

## Lost in Vengeance

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## Chapter One

Killian Stone's truck bounced across the dirt road as he followed the dark green ranger's vehicle in front of him. With his window rolled down, he embraced the comforting smell of the Canadian Yukon. The crisp fall air stung his sensitive nose, but it was a reprieve from the stuffiness of the truck's cabin. Many people didn't associate Canada with scenic places to visit, but as he watched the golden ambers of fall blending with the dark evergreens, Killian couldn't imagine a more beautiful place. They had left the Alaskan Highway about forty-five minutes before and the off-road terrain was tearing into the suspension of his rented Ford.

Ranger Lucas had contacted Killian about a month ago regarding a wolf that needed some help. They had a female who wasn't grouping well with the others at the sanctuary and wasn't doing well on her own. Some lone wolves could survive in solitude, but she avoided the other packs so much, she had begun to starve herself.

Killian was well-known in the circle of wolf preservation since he'd started his own sanctuary in California five years before. After he received funding and opened Wolf Creek, word was sent to all wildlife reserves and areas where wolves were common that he was interested in looking at troubled wolves. He hoped he wasn't too late for this one.

The green truck stopped, and Killian pressed on the brakes as he waited for Ranger Lucas to pull through the red-and-white barrier gate. Wolf Sanctuary took in sick or injured Yukon wolves and allowed them to create their own packs within protected areas. It was approximately one hundred acres and manned 24-7 by rangers with tranquilizer guns, who would have no problem shooting a trespasser. One such

guard leaned toward Killian's window, peering in with grim assessment at the new guest. With a quick nod and wave, the guard stood and let Killian pass.

The road beyond the gate was paved, much to Killian's and the truck's relief, and surrounded by buildings clustered together. The concrete structures with little windows reminded him of the military base he'd visited as a teenager. Above each front door were huge white block letters: OFFICE, LIVING QUARTERS, and INFIRMARY. When Lucas pulled in front of the last building, Killian parked next to him and got out of the truck, his keys jangling in his fingers anxiously.

Lucas, a short, fat man with salt-and-pepper hair and a warm smile, opened the front door and let Killian pass him.

"Like I told you over the phone, Mr. Stone, we don't usually have problems with our wolves. If they are too injured to survive, then we humanely put them down, but usually they recover and settle right into the area." His breath came out in gasps as he fumbled with his key card, as if the walk from the vehicles had been strenuous exercise for him.

They stood in a small area separating the front door from the holding area, a precaution in case a wolf got loose. After a loud beep, Lucas pulled the door open. Killian felt like running ahead to the wolf in the room but followed Lucas with his nervous hands folded behind his back.

What he saw in front of him made him bite back sharp criticism. To humans, the cages surrounding the hallway probably seemed fine. They were big enough for one wolf, maybe two, to walk comfortably, and had dirt layered on the concrete floors with fake pine trees and boulders placed in a strategic fashion to make the wolves feel more at *home*. But for a man who spent half of his time as a wolf, it made him simmer in anger. He imagined himself locked up in the tight confines, pacing back and forth behind a chain-link fence, waiting for an opportune moment to escape. Or even worse: being injured and resigning himself to a fate of captivity.

Lucas continued chattering away, but Killian ignored him, each step bringing him closer to this wild wolf as he passed cage after cage. Most of them were empty, but two wolves regarded him with sad and tired eyes. One of them lifted its head as Killian walked by and let out a high-pitched whine, begging Killian to set him free. All Killian could do was close his eyes and press his hand to the cool metal and walk on to the final cage. Lucas's squat form stopped.

"Here she is. She's a pretty one. I have never seen a wolf with such blue eyes. Usually they're more of a light green. And she's large for a female—would've made a great addition to any pack. It's odd that she wouldn't fight her way into a pack. She's got a snappy jaw, she does." Lucas nodded, his double chin melting together.

Killian focused on the wolf in front of him. Her fur was as white as freshly fallen snow, with bright silver at the tips of her ears and tail. Lucas was right. Killian had never seen eyes quite that color, even on a Shifter. Shifters tended to be the only wolves with blue, green, or gray eyes, making it rare to find in the wild, but he had never seen this shade of crystallized azure before. If he couldn't smell her right in front of him, emitting the strong scents of wolf, sugar, cherry blossoms, and human, he would think she wasn't real.

