

# Grace of a Wolf

## #Chapter 1: Grace: Awakening to Pursuit - Read Grace of a Wolf Chapter 1: Grace: Awakening to Pursuit

### Chapter 1: Grace: Awakening to Pursuit

As a human, I should be miles away from any large shifter event. Especially the annual Mate Hunt.

A hunt for mates. Doesn't that sound barbaric? Yeah, it's as bad as it sounds.

Several packs in the area gather as their newly minted adult wolves shift. Females are let into the woods first and are given an hour's head start, just before sundown. Then it's time for the males, ostensibly thrown out to hunt down the scent of their fated (or chosen) mates.

It isn't an event for the faint of heart, and it's definitely no place for someone who can't shift. So why the fuck am I here, running my little human heart out, chased by what sounds like an entire pack of wolves?

Great question. I don't know, either.

Alpha warned me to stay home with all the windows and doors locked, saying you can never trust a hormonal wolf during the Hunt. And that's exactly what I did, because I've seen and heard of too many horror stories to want anything to do with a night like tonight.

But somehow, I opened my eyes to a canopy of trees over my head, half blocking out the light of the full moon. To near-freezing winds brushing against my half-naked skin. To the sound of howling, near and far.

And an unfamiliar, unsettling crunch to my left.

As soon as my brain function caught up to the situation, I got up and ran. Maybe not the smartest thing—I had no idea where I was running to—but every inch of my body was *screaming* danger, and there was zero percent of me interested in learning the origins of that suspicious sound.

And now I'm here.

Surrounded by howls fueled by the thrill of the hunt.

Feet bleeding. Lungs freezing.

Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

The distinct terror of being hunted has my blood cold and sluggish in my veins, even as my heart pounds erratically. Or maybe it's the fall chill. We're only a couple degrees above freezing tonight, and however I got here—my clothes were compromised in the process.

Bra and underwear. At least I have those.

No shoes, of course.

My skin's riddled with goosebumps and branches whip at my skin, leaving marks and scratches I'm sure I'll regret later. Unlike the pack I've been adopted into, I have no innate talent at maneuvering in the wild. My feet pound against leaves, probably leaving an easy trail to follow. But is standing around any better? Uh, probably not.

Then again, running just triggers their prey drive—

Fuck. I have no fucking clue, so I keep running.

My breath is ragged, choppy. Each gulp of air is like icicles stabbing into my lungs.

Alpha—the man who more or less adopted me six years ago—is going to be furious. But later fury doesn't help me in the moment. I learned that lesson a long time ago. Not everyone's willing to have a human around a wolf pack, and a few of them are willing to show me their displeasure in private.

This might be one of those times.

Super *not* my idea of fun.

My foot catches on something, sending pain straight through my ankle.

The world spins, and my face slams against the ground before I can break my fall. Dirt and blood fill my mouth; I'm surrounded in twigs and dead leaves.

I cough and sputter, trying to clear my airway. My arms shake as I push myself up, spitting out clumps of earth.

"Shit," I hiss, pain shooting through my ankle as I attempt to stand. It buckles, and I collapse again.

A crashing sound from the underbrush sends my heart into overdrive. I freeze, terror gripping me as a slender gray wolf bursts into view. It skids to a halt, panting heavily. Golden eyes lock onto mine.

I blink, recognition dawning. "Andrew?" Could it be?

The air is rent with cracks and snaps, the wolf shifting stretching until slender, shorter-than-average Andrew stands before me, naked and scowling. "What the hell are you doing here, Grace? Dressed like that?"

His tone catches me off guard. Andrew's always been indifferent to me at best, but this is different. Colder. More hostile.

"I don't know," I stammer, struggling to my feet. "I woke up out here. Do you know where Rafe is?"

Maybe Raphael can keep me safe during the sexual haze of the Mate Hunt. He said he had no interest in joining, of course—though no wolf has a choice. It's a required event once you're of age. He'll be happy to have an excuse to desert the dubious festivities.

But Andrew's expression darkens at the mention of my boyfriend—his best friend.

"You shouldn't be here," he growls. "Turn back. Now."

"What? Why? Andrew, what's going on?"

