

CH 9 - KATHERINE

KATHERINE POV

Carlos pulled the SUV into a wide gravel lot and shifted the engine off with a grunt. The tires crunched softly beneath us, and I could not believe my own eyes.

"There she is," he said, nodding toward the low, sleek building ahead of us. "Winter Pack Hospital."

I leaned forward in my seat, genuinely impressed for the first time since I'd landed.

The hospital looked nothing like the rusted, overworked clinics I'd rotated through back in Alaska. It was modern, understated, and beautifully integrated into the landscape. Long lines of timber and glass stretched across a snow-dusted lawn. The structure curved like a spine, following the natural slope of the hill behind it, with big, panoramic windows that reflected the forest around it. It looked like it belonged there. Like it had always been there.

And maybe it had.

Carlos caught my stare and chuckled under his breath. "Didn't expect that, huh?"

"Not exactly," I admitted.

The idea of a pack this far from a city having high-end medical facilities hadn't even crossed my mind. I'd expected rustic. Primitive, even. But this? This was clean, efficient, intentional.

And it screamed power.

Winter Pack didn't just survive. They thrived. They didn't need to assert their dominance. It was in everything they built. Quiet. Controlled. Unapologetically prepared.

Carlos came around to open my door, grinning like a proud old friend.

"You'll be alright here," he said as I stepped out. "Just watch your step—some of the staff bite harder than the patients."

I gave him a side glance.

He winked. "And if you ever need help finding your way around—or just need a coffee break—you can call me. Anytime."

His voice dropped half a note, the implication as subtle as a hammer.

I forced a smile. "Sure. I'll keep that in mind."

It came out more mocking than I meant it to. Okay—maybe not more than I meant it to. Just enough to let him know I'd caught the vibe and wasn't interested. He didn't push it. Just chuckled again and tapped the roof of the SUV before walking away.

I watched him leave, then turned toward the main doors.

Let's get this over with.

The inside of the hospital was even more impressive. Wide halls. Soft lighting. Polished floors that looked like stone but muted every footstep. The whole place smelled like pine, sage, and antiseptic.

My boots clicked softly as I approached the reception desk.

A young woman with bright red curls and freckled cheeks looked up, already smiling. She wore pale green scrubs and a badge that read "MARLEY, RN."

"Hi there! You must be the new medical student," she said warmly.

"That obvious?"

"Only because we've been expecting you all morning. Dr. House is in his office, down the hall and to the left. He told me to send you straight in."

I nodded, adjusting the strap of my bag. "Thanks."

"Oh, and..." She leaned in slightly, her eyes glittering with something halfway between curiosity and warning. "Don't let him intimidate you. He's... intense, but fair. You'll learn a ton."

Fair. Right. That was everyone's favorite word in this pack, apparently.

I thanked her again and walked in the direction she'd indicated, my steps echoing softly down the hallway. The walls were lined with minimalist artwork—landscapes in soft gray and blue, anatomical sketches, even a few vintage medical posters that felt surprisingly charming rather than morbid.

I found the door easily enough. A simple plaque read "DR. THOMAS HOUSE, M.D., CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER."

My fingers curled into a fist, ready to knock.

But before I could, the door burst open with enough force to make me take a step back.

An older man with silvery-brown hair and bright cerulean eyes stood in the doorway, eyebrows raised and lips already halfway to a smirk.

"Ah! Kathleen Rale, I suppose?" he said in a voice that was both clipped and amused. "You're early. Or I'm late. Time gets fuzzy when you've been in surgery for four hours."

His voice had the kind of command that didn't need volume. Just tone. Sharp. Efficient. Decades of being obeyed.

I straightened instinctively. "Yes, sir. Kathleen. But everyone calls me Kat."

"Well, Kat, I don't care what they call you as long as you don't faint, cry, or break anything expensive on your first day." He gestured for me to enter. "Come in."

I stepped into his office, and it hit me like a wall of controlled chaos.

