

Chapter 1 of *Wolfsong*

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Madison Montgomery winced when the bus driver tossed the red Samsonite suitcases onto the slanting sidewalk. Not because they almost landed on her toes, but because the luggage had belonged to Laurel, vivacious lover-of-vivid-color Laurel. Irreverent Laurel who'd challenged the ever-trying-to-be-good-girl inside of Madison to abandon her perfection. Flawed Laurel who'd shared Madison's understanding of what it was to be a fractured soul in search of a place to fit.

Madison glanced at the highway doubling for the town's main street and the aged brick courthouse proclaiming the county seat. Small town. Old town. It was a place not so different from the one where she once did belong...before a careless driver cut short the lives of her mother and father.

Still, abandoned ten hours from her point of departure, Madison was having a moment of self-doubt, a moment of hope that the guy who was supposed to meet her had forgotten and would never show up. That she could just go inside the slice of a diner occupying the corner space behind her and buy a ticket on the next bus back downstate. But Madison Montgomery had a lost soul to vindicate and another guilt torn to repair before she could reclaim her unruffled life.

Maybe the guy picking her up waited for her inside. Madison slipped the strap of the carry-on over her shoulder, hoisted the red Pullman, turned, and entered the diner.

The place smelled of rancid grease and there were too few fluorescent bulbs humming against the yellow ceiling to compensate for the afternoon sunlight she'd just left. She felt awkward and vulnerable blinkingly searching out the face of a stranger. She should have asked for a description along with the job details. But she'd expected this Armstrong guy to be watching for her.

The scrape of chair legs at the back of the cafe snagged her attention. A man unfolded from a chrome-framed chair, a man so tall and broad-shouldered that his size dwarfed the chair, the table, the very room. Madison blinked at the colossus eyeing her through two inky slashes above cheeks darkened more by heritage than sun.

"About time you got here," muttered the mountain of blue chambray and Levi denim striding toward her.

"See ya 'round, Walker," called the sandy headed man still seated at the table.

She gaped at Walker Armstrong as he passed without a word. He towered over her five foot eight inches, his raven-wing black hair swagging across his broad, burnished brow and plunging past high planed cheeks to linebacker broad shoulders. She should be relieved that he wasn't pale. She'd joined the wolf study project in this remote corner of Michigan's upper peninsula to hunt a lighter man...like the one still seated at the Formica table, his unnaturally glinting grin aimed at her.

The diner door banged shut and she realized Armstrong had left without her. Madison closed her mouth, gave the diner patrons a sheepish glance, and bumped herself and her luggage out into the daylight.

Armstrong waited beside a baby blue, four wheel-drive pick-up truck patched with rust blithely watching her drag her luggage up the sidewalk. He nodded toward the cargo bay of the truck as she neared, his voice flat over his shoulder as he opened the driver's side door and climbed in. "Throw your gear in back."

She easily hoisted the carry-on bag over the shoulder-high side of the 4X4's cargo box. But, on her first attempt, she banged the Pullman against truck fender. He didn't give her a second try.

Wordlessly he climbed down from the cab, snatched the Pullman from her, and tossed it over the truck fender. Duly chastened, Madison scooted around the truck and climbed into the passenger seat barely before he threw it into gear and shot out into traffic.

She glanced through the rear window at the bright suitcases skidding about the rusty cargo box. Guilt nagged at Madison. She should be taking better care of her inheritance, meager it was. She should have demanded he secure her luggage with the black rubber bungee cords lumped in the corner of the cargo box.

She should have. But she didn't and she knew why before her gaze even scaled the broad shoulder beside her and broached the hood of hair from which a hawkish nose and set jaw jutted. He intimidated her. Not by his size, though that was enough in itself. Not even by the power radiating from his bunching muscles as his arm worked the gearshift lever sticking up from the floorboards. It was his tension.