He opens his mouth to respond, but the sound of more wolves crashing through the forest cuts him off. Two dash past, a familiar gray form and a smaller red one. My breath catches as I recognize Raphael's wolf. But something's wrong. He's nuzzling the red wolf, playful and intimate in a way that makes my stomach churn.

Raphael freezes when he spots me, his entire body going rigid. In an instant—faster than Andrew, thanks to his alpha ranking—he shifts back to human form, blue eyes blazing.

"What are you doing here?" he snarls, his voice harsh and unrecognizable.

I flinch, taken aback by his anger. "Rafe, I—"

The red wolf shifts then, taking little longer than Rafe. She must be a higher-ranking wolf. Maybe even Luna-class.

For some reason...

No. For *obvious* reasons, that knowledge makes my stomach twist into knots.

She's the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. Long black hair frames an absofuckinglutely flawless face. Not a single freckle, or pimple, or *anything*. Just smooth, glass skin. Her green eyes are sharp and gorgeous, impossibly emerald-bright. She steps closer to Raphael, one hand on his arm, her gaze fixed on me with thinly veiled hostility.

Who am I kidding? It isn't veiled at all.

"Mate," she purrs, "who is this?"

Mate? Who? *Him*?

It can't be. That's Rafe. *My* Rafe.

But by the way his jaw clenches and he avoids my gaze, that's exactly who she's talking to.

*My* boyfriend. *Her* mate.

My world shatters. Never mind that I'm practically naked in a forest full of sex-crazed wolves: My dreams of the future are shattering.

Only hours after he assured me that tonight won't change anything between us.

My boyfriend—is he still my boyfriend?—doesn't look at the new girl. His *mate*. Fuck, I suddenly hate that word.

Instead, his eyes finally meet mine, a flash of something crossing his face. Is it guilt? "No one," he says flatly. "She's no one important. Just a human adopted by the pack."

I stumble back, unable to process what I'm hearing. This can't be real. It has to be some kind of nightmare.

"Rafe," I whisper, "what's happening?"

He looks away, jaw clenched. "You need to leave, Grace. Now."

"But—"

"Now!" he roars, eyes flashing gold.

His mate—whoever she is—smirks, pressing herself against Raphael's side. "You heard him, little human. Run along now. The Mate Hunt is no place for a little girl like you."

Andrew shifts uncomfortably. "Grace, I'll escort you back to—"

"No," Raphael cuts in. "You should return to the Hunt. I'll make sure she leaves."

"Mate!" the black-haired vision protests, and he touches her face.

"Stay here. I'll be right back." So gentle. So sweet. The same tone he used to use toward me.

How can things change in an instant?

Of course I know about mating bonds. I've been living among wolf shifters for six years. But Rafe was supposed to be different.

Was supposed to be on my side.

My other half.

He stalks towards me, snatching my arm in a rough grip, like a fucking stranger. Worse than a stranger. Like someone who doesn't give a shit at the pain he's causing me.

I struggle to pull my arm out of his grasp, to no avail, limping along behind him.

"Rafe, stop! You're hurting me!"

He releases me abruptly, as if burned. For a moment, I see a flicker of the boy I love in his eyes. But it's gone in an instant, replaced by cold fury.

"What were you thinking?" he hisses. "Do you have any idea how dangerous it is for you to be out here tonight?"

"I don't know how I got here! I woke up in the woods, and—"

"Bullshit," he snaps. "You were trying to interfere. Trying to make sure I didn't find my mate."

Shock has me standing still, stunned by the accusation. "I didn't—I wouldn't—!"

"Was this how it was always going to be between us? Always insecure and forcing me to prove my loyalty?"

A gust of wind whips through, sending a violent tremor down my spine. Goosebumps prickle all over my exposed skin, but the chill in my bones, in my *heart*, isn't just from the weather or my lack of clothes. It's from the ice in Raphael's perfect blue eyes. From the venom in his words.

His accusation cuts deeper than the frigid air. How can he speak to me like this? Like I'm nothing more than an annoyance, a burden he's finally free to cast aside?

"Rafe, please," I whisper, my voice trembling. "I swear I didn't—"

"Save it," he snaps, cutting me off. "There's no excuse for this. You never should have stepped foot out here tonight."

My heart shrivels under his anger, leaving me empty and aching. The Raphael I know—the one who held me close and promised me forever—would never treat me this way. He'd listen. He'd understand.