Books everywhere. Medical texts stacked on shelves and sprawled across the desk. A full anatomical skeleton model stood in the corner wearing a red scarf and what looked suspiciously like a nurse's cap. On the walls, framed photos of surgical teams, wolf pups, and a few grainy black-and-white shots of a much younger House operating in what looked like a field tent.

The man was clearly a legend in his own right. And he knew it.

"Sit," he ordered, pointing at a chair across from his desk. "Let's talk about how not to get you killed in the next six months."

I sat, straight-backed and alert.

House didn't waste time. He opened a folder, scanned it with the speed of someone who already knew what was inside, and then pinned me with those bright eyes again.

"Top of your class in anatomy and pathology," he said. "Published an article on adrenal gland regeneration in shifters under high-stress transformations. Specialized in hybrid physiology. Impressive for someone your age."

"Thank you," I said, unsure if it was actually a compliment.

He closed the folder. "Winter Pack doesn't usually take outsiders into our medical team. We're cautious. We don't like wasting resources on people who think they're on some grand wilderness adventure."

"I'm not here to camp," I said coolly. "I'm here to work."

"Good." He leaned back in his chair, folding his hands across his stomach. "Then here's how it works. You'll rotate through three primary departments: trauma, diagnostics, and obstetrics. Our emergencies aren't your standard car wrecks and coughs—we deal with transformed injuries, pack disputes, cross-species complications. If you panic, people die."

"I don't panic."

He smiled faintly. "That's what they all say."

I bit back a retort. Let him test me. I wasn't made of glass.

He grabbed a white coat from a hook behind his desk and tossed it to me. It landed perfectly in my lap.

"Put that on. Your first round starts in fifteen minutes."

I blinked. "Wait—you mean today?"

"Unless you were planning to spend your first day getting a manicure," he deadpanned. "You're not a tourist, Rale. You want to be here? You get your hands dirty."

I stood and slipped the coat on, the weight of it settling over my shoulders like a dare.

"Any questions before I throw you to the wolves—pardon the expression?"

"Just one," I said. "Where's the nearest coffee machine?"

He barked a laugh. "Attagirl. Down the hall, second door on your right. You've got ten minutes. After that, meet Dr. Hang in OR3."

I gave a mock salute. "Yes, sir."

"And Kat?" he added as I turned.

I looked back.

"Don't screw this up."

"Wouldn't dream of it," I said.

Then I turned and walked out like my legs weren't shaking slightly under the weight of adrenaline and caffeine withdrawal.

Ten minutes. Coffee. Then surgery.

No big deal.

—

OR3 was bright. Cold. Clean.

The kind of space that demanded precision—not just of tools, but of thought. Of movement. One misstep, and someone bled out. One hesitation, and someone's future was ruined. It was the kind of pressure I didn't just tolerate—I thrived under it.

I'd barely stepped into the scrub area when another figure appeared beside me.

"Trainee?"

The man had dark, almond-shaped eyes behind rectangular lenses, his black hair tied into a neat low bun. His build was slim but efficient, like he didn't waste space on anything unnecessary. He handed me a surgical cap and mask before I could answer.

"I'm Dr. Hang. Orthopedic specialist. You're with me for this one."

"Kat," I replied quickly, taking the gear. "Looking forward to it."

"Hmm," he hummed without looking at me. "We'll see."

We scrubbed in silence, his movements brisk and economical. He didn't speak again until we were gloved, gowned, and stepping into the operating room itself.

The patient was already anesthetized on the table—male, large-framed, muscular even under sedation. His left leg was exposed, draped in sterile cloths. The limb looked unnaturally twisted, the outline of the femur visible beneath swollen, bruised skin.

I scanned the chart clipped to the rail.

"Darren. Border patrol. Ambushed by rogues near the eastern perimeter two nights ago. Delayed extraction—he kept fighting despite the fracture."

Dr. Hang gave a clipped nod. "He shifted mid-combat, mid-injury. That's the problem."

I blinked. "He healed while fighting?"

"Partially. Which means his bone tried to fuse mid-shift. Wolf regeneration is quick, but messy under stress. The result—" he tapped the leg gently, "—is a misaligned femur and early callus formation. We have to re-break it and fix it properly before the bone fully ossifies."