As Lucas talked, she lifted her head from the ground. Apparently trying to stay as far away from humans as possible, she had backed herself into the farthest corner of the fence. She immediately dismissed Lucas, but when her eyes met Killian's, she paused and slowly blinked. She inhaled a steady breath, and her eyes opened wider. She stood, her limbs seeming to struggle with the simple movement, but she made it to a strong and confident posture. Her tail lifted in defiance of his Alpha presence.

*Hmm...great. Another challenging she-wolf,* he thought as he raised an eyebrow at her. She ignored it and continued to stare, causing Killian to mask his laugh with a cough. She was a fighter, and the tenseness of her muscles said she would spring if he opened the gate. He had to take her home with him before she did damage to herself—and the humans taking care of her.

"Wow. I think that's the most reaction she's had to anyone the last couple days. Last time we had to tranquilize her in order to give her an IV with nutrients. But she hasn't stood in days."

Killian patted the older man on the back, ignoring the disgusting moisture he found there despite the cool temperature, and pushed him toward the door they had entered.

"Lucas, why don't we make some arrangements? I want to take this pretty wolf off your hands."

"Oh...really? Just like that, huh?" Lucas laughed.

Killian laughed with him, relieved he hadn't made another useless trip to the middle of nowhere.

\* \* \* \*

Fifteen hours later, Killian pulled up the long, curved driveway in front of his home. Wolf Creek was a private sanctuary set a couple of miles away from Big Bear, California. Government and private foundations funded it as an experiment to return wolves to the Golden State.

His home wasn't as scenic as the expanse of Alaska, but for Southern California, it was a welcome escape from the hustle and bustle. Although it was a front, he believed bringing wolves to Big Bear could help out the ecosystem as it had done in Yellowstone, which was exactly what he stated in his proposal at fund-raisers.

When he stopped in front of his house, a blond-haired man came striding out the front door with a frown on his face. Jamie was always cautious when Killian returned from his journeys to find new wolves. He hated the bad news when Killian was once again unsuccessful at finding a Shifter. Killian gave Jamie a smile to let him know all was well.

Jamie let out a loud whoop, jumping down the three stairs of the wooden front porch, and jogged to Killian.

"You found a Shifter? How was the flight?" he asked, patting Killian on the back of his shoulder.

Killian laughed. "Yeah, I found one. And of course the flight was fine. Having to worry about an unmated, scared, packless female Shifter in the cargo bay of the jet was just amazing."

Jamie's mouth gaped, but he retained his smile. "A female, huh?" He rubbed his hands together.

Killian rolled his eyes. Jamie was always on the prowl for new dates.

They circled to the back of the horse trailer. He had hated to tranquilize her, but unfortunately she wouldn't go with him willingly.

"Watch out. She's kinda mean. Tried to bite my fingers off when I tried taking her out of the cage."

Jamie cringed. "In a cage?"

Killian nodded, his mouth pulled into a hard line. He turned the handle and opened the door, wary of what they would find inside. No big ball of white fur came sprinting out of the trailer, teeth and all. Yet what waited inside worried him more.

The beauty was backed against the wall of the trailer in a defensive position, limbs tensed to spring and tail high in the air, even though she was terrified. White, pearly canines dripped with frothy drool as she gave a low growl, daring them to walk any closer. The narrow slits of her eyes glowed with jewellike luminescence.

Killian cursed under his breath.

Jamie wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, his green eyes narrowing. "Feisty one, huh?"

"You have no idea," Killian mumbled, remembering when he tried to grab her from the cage and those teeth came a little bit too close to his fingertips. Her hot breath had fanned across his skin before he snatched his hand back.

"Why don't you just force her to change? Use your little Alpha magic powers."

Killian tilted his head to the side and then shrugged.

"I don't know. There's something about her. She seems wounded, and if I force it on her, it could cause her more trauma."

It was hard for him *not* to use his wolf's command. Killian could feel the creature, alert and dangerous, lurking underneath the surface. It paced, anxious to force the she-wolf down but intrigued by the little creature that resisted his call. He wasn't going to tell Jamie he had already tried. The Alpha force could be overbearing for the pack, pushing and weaving its way into their will, until they were forced to accept it. Sometimes a wolf didn't notice they were being commanded, but other times, if they were very willful, it could be painful. But she had just blinked at him and growled louder. He had never seen anything like it.