But the man before me is a stranger, cold and uncaring.

"How can you do this?" I ask, struggling to keep my voice steady. "How can you treat me like this? Just a few hours ago, you were holding me. Kissing me. Swearing we'd be together forever. How can all that change in *hours*, Rafe?"

His jaw clenches, a muscle ticking in his cheek. "That was before. This is now."

"Before what? Before you met some random she-wolf who batted her eyelashes at you?"

The words are out before I can stop them, fueled by hurt and disbelief. In an instant, Raphael's eyes flash gold, a low growl rumbling in his chest. Before I can blink, his hand is around my throat, squeezing.

"Don't you ever speak about my mate that way again," he snarls, his face inches from mine.

I can't breathe. My fingers claw at his hand, desperate to break his grip. Black spots dance at the edges of my vision as panic sets in.

Rafe wouldn't hurt me. He wouldn't. He *promised*.

But as the pressure increases, a terrifying thought crashes over me. What if this is it? What if he kills me right here, right now?

Just as my lungs start to burn, his grip loosens. He blinks, as if coming out of a trance. His fingers loosen, leaving me to crumple to the ground. Coughing. Gasping. Tears sting my eyes as I gulp in lungfuls of air, greedy for oxygen. For survival.

"We're over, Grace."

Three words. That's all it takes to shatter my world completely.

I look up, but can't see him. Not clearly, anyway. My vision's too blurry from the tears I'm desperately trying to hold in, and it's too dark. "Who is she?" The words are choked and hard to hear, but he understands immediately.

"My fated mate," he snaps, as if it should be obvious. As if that explains everything.

"So... that's it?" I struggle to my feet, legs shaking, trying my best to ignore the agony in my ankle. It throbs, refusing to play second fiddle to this insane melodrama. "You're just going to throw everything we had away? For someone you just met?"

Raphael's beautiful ocean-blue eyes are distant. Like he's looking right through me. "This is why humans don't belong in wolf packs. You don't understand. You can't."

The casual cruelty in his voice steals my breath all over again. He isn't the boy I fell in love with. He isn't my Rafe.

Not the one who assured me it was okay to be human.

That he'd take care of me forever.

That my lack of wolf didn't matter.

"Get home safe," he says, his tone devoid of any real concern. Then he shifts, fur rippling over skin, and disappears into the darkness.

I stand there, shivering and alone, as the sound of his retreating paws fades into the night. The forest suddenly feels impossibly vast.

How did everything go so wrong so fast?

## **Chapter 2: Grace: Abandoned**

How long do I stand there, eyes straining in the darkness that steadily grows?

Who knows. I sure don't.

The howls change; many are still hunting. Several have found their mates. Is Rafe howling out there, sharing a joyous run with his newfound mate?

That pretty little red wolf, the gorgeous woman within—she's everything I'm not.

My breath puffs out in wispy smoke, a visual reminder of the temperature, even though my body's already long cold.

My teeth chatter as I wrap my arms around myself, finally roused out of my fugue state to ponder more immediate concerns. Like how to get home.

I've never been great at reading the stars. Alpha always warned me I should learn these basic skills; I don't have an internal compass, and I'm terrible at tracking. But I live with wolves, so I don't spend many nights outside alone. It's too dangerous.

The forest stretches endlessly, nothing but shadows and the rustling of leaves and howls in the distance.

At least no one seems to be around me. Hopefully that means I'm close to home. I pick a direction at random, praying it leads me out of this nightmare.

Who would do this to me, setting me up for such a cruel fate? The questions swirl in my mind, but answers are out of reach. Yes, there are occasional pranks when you live with wolves. There's some harassment. There's even a solid amount of bullying I endure in silence.

But this? To threaten my life, to put me in the middle of the Mate Hunt, knowing at any time a frustrated wolf could hunt me down?

Human women are fully aware of the statistics; unmated shifter males are their biggest fear. Any male shifter in human territory is automatically suspect whenever a sexual assault case comes up.

It's no secret in the shifter community; it's a struggle every pack deals with. Most of the assaults are from rogue wolves, but not all. It's one of the many reasons they're not welcome among most human communities.

So who would be this cruel, knowing my likely fate?

As much as I can be disliked among the pack, I'm not generally *hated*.

The forest floor bites into my bare feet with every step. Twigs snap, leaves crunch, and sharp rocks dig into my soles. My toes curl against the cold, damp earth. Each step sends a jolt of pain up my leg from my throbbing ankle.

I crash through the underbrush, all grace abandoned. Branches whip across my face and arms, leaving stinging welts in their wake.

*"Move quietly. Blend with the forest. Especially because you're human, you'll need to move like a wolf."*

Rafe's voice echoes in my head, unbidden. Tears prick at my eyes as I remember his patient instructions, his warm hands guiding me through the woods. How many nights did we spend out here, him teaching me to navigate the wilderness?

No. I shove the memories away, blinking furiously against the moisture threatening to spill over.

But they keep coming, relentless as the cold seeping into my bones.



*"Watch where you step. See how I place my foot? Roll from heel to toe, avoid anything that might snap or rustle."*

I stumble over a root, nearly falling face-first into the leaf litter. Every move I make announces my presence.

*"You're doing great, Grace. Soon you'll be moving as well as any wolf."*

A choked sob escapes my lips before I can stop it. Rafe's proud smile, the warmth in his eyes as he watched me improve—it's all tainted now. Poisoned by the cold dismissal in those same eyes mere hours ago.

Fuck this mated bullshit.

Who wants a man that changes so much over a little bit of pheromones?

I limp onward, each step a battle against pain and exhaustion. Shadows dance at the edge of my vision, taking the shape of prowling wolves. Every so often I jerk around, convinced something's following me.

But there's nothing there.

Even distant howls have gone silent.

*"If you ever feel lost or scared, just listen. The forest will guide you home."*

Home. The word rings hollow now. The person I thought was my future has turned his back on me.

Another twig snaps beneath my foot, the sound impossibly loud in the quiet night. It's only then I realize that even the sound of insects has hushed.

That's not good.

There's a predator somewhere.

I freeze, heart pounding as I strain my ears for any sign of pursuit. Nothing but the whisper of wind through leaves. Another far-off howl. And another, echoing off the trees.

But nothing close, despite the eerie silence.

I force myself to keep moving, ignoring the burning in my muscles and the ache in my chest that has nothing to do with physical exertion. How late is it? I can't feel my toes. Or my fingers.

And each tree looks the same as the last, each shadow hiding potential dangers.

*"Remember, Grace. You're stronger than you know. Don't ever let anyone make you feel less than you are."*

Rafe's words were once a source of comfort. Of strength. Now, they're a knife. One of those serrated ones with the weird little hooks at the end. When you pull them out, they destroy everything.

How quickly those sentiments changed when faced with his true mate. How easily I was discarded, all our shared moments rendered meaningless.

Tears blur my vision as I push through a thick patch of undergrowth. Thorns slice over my skin, but I barely feel the sting. It's nothing compared to the pain tearing through my heart.

I emerge into a small clearing. No trees overhead. No creepy shadows. Just silver-blue moonlight resting against impossibly lush grass, unmarred by dead leaves.

It's unnaturally perfect here.

In the distance, a wolf howls. No matter how many years I've lived with this pack, the sound always sends a chill down my spine. Primal instinct, Alpha always said.

How many times had I stood beside Rafe, watching in awe as he shifted and added his voice to the pack's song?

Now, that howl holds no wonder, no beauty.

Just bitterness and pain.

I rub my hands over my arms, a futile attempt to generate warmth. My teeth chatter as I stumble forward, eyes darting around the eerily perfect clearing. Something about this place feels off, but I can't put my finger on why.

Have I been here before? The grass, untouched by fallen leaves, gleams silver-blue in the moonlight. It's beautiful, but wrong. Unnatural.

A frown tugs at my lips. This forest is my home—or was. I've explored so much of it with Rafe. But I have no memory of this place.

If only it were daylight. The sun would guide me, even with my poor sense of direction. I could find my way back so easily then.

A twig snaps.

My head whips up, heart leaping into my throat. The unnatural silence presses in, suffocating. No insects chirp. No night birds call. Even the wind seems to hold its breath.

Something moves in the shadows.

I freeze, eyes straining against the darkness. Another rustle. Closer now.

And then—

Oh. God.

A massive wolf emerges