

Chapter 14

Out of the Frying Pan

With an inquisitive look, Rebecca poked at the sizzling fish with the stick Wolf had been using to flip the salmon in the cast iron frying pan. It merely hissed and popped some more.

"What's it going to taste like?" she asked uncertainly.

Wolf looked at her a moment, then went back to cooking. "Like a fish," he added after a moment. "Why humans think they need to spoil perfectly good meat by burning it, I'll never understand," he noted.

Rebecca did have to admit that the aroma of the cooking fish was pleasing, and her now human tummy growled in anticipation. As a doll, she'd never had any reason to eat anything. Samantha had often pretended that she had, inviting her to tea parties and such. But it had never been the real thing, and certainly not a slippery slimy fish.

Wolf looked over at her. "It's almost done," he said.

Rebecca cast a quick glance over at Silver Sky. He seemed perfectly content nibbling the tall grasses and running around on his newfound legs. He didn't seem to be nervous or worried about their new life in the least. And while she enjoyed seeing him a such a pleasant mood, she couldn't help but feel a twisting in her stomach. An altogether new feeling.

Wolf slid a clean porcelain plate in front of the worried little girl and laid a healthy sized slab of salmon on it. Fidgeting through his pockets, he produced a silver fork, which he handed to her.

"You're not the first, you know," he started as she prodded the fish.

Rebecca looked up at the old man, tasting a tiny bite of the salmon. It had a surprisingly strong, but pleasant taste to it. Emboldened, she tried more.

"I've seen many like you in these woods," Wolf continued. "None have come so far on their own, though. Usually, they find themselves forgotten in some lonely campground, or have floated down the rivers dropped from a boat. But regardless of where they have come from, they all want the same thing you did." He looked intently at the little girl, now doing her best to taste each bite.

Rebecca paused for a moment. "Does that surprise you?" she asked.

Wolf seemed taken aback by the question. "I suppose it does," he stated, simply. "Why would you want to return to someone who has tossed you away, forgetting you?"

"I don't think that is what happened," Rebecca responded. Honestly, though, she was not sure what to think. Why *had* they been in that box for so long? It had been so long that she could not remember when it happened.

Wolf could see her uncertainty. "I think that when you can answer that question, you will know what to do. There are many out there that chose not to go back. You may meet a few. In fact, I hope that you do."

Rebecca finished up her plate of delicious salmon and set the dish aside. "What are they like?" she asked.

Wolf looked at her beneath his bushy eyebrows and a smile slowly crawled across his face as he remembered his many encounters. "I've seen everything from old toy cars

to army men. Our old grumpy bear here used to be some girl's teddy," he said with a chuckle.

"She used to tug my ears and suck on my nose in her sleep," grumped Bear, half asleep, himself.

"So, you didn't return?" quizzed Rebecca.

"Would you go back to that? That's just gross!" responded Bear, resigning himself to waking up.

"No, I guess not," giggled Rebecca. "But Samantha and Timothy aren't like that. They're fun and loving and I miss them a whole lot!"

Wolf pointed in the distance towards Silver Sky. He was running around and even tempting walking in the ice cold water of river. It was obvious he was enjoying his new stature and speed.

"What do you think he's feeling right now?" Wolf asked.

Rebecca looked at Silver Sky and the twisting in her stomach returned. "I don't know. Happiness, I guess." She didn't have to guess. He looked happier than she'd seen him in ages. "But I know he misses Timothy, too. He's just not thinking about that right now," she added, quickly, suddenly very unsure.

"You still have most of your journey ahead of you. I suspect you'll have plenty of time to think these things over," Wolf noted.

Bear wandered over a bit closer, inspecting Rebecca's plate, hoping to find some scraps, but being very disappointed. "What about Joe?" he asked, looking inquisitively at Wolf. "He could probably help them along."

The old man did not respond, seemingly lost in thought. He muttered a few things under his breath, most not fit to print. For the first time, he appeared indecisive and even a tad nervous.

"Ah, come on," growled Bear. "He's pretty cool, and he could help them out."

"He's a killer!" snapped Wolf, anger swiftly taking over his demeanor.

Bear laughed a deep, guttural laugh. "No way, man. Most he's ever killed is a fish, and from what I hear, he's not that great at that, either."

Wolf looked ferociously at Bear. "He had guns. That makes him a killer in my book."

Bear rolled his eyes. "Then your book needs editing."

Rebecca must have looked dreadfully confused, as Bear suddenly stopped teasing wolf to explain. "Joe started life as a plastic toy soldier. I guess you could say he went AWOL."

Rebecca's look of confusion had not gone away.

"Erm... Absent WithOut Leave," explained Bear. "A joke," he added. He sighed and continued, "He chose to stay human. There's a fork in this river that heads east. It comes out at the sea and there's a fishing village there. Joe lives there now."

"He won't have a thing to tell you that will be helpful," Wolf interrupted. "The man is crazy. He thinks he's actually been through a war. Sometimes, these transformations can go a bit, shall we say, wonky."

Bear thought about this for a moment. "Yeah," he agreed. "It can really depend on the experiences they had before. From Joe's stories, I'd guess he lived with some downright frightening kids."

"On the other hand, he does have a boat," noted Wolf. "It might help you shave some time off of your trip. I'm not much for ocean voyages, but you might enjoy the views."

He looked off towards Silver Sky. "I don't reckon he'll like it much, though."