"Hmm, well, how are you planning on getting her out of there, then?" Jamie asked, backing away as her snarl grew louder.

Killian smiled. "Very patiently."

\* \* \* \*

Cat paced the end of the small box, still disoriented from the drug the man named Killian had shot her with. The metal box felt even more closed in than her previous cage, making her itch to be free. She smelled the comforting scent of a forest nearby, and she wanted to sprint toward it, but the two men blocking the box's exit spelled major trouble.

The one called Jamie said something about forcing her into a room in the house, as if the current location wasn't torture enough. He seemed relaxed, given that Cat was ready to pounce and attack at any moment. Fear and rage coursed through her body, but caution held her back. Jamie's sweet scent of lemon fit his pretty-boy features, but Cat sensed the dominance of his wolf. The man next to him was what caused Cat's caution.

She had been waiting patiently for someone to enter the small area so she could attack, and when he opened the gate, that was exactly what she did. Never before had she met a man who exuded as much dominance. She had always thought her parents were powerful, but compared to this man they were like mice against a lion. Cat sensed the tendrils of his Alpha waves coming toward her, trying to calm and subdue her. She wasn't going to fall for that one.

Her wolf respected dominance, but she wasn't going to submit to it.

Killian was a different type of beautiful from Jamie. He was all sharp angles, where Jamie was soft. He watched her inquisitively, holding her stare with amber-gold eyes and refusing to look down. She growled instinctively and paced faster, but his presence was so sedative. His midnight hair curled at the ends to brush the tips of his tanned shoulders and swept back away from his face.

Despite his natural ability to alleviate her stress, his large body should have scared her. Strength rippled underneath the black T-shirt that stretched over his thick biceps. But even his scent attempted to subdue her, with its comforting pine-and-earth undertones and a hint of unidentifiable spice. Six years in the wilderness, wild and lonely, made her wolf want to rub against his leg in search of affection, but fear held her back.

*I don't want you to change back until you find safety. Do you understand?*

Her mother's words had kept her alive in the wilderness. They had forced her to remain steadfast and refuse to shift back to find shelter in a town. And she wouldn't change that now just because this big dark man wanted her as his next loyal subject.

As she continued to pace and keep watch on Killian, Jamie stepped away out of her sight. Instantly nervous, she tilted her head, listening for his quieting footsteps.

He met her stare confidently. "Don't worry. Jamie's just going to get you some food. I'm sure you're hungry."

The thought of food had Cat's stomach rumbling in agreement. While in the cage, she'd starved herself in hopes that one of the employees would enter. Then she could

attack and escape. She hadn't accounted for the small weapon they'd shot through the gate, knocking her out so they could give her nutrients. She'd woken up to some women talking about the medicine helping her malnutrition. Since then, she'd continued to not eat. If she couldn't escape, there was no way she was spending the rest of her life in a cage.

Her attention sharpened when Killian stepped onto the ramp of the trailer, shaking it with his weight. Letting out a warning growl, Cat crouched lower, ready to spring.

"Don't worry – you're safe here. We're not hunters, although I'm sure you can tell by our scent, can't you?" He crept into the trailer, speaking to Cat as if she were a small child.

After being wild for so long, the tiny space, plus Killian's persistence in getting closer, made it hard for her to breathe. Each breath became heavier, faster, as she fought to get oxygen into her body. She huffed and puffed, and it built on her anxiety, sending cold chills all over. Drool dripped from her mouth, and her vision blurred before he finally stopped five feet away from her and crouched down, his large frame almost blocking her view of the outside. Yet he didn't lower his head below hers or lose her eye contact.

"I'm the Alpha of the pack here. I brought you here to get you away from the cage. Although you can tell that too, right?" He smiled, his white teeth contrasting against his tanned skin. "I've never seen a wolf resist my command the way you do. Are you just stubborn?"

His voice never wavered, even when Cat's angry jaws snapped toward him. He stood firm and strong, like a mountain she had to overcome in order to escape.

"I think it's more than that, though. You're a scared one, huh? Is that why you won't change to human?"

Cat continued to stare, standing still and pulsing with apprehension.

"All righty, then! I bring food. Courtesy of Chef Jamie." The blond with green eyes came around the end of the trailer with a big grin and childish energy. In his hand, he carried a large pan containing a huge piece of raw beef, dripping with fresh red blood.

Cat's fear almost fled from her body, replaced with the pain of her aching stomach as her gaze latched on to the meat Jamie set on the floor of the trailer. Killian reached back and pulled the metal dish toward him. It ended up in front of his bent legs, his hands folded as he settled back into his crouching position.

"See, we don't want to hurt you. We just want to make you more comfortable."

She was torn between fear of the man in front of her and intense hunger for the tender meat. She could practically taste the beef. Her growl turned into a high-pitched whine as she considered her options. She could attack this guy, maybe win, but her chances were low. He might be in human form, but it didn't take long to shift, and he could be a very large wolf under all that human skin. Plus, he had his friend with him, and there could be more in the house. Even if she won, Cat had no idea where in the world she was. She looked from Killian to the meat and back again.

Slowly, she inched one foot toward the platter, then another. When Killian made no move to grab her, she moved closer until her paws hit the cold metal. Her face was inches from his; all it would take was one snap of her teeth, and the fight would begin. His almond-shaped eyes bored into hers, daring her to start it, but his Alpha command begged her to take the food.

Cat jerked her head down to the pan and sank her teeth into the glorious meal. The blood gushed into her mouth, and her stomach cried in relief for the nutrients it needed. Out of the corner of her eye she watched Killian reach out a hesitant hand as if to pet the top of her head. She jerked her head up, and the growl came ripping from her lungs.

Killian raised his hand and shrugged in apology. "I just wanted to see if you are as soft as you look."

Cat gave his hand a pointed look and bared her teeth. *Just try that again, Mister*, she dared. Then she went back to her meal.

A few blissful moments later, Cat licked her paws and mouth, trying to clean up any leftover blood, gazing happily at the empty pan. It had been refreshing, though not nearly enough for her stomach. Killian still crouched in front of her with Jamie behind him at the entrance of the trailer, but neither made a move toward her.

"How about coming in now?" Killian asked. "We have a woman in there—Kelly—and she cooks a mean meatloaf."

Stay in the horrible metal trailer, enclosed and terrified, or go into a home with a strange man? She had already decided this wasn't the time to escape, as these two wolves could take her down with little effort.

Going into a home after this many years made her feel awkward, but it was her only realistic option. She stood to her full height on four legs, stretched her aching limbs, and sighed heavily.

"I guess that's as much of a yes as I'll get, then," Killian said, slapping his hands to his thighs. He stood and headed from the trailer, slinging an arm around Jamie's shoulder to whisper in his ear. They both waited at the bottom of the ramp as Cat walked toward them and watched their every move with caution. Once Cat reached the bottom, Killian led the way up the curved cobblestone pathway to the front porch of the home, with Jamie behind them both.

## Chapter Two

The door loomed in front of her like a gigantic gate leading toward another cage. Walls would close in on her the minute she entered and choke off any chance of escape. Flashes of the chain-link cage brought back all her feelings of helplessness. She would be trapped again, but in a prettier crate. It didn't help that the two men were leading her into unknown territory. It made her alert, wary, and just a little on the crazy side of paranoid.

"Are you coming?" Killian's voice broke through Cat's thoughts.

He leaned his weight against one of the mahogany doors he held open for her, hands tucked into his pockets. His house was a sharp contrast to the tiny cabin she had known in Alaska. Natural wood pillars surrounded a beautiful knotted-oak door, twisting their way up to a green-shingled roof. Tinted floor-to-ceiling privacy windows gave a sense that the owner loved his privacy but craved the view. Yet all she saw was a cage, and she wanted to slink back into the greenery surrounding it.

Killian must have seen how uneasy she was, because he motioned for Jamie to go on into the house. When Jamie made his way into the front entry, Killian smiled in an attempt to comfort her.

"We'll take it slow, okay? I'll leave the door open for a little. It's a lot bigger inside than it looks, I promise."

He was continuing his endeavor to calm Cat, and she wasn't sure whether she hated or liked that someone cared enough to try. With Jamie no longer behind her, the itch to run the other direction came back, but common sense shut it down. Cat apprehensively crossed the threshold and gazed at her surroundings.

Killian was right—the house was much more open on the inside than it looked from outside. Dark hardwood floors spread across the whole open-concept bottom floor. To her left was a sitting area, furnished with chocolate leather couches and a gigantic stone fireplace. At the other end of the room stood a large oak staircase, which curved until it widened at the top into a beautiful balcony overlooking the lower room.

With the fireplace lit and the smell of meatloaf embracing her in its warmth, she could *almost* relax—if it weren't for the smell of other Shifters in the house.

Cat turned her head sharply. Killian remained standing at the door with his arms crossed, Jamie at his side. They watched her with caution, waiting to see how she would react to the new environment.

The openness of the bottom floor wasn't suffocating. She let out a deep breath and opened her senses, taking in the place. The familiar smell of leather and fire, the decadent scent of the meatloaf, Killian's dangerously comforting smell, and the less overpowering sweet lemon of Jamie were all on the forefront. From the strength of Killian's scent, it was his home first and foremost. She could smell three other Shifters in the house. Having so many different wolves in such a small area skyrocketed her desire to flee. They chattered in comfortable tones over the recognizable clatter of dishes, which led her to believe they were in the kitchen.

Cat let out a long whining groan, again overwhelmed by all the new sensations and environments. After opening her eyes, she began to back out the door. Her wolf begged to escape from the presence of the unknown, but the chatter in the other room stopped as someone quieted them.

"Killian?" A woman's voice called over with a twangy accent, and then a motherly face popped around the corner from the front right.

"Hey, Kelly." Killian's expression could only be described as love, which he directed toward the woman.

His mother? Cat wondered, staring at the lovely woman. With her coffee-colored hair pulled into a messy ponytail and a yellow apron around her thick figure, she was

the epitome of a mother figure. Instantaneous sadness swept through Cat, causing her throat to burn and close up with unshed tears.

“This meatloaf isn’t going to wait all day for you to get your butt in here. I worked my hide off trying to get this done for you in time, and here you are dawdling in the doorway.”

Kelly paused, finally seeing the wolf in the middle of the living room. When she turned her wide-eyed attention back to Killian, Cat stepped back even farther. This woman, who smelled of brown sugar and pears, but more than anything Shifter, was probably uncomfortable with the unknown.

Then Kelly gave a soft grin in understanding, the laugh lines around her eyes becoming more pronounced.

“Come on, then. Let’s get you fed, little one.”

Surprised at the woman’s acceptance, Cat hesitated. The end of her tail swished across Killian’s leg where he stood at the opening of the door, almost boxing her into the room.

Kelly’s sincere grin widened. “Unless you don’t like meatloaf?”

Cat sensed Jamie and Killian’s tension behind her. They were probably wondering whether she would bolt out the door. With Kelly’s hospitality and motherly appearance, Cat wasn’t sure what she wanted either, but her body had made its decision as it headed in the direction of Kelly and the kitchen. Her stomach was still not relieved from the large portion of beef before, and the thought of meatloaf had her all but salivating on the hardwood flooring.

When she stood next to Kelly, the older woman’s scent swirling in her senses, Kelly turned away and clapped her hands three times in quick succession.

“All right, folks, time to eat!” she yelled at the others in the kitchen.

Cat turned the corner into the kitchen and found herself in a room with two additional Shifters. With a total of five Shifters surrounding her, Cat’s defenses built up

with a sense of potential danger. Her back tingled as her fur stood on end, and the room spun as her gaze bounced from Shifter to Shifter.

Killian walked ahead of her and stopped in front of the granite island, where the two new females sat. A blonde with emerald eyes turned toward Killian on the twisting bar stool and wrapped her arms around his waist.

"Hey, Killian. We thought we were going to have to wait all night for you."

Killian guffawed. "Like I would miss meatloaf!"

The blonde made a noise of agreement and turned to see Cat standing in the doorway. Cat was unsure what to make of the situation. With the different emotions battling in her system, her limbs froze, and the thought of moving farther into the room full of Shifters seemed like suicide.

"That's the wolf I got called up for," Killian mentioned to the blonde as he stretched across the island to grab a plate from the center, but Cat had the impression of him speaking to the whole room. Everybody turned to stare at her, the lone wolf in the room of a pack.

"This is my family. Right here is Jessica, and that there is Aurelia. Kelly is the amazing woman who cooked us dinner, and you have already met Jamie. There are two more, Brian and Finn, but they're working." With each name he pointed with his other hand to the respective Shifter, and each nodded to her in acknowledgment, except for the redheaded woman introduced as Aurelia.

Aurelia was turned slightly in her stool, her silver eyes staring intently into Cat's, a sure sign of Aurelia trying to assert her strength over Cat. She swirled a glass of red wine slowly with her left hand, as if in time to her own special tune. A thin, jagged scar ran down the length of her face from the top of her left eyebrow to below the collar of her dress, distracting from her sensual elegance and adding to her vicious appeal. Cat's wolf pushed against her thin self-control, wanting to show Aurelia who the bigger wolf in the room was. The animal won, baring white fangs and letting out a low, guttural growl of warning.

Out of the corner of her eye, Cat watched Killian's head snap to Aurelia, a scowl creasing his eyebrows.

"Aurelia, leave her be," he commanded.

Aurelia turned her face away from Cat's, unable to do anything other than what the Alpha directed.

*He actually does use it on his pack,* Cat thought. It was reassuring to know he had a good hold on those around him, and made her just the slightest bit more relieved.

The rest of the Shifters froze, hushed by Killian's abruptness. Jessica had paused in midreach to get her own plate, and Kelly stopped slicing the meatloaf into its perfect rectangles. It was obviously a rare occurrence for their Alpha to snap at a packmate.

Killian had set his plate on the island and braced himself against the edge of it, his fingers turning white against the tan granite. His body was tense, his shoulders unmoving as if he held his breath. Then, finally, he let out a deep exhale, the tension releasing out of his body. It was as if all the apprehension in the room vanished with it.

"She is a guest in my house," Killian said, his voice rough and direct, "and I will not have you challenging her, Aurelia. That goes for everyone. You must all remember what it was like to first come here?"

Then, as if nothing happened, he grabbed his plate and carried it over to Kelly, who promptly plopped three pieces of meatloaf on it.

Out of the corner of her eye, Cat saw Jamie move from behind her to grab a plate of meatloaf. When they were both seated at the dining table, the rest of the pack moved in to get their own food. It was one thing Cat didn't miss about living with a pack—the rule of getting your food after the Alpha. Only Kelly remained standing at the stove with the pan of meatloaf still in her hand.

She walked over to Cat with brief hesitation, reminding Cat of someone attempting to come upon a stray without frightening them.

*I guess that's what I am to them – a dangerous stray that could bite at any time.*

"How about some meatloaf, hon?" Kelly drawled, attempting to draw Cat in with her voice.

Cat desperately wanted to move closer, but fear of the other Shifters had her limbs beginning to quiver. Her appetite seemed both nauseating and painful at the same time, warring over whether to eat or not.

"Come on over here, and I'll serve you a big ol' plate on the floor. You don't even need to be near those guys yet if you don't want to," Kelly insisted.

Mindful of the Shifters at the table to the left of her, Cat made her way to a spot on the floor at the opposite end of the kitchen, her back against the wall. True to her word, Kelly served up a big plate of meatloaf, beans, and a salad Cat would unquestionably ignore.

The pack seemed wary with Cat sitting in silence off to the side, like they had been invaded. Everyone's limbs were tense except for Kelly and Killian, who ate comfortably in the tension. Jessica kept flashing her gaze to Cat, then back to Aurelia, talking to her. Aurelia pointedly avoided looking at Cat in any way. Killian sat at the head of the table, where any good Alpha would be. Jamie had positioned himself so he sat between Killian and Cat, in case of an impending attack, staking his claim as Second. The seat directly to Killian's left was empty, showing that whoever was Third was not there.

Killian was right. The meatloaf was absolutely amazing. The large portion of beef had hit the spot, but the blend of spices and meat hit her palate just the right way. She fought the urge to groan in pleasure at the delectable dish. As she ate, she was able to pick up the smallest bits of conversation from the others.

Jessica was married to a man named Brian, and they had a three-year-old daughter named Mia. Kelly was married to the other absent man, Finn. Jessica and Jamie were twins, which should have been obvious by their appearance, and were the only two at the table actually related to each other. Killian mentioned a pack of wolves living on the premises, and Cat had to wonder how it was possible to live in camaraderie with wolves.

After finishing the meal, Cat laid her head on her paws and watched as the pack slowly said their good-byes, the last one being Aurelia. She seemed to hang around Killian like a pup, waiting for the smallest pat on the head.

When the front door shut behind Aurelia, Killian came back and stood in front of Cat.

"It was good, right?"

She lifted her head off her paws and stood, stretching her limbs, now stiff from lying on the hardwood.

"Let me show you where you'll sleep." He walked out of the kitchen.

Cat started toward the front door of the house, assuming she would sleep outside, but Killian walked up the staircase.

He laughed and pointed up the stairs. "You get to sleep in a room...in a bed."

That shouldn't please her, right? The thought of being in a tiny room with closing doors sounded horrible, but the mention of a bed with pillows sounded heavenly. The silver lining on an otherwise terrifying situation. Cat's human side shoved down the wolf and its fears, lured by the promise of a comfortable night's sleep.

She followed his large frame to a room at the end of the hall. Plush carpet felt awkward beneath her paws, thick leather pads used to rocks and pine needles. When he entered through the door, he stood aside while she walked in. Sky-blue walls surrounded her, and a large window took up the center of the wall facing the forest below, giving her an expansive view of the trees. It was as if she slept in the forest, but within the safety of the home. In the center of the room sat a queen-sized bed with an elegant cream quilt atop it.

Gratitude didn't even begin to define the emotions coursing through Cat. Relief it wasn't a prisonlike room, awe at the amazing view, and a warmth she couldn't yet embrace.

She turned and looked at Killian, who had a serious look on his face, before jumping on top of the bed and curling into a small ball.

Killian let out a long sigh and sat down on an upholstered chair across from the bed. He put his elbows on his knees and laced his fingers together, leaning toward Cat. She had seen this posture before. Her father often used it to have serious conversations with her as a child.

"Look, I have no idea what you've gone through, and in no way am I going to try to convince you to tell me about it. But I just want you to know you're safe here. If you don't feel safe with the others, then I hope you at least feel protected around me. I never let anything happen to my family, and that's what I'm hoping you will become. Humans don't know what happens here, and my property is secure."

Killian studied Cat, questions in his eyes she couldn't answer. "Basically, I want you to know you can change back. Nobody here will hurt you."

After watching her and realizing Cat wasn't going to change anytime soon, he made his way out of the room.

"There's some clothes left in the room for you if you decide to change. The bathroom is fully stocked if you want to take a shower. And there's a rope on the door to pull down the handle if you feel like you're being locked in. Good night, little wolf." He closed the door behind him, shutting her in to the comfortable room.

Cat's mind swirled with the unnerving situation she was in. There were so many ways she saw her life going: staying in the forest for the rest of her life, maybe dying in captivity, maybe dying when she found the Shifter she hunted. But she had never seen herself in a big house full of other Shifters, sleeping in a bed overlooking a beautiful forest in California.

Tomorrow she would worry about it. Tonight she would sleep on the comfortable bed with the light of a full moon spilling on her white fur.

## Chapter Three

Cat jolted awake into an immediate defensive crouch. Her heart raced, thrumming erratically against her chest as her breath heaved in unison. Disoriented, she turned and growled, looking for the needle she knew was coming...

Until she realized her claws were digging into soft mattress and blankets instead of the hard, cold floor of the cage.

She looked around at the beautiful room through hazy eyes. The day before came back to her in sudden flashes. Killian taking her from the cage, waking up in something called a trailer, eating *meatloaf* of all things with a pack she wasn't a part of, and Killian's sad face when he realized she wasn't going to shift back last night.

A clatter of pans and dishes from somewhere in the house startled her, and it was followed by a very confident deep male singing. The smells of ham, spinach, eggs, and cheese wafted up the stairs to her room and were so deliciously enticing they spurred Cat to movement.

She jumped down off the bed, then looked back for a mournful moment, wishing she could have slept longer. It had been so long since she had slept on anything even remotely comfortable, and the mattress had been heaven. Already the ache in her bones had dissipated.

A knotted rope hung from the door handle, and Cat pulled down on it to exit the room. When she entered the kitchen, Cat was not prepared to see Killian standing in front of the stove in only his green plaid pajama pants. He held a spatula in his right hand, angled toward his face like a microphone as he belted the song playing over the speakers in the kitchen.

A country tune played in the background with a mix of twang and electric guitar. Killian's deep voice was surprisingly good, and Cat couldn't help but smile. Two days ago if someone had told her she would be standing in a kitchen, watching a sexy man in his pajamas singing to country, she would have laughed her ass off.

Killian was comforting in a strange way – something she never expected. She had planned to come down the stairs grumpy and scared of the overbearing man in front of her, but his personality seemed the opposite of his appearance. Plus, what young woman could resist the way the waistband of his pajamas hung low on his hips, hinting at the rear end beneath? Or the way they shifted with each move of his hips to the tempo?

The song ended, as did Killian's dancing and singing, so Cat moved farther into the kitchen, making her steps louder to the man who obviously had no fear of her, as he wasn't paying attention enough to notice her presence. Or so she thought.

"I thought you were never going to get out of bed, or work up the nerve to walk into this kitchen with me."

Killian turned down the music and dumped the omelet he had made onto a plate on the counter. Two plates stood side by side on the island, each with three omelets, a huge pile of hash browns, and a half dozen pieces of sausage all haphazardly stacked together. After setting up his masterpiece, he looked up at Cat and grinned, but not before she saw the flash of disappointment in his eyes. "Hope you're hungry!"

Giving a huff, Cat lay down on the ground in the same spot as before, and Killian set the plate in front of her. Why it was so important to him for her to be human, she didn't understand. Because she'd be easier to control?

They ate in silence, but Killian kept glancing over at Cat, making her fidget with discomfort. The food was amazing, but it turned over in her stomach as her anxiety increased. Her only solace was she could see out the large windows to the forest behind the house. The depth of the trees looked so comforting, and she wanted to go beneath their cool limbs and run free.

"How about we go for a run after breakfast?" Killian asked abruptly, causing Cat's gaze to dart his way. He had finished all his food and watched her as she looked out the window, his hands folded comfortably behind his head. A knowing smile tilted the corners of his lips.

Cat's heart lifted, and she couldn't help the impulsive thump of her tail against the hard floor. She could already feel the pine needles digging into her paws, the smell of the trees and rush of wind as she ran through the cool forest. And it would be the first time in forever she had run with another Shifter...

But she couldn't think like that. She needed to think of a way to get out of the situation she was in. Maybe out in the forest there would be a way for her to slip away from—

"Trying to give me the slip out there won't work, by the way."

Killian stood up from his chair and gathered their dishes. Something in her look must have given her away. Analyzing herself, she realized her body had gotten tense as she thought of her plan of escape, and forced it to relax.

"We're in California," he continued, "and that means it's not wolf friendly out here. If you try to leave Wolf Creek, you'll get captured by rangers, maybe even shot by some civilian in a neighboring town. And then they'll come straight here and shut me down."

He set the dishes in the dishwasher and turned to look at her, a glint of danger in his golden eyes. "I want you to be comfortable here. But if you threaten my pack in any way by exposing us to that kind of situation, I *will* have to take you down."

Cat's eyes widened in shock. Killian had always seemed so easygoing besides that time he snapped at Aurelia, and now she understood why he was the Alpha. The pack loved him for his good nature, but he could be firm and protective when needed.

She bowed her head slightly, letting him know she heard him and understood. It seemed she was out of her element, in a strange place, and with no plan to get away. It

was stifling to know she was confined to the land around the house, and not able to roam the wild.

Killian nodded, his mouth still in a tight, grim line, a very unfamiliar look for his face.

"Just stay here a second. I'm going to go change." And then he was gone. She had never seen a Shifter leave to change to their wolf form before. She and her parents had grown accustomed to being able to shift when they pleased, so nudity was no different from wearing clothes for them.

A few seconds later, a black wolf almost twice her size walked into the kitchen, taking up the majority of the entryway. The hair on her back and neck stood at attention. She flashed her canines, and Cat had the momentary sense of her wolf taking over. But a pair of familiar gold eyes locked on to hers, and the intoxicating scent of pine and spice and...Killian whirled in her senses.

She let herself relax and dropped her head, and he strode toward her to sniff. They circled each other, mostly for her benefit to get used to having another wolf in her presence. Killian hesitated before he jolted out of the open back door of the house.

When Cat poked her head out, Killian was already in the middle of a grassy field separating the house from the trees. The black wolf tilted his head toward the forest, encouraging her to run with him. Unable to resist the temptation of freedom, Cat sprinted out the door toward the shady depths.

The minute her paws met the pine needles and soft ground of the forest, she laughed inwardly, so thrilled to not be confined inside something. As she ran the wind rushed around her, bringing with it all sorts of unfamiliar scents. She focused in on the few she was accustomed to: fresh air, the smoky scent of bark, earth, and...Killian.

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