my aunt and cousin the night before I left. "Jonas can choke on his own shit for all I care. I'm going to Winter Pack, not into enemy territory."

My aunt had laughed through her tears, brushing my hair with those long, bony fingers that had raised me. "Be careful, Kat. You always get brave when you're scared."

And I was. I was scared as hell.

Three women in a tight little kitchen—me, Aunt Elira, and my cousin Tessa—trying not to fall apart. Tessa squeezed me so hard my ribs ached, whispering something about tracking my phone and showing up at my doorstep if I so much as ghosted her for a week.

"Don't think I won't," she warned, her voice cracking.

"I'll be back in a blink," I promised. "You'll be begging me to shut up and leave you alone like usual."

A few tears escaped, but nothing dramatic. We weren't the type for long, sobbing goodbyes. We were the type to survive, teeth clenched, grief buried under duty and drive.

And just like that, I was on the plane.

The flight had been fast, and in four hours, I was back in Canada.

The second I stepped off the plane, something twisted inside my gut. Not hunger. Not nerves.

Something older.

Uneasiness curled up under my ribcage like smoke. Hator, my beast, stretched awake and whispered in the corner of my mind.

"Something's coming," she whispered. "I don't know what."

Neither did I.

But I didn't like it. Not one damn bit.

The airport was tiny. The kind of place where you could see the edge of the runway from the baggage claim. Everything smelled like pine and melting ice. Late spring had touched this place just enough to remind you winter ruled here most of the year.

Outside, a black SUV idled beside a faded yellow curb. A bulky man leaned against the passenger door, holding a piece of paper with my name on it in all caps: KATHLEEN RALE.

At least they spelled it right.

I sighed. At least the Alphas of Winter Pack had the decency to send transportation. For a med student, no less. That was either very respectful—or very suspicious.

"Hi," I said as I approached. "I'm Kat."

The man's eyes dragged across me a second too long, but he caught himself. Straightened up. "Carlos. You're the doc-in-training, huh?"

"Guess so," I replied with a tight smile. I wasn't in the mood to make friends. Especially not with someone who looked like he bench-pressed bears for fun and smelled like testosterone and cheap gum.

He opened the door for me. I slid in without another word.

Carlos tried his best at small talk. Asked if I'd ever been this far north. If I'd heard the Winter Pack was hard-ass but fair. If I liked snow.

I gave him polite, half-hearted answers and turned my face toward the window. I didn't want to get buddy-buddy with a pack warrior who thought I was someone cute to flirt with. I wasn't here for that. I was here to study, to work, to survive.

And the land outside was beautiful enough to shut him up.

The road curved along the edge of Great Bear Lake, a mirror of still water wrapped in pine and cedar and the first timid signs of spring. Patches of snow still clung to the shadows, stubborn against the warming sun. Buds dotted the branches like green punctuation marks in a sea of evergreen. There were no city lights, no buildings taller than a wolf's shoulders, no noise except the wind and tires humming on gravel.

It looked like the woods I grew up in, back in Bloodhound. Wild, quiet, ancient.

Hator pressed closer inside my chest.

"This land is claimed," she murmured. "It's strong. Can't you feel it?"

Yeah, I could.

Power hummed under the surface like a distant drumbeat. Subtle but insistent. Like the whole damn territory was breathing in sync.

We were close.

Carlos slowed at a checkpoint—barely more than a gate and a pair of guards—but didn't stop. They gave a nod, scented the air, and waved us through.

The second we crossed the border, my spine stiffened. It was like stepping through a wall of static. The magic here was thick. Not hostile, not exactly. Just aware. Watching.

Hator went quiet. Not out of fear—out of reverence.

"This is it," Carlos said. "Pack territory."

"No kidding," I muttered, still peering out the window.

He cleared his throat. "Dr. House—our Head of Medical—asked me to take you straight to the hospital. Says he wants to meet you, get your induction started right away."

I nodded. That was exactly what I wanted too. Get this whole introduction mess over with. Prove I was worth the spot they'd carved out for me.

Carlos didn't talk much after that. Good. I needed the quiet. My head was buzzing, thoughts bouncing between excitement and dread.

Medical training in a place like this—it wasn't going to be some neat, sanitized internship. Winter Pack was known for being hard. Isolated. Resourceful. I'd be patching up wolves torn open from real fights. Delivering pups in cabins in the dead of night. Learning to read symptoms not just from lab results, but from scent, body language, instinct.

I wanted that. I needed that.

But wanting something didn't make it easy.

As the SUV rolled deeper into the pack lands, the buildings began to appear—wooden cabins, wide porches, tall chimneys. Nothing was built to show off. Everything was functional, strong, meant to last.

Kind of like the people who lived here, I guessed.

And somewhere in the middle of it all, waiting for me, was a hospital.

My new workplace.

My next test.

Carlos made a low sound in his throat, like he was debating whether to say something.

I glanced sideways. "What?"

He hesitated. Then: "The Alphas'll probably want to meet you too. Not right away, maybe. But soon."

My stomach did a backflip. Fantastic. Nothing like four intimidating male leaders to round out your first day on the job.

I cleared my throat and looked back out the window. "Noted."

But Hator didn't stay quiet this time.

She stirred again, her voice low and intent.

"They're strong, Kat. And...something else. There's a feeling. A thread in the air. You'll feel it soon."

I didn't answer her. Didn't need more cryptic messages today.

I just watched the trees pass by, the snow receding inch by inch, the territory drawing me deeper into its heart.