My stomach twisted in that familiar, fascinated way.

This was next-level. This wasn't textbook.

"Why didn't they sedate and realign immediately?"

"Too risky. He was still in shifted form when they pulled him out. Took nearly 24 hours to get him stable enough for human anesthesia." Dr. Hang glanced at me. "Not many patrol wolves could've kept fighting with a broken femur, let alone heal through it. Winter Pack breeds strength."

Yeah. No kidding.

Even unconscious, Darren radiated something wild. Something unshakable. There was power in his body's refusal to give out. Not stubbornness—resilience. I'd read about it. But seeing it in the raw, up close like this—it changed things.

It made the danger of this place more real.

Dr. Hang nodded at the tech to begin. A sterile tray of instruments was handed over, the lights above warming to full brightness.

"Retractor."

I passed it, already anticipating his next steps. We made the incision cleanly along the lateral thigh, exposing muscle and scar tissue. The old fracture line was barely visible beneath a thin sheen of partially healed bone. Nature had done its job—too fast and in the wrong direction.

He picked up the oscillating saw.

"Moment of truth."

A quick warning to the staff. A bone clamp to stabilize. Then a precise buzz of the saw—

Crack.

The sound echoed sharply, unnaturally loud. My heart kicked.

The femur split cleanly, almost like it was waiting to be corrected.

Dr. Hang exhaled.

"Back on track," he muttered, voice a bit satisfied.

I helped him align the bone, watching carefully as he inserted a titanium rod and secured the screws. Every step had to be perfect. Every angle controlled. There was no margin for error when you were fighting against a body that wanted to heal too fast, too wrong.

By the time the sutures were in place and the sterile dressings applied, over two hours had passed. My feet ached. My shoulders were tight. But my hands hadn't trembled once.

Dr. Hang peeled off his gloves and looked at me properly for the first time.

"You've assisted in trauma surgery before."

"Yes."

"Not like this, though."

"No," I admitted. "Not like this."

He gave the tiniest nod. Not praise. Not approval. Just... acknowledgment. And that was more than enough.

I was still processing the last few hours when I stepped out of the OR and found Dr. House leaning against the hallway wall like he'd been waiting the whole time.

His coat was off now, shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows, revealing thick forearms and a thin scar that curled around one wrist like a pale vine.

"Well?" he asked, pushing off the wall.

I wiped my brow with the edge of my sleeve. "It was intense. Fast. Brutal, even."

He smirked. "And?"

"And incredible. That wolf—Darren—his body shouldn't have held up through that."

House nodded. "That's Winter Pack for you. Survival here isn't just about instinct. It's about will. Our wolves are trained to keep moving even when their bodies scream to stop. It's what keeps the border intact."

I swallowed. "I've never seen anything like it."

"You will," he said, his tone softer now. "Plenty more where that came from."

He turned and started walking. I followed.

"Your shift's done for today," he said over his shoulder. "Time to get you settled."

"Settled?"

"You'll be living in the pack house with the other members. It's easier that way. You'll have a room, access to shared facilities, kitchens, training areas, the works."

I tried not to let the word living rattle me. But it did.

This wasn't just an internship. It was immersion.

He stopped in front of the reception again, where Marley—the red-haired nurse from earlier—was finishing a chart.

"She offered to walk you there," House said, jerking his chin toward her. "Said she'd introduce you to whoever's around today."

Marley lit up when she saw me. "I was hoping I'd catch you before you disappeared!"

I looked back at House, a flicker of nerves in my chest. "And then what?"

He paused. Just long enough to make it feel intentional.

"Then," he said slowly, "you'll be initiated."

The word landed like a stone in my stomach. I wanted to argue that pack initiation had not been planned with my alpha, and something to buy me time...

But House was already turning, coat slung over one shoulder, his footsteps fading down the corridor like the end of a verdict.

Marley reached for my arm, smile bright but tight. "Come on. I'll walk you to the Pack House. You'll be fine."

Fine.

Funny word, that.

I followed her out into the snow-dusted dusk, but I couldn't shake the feeling that something was waiting for me on the other side of that door.