She'd felt it in the cafe the minute he'd skidded the chrome chair legs back from the table. She saw it now in how his lips tightened across his teeth. A muscle popped along the sharp jawline. Why had he clenched his teeth?

She realized then that that jaw, that face all rough angles as though hewn from wood was tipped toward her. From the narrow slits above the polished copper cheeks, something dark and glittery slid in her direction.

Madison started and turned her face away, her cheeks prickling with a blush, her voice hollow and forced in her ears. "How far are we from the camp?"

"Forty miles," he answered in a flat tone, his big hands steering the truck hard from the main street into the parking lot of a supermarket.

Madison's shoulder hit the door and she braced herself as he skidded into a parking space nose-to-nose with a sub-compact, the smaller vehicle all but disappearing beyond the high, broad hood of the truck. When the truck rocked to a halt and there'd been no crash, she gaped past her white knuckled fingers clamped on the edge of the dash and through the wide windshield in wonderment.

"Meet me at the check-out when you're done," he curtly ordered, unfolding a sheet of notebook paper, tearing it in half, and handing the bottom portion to her.

By the time Madison realized she was staring at a grocery list, Walker Armstrong had disappeared through the automatic doors of the supermarket. She slid down out of the truck, her finger out of habit depressing the lock. She glanced at the red luggage full of her belongings in the open back of the truck, glanced about the sparsely filled lot, and reluctantly headed into the store.

Twenty minutes later Madison gaped at Walker's brimming cartload of meats and produce. He was frowning down at her sparse collection of dairy, canned, and dried goods.

"The list didn't say how much," she said lamely.

He plucked a fifteen-ounce can of tomato sauce from her gathered goods and muttered, "The bigger ones."

"The list didn't give sizes."

Abandoning his cart in front of the bakery shelves, he plowed off with hers. She trailed, fumbling the small cans and packages out of the cart wherever he stopped while he piled in larger ones.

"I was told I'd be cooking for only four men," she mumbled miserably.

"And I was told I was being sent someone who knew how to cook for a crew," he growled back.

"Maybe if I'd been told we were shopping for the month," she snapped, her control slipping.

"We're not," he leveled. "I'll drive you into town weekly for supplies."

Resignedly Madison asked for his list of bakery needs and slunk off under his reminder, "Lots."

In the checkout line, he peered over her shoulder at the pile of breads, coffeecakes, and doughnuts capping off the cart of meat and dairy.

"Enough?" she stiffly inquired.

"Don't you intend to bake anything yourself?"

Walker swung himself back into the driver's seat, drawing a guarded glance from his passenger's green eyes. She should be wary. He had no use for women who toted red suitcases and colored their eyes with tinted contacts. He'd seen the blunt edge of one when she'd turned her wide eyes in the direction of the bus station. He'd gladly drive her back there and dump her off.

At the intersection, he paused longer than was necessary. Just in case she'd changed her mind about staying, he told himself. But she didn't say the words he willed her to speak.

He sighed and pulled out onto the main street, rolling them further away from the bus stop. Too late if she changed her mind now, he vowed, knowing he'd burn a U-turn if she so much as wavered. But she just sat there, pressed against the far door.

"Damn," he muttered and she jumped.

"Buckle your seat belt," he growled.

She fumbled for the straps with long, slim fingers he was certain had little experience with meat cleavers or potato peelers. He scowled and eased up on the gas pedal as they approached the highway turn-off. One last chance for her to say she wanted to go back to the bus station. But she sprawled her long legs across the floorboards of his truck as though settling in for a long ride.

He jammed the transmission through its gears, his feet punching the clutch and forcing the gas pedal alternately. She was no doubt just another city-bred girl dabbling in what was currently stylish.

As if saving wolves was a fad. If he got a look at the backside of her thigh-hugging jeans, he was sure he'd find a designer label. He knew what mattered to city girls, knew their penchant for trends and status symbols. A year ago, he'd promised himself never to be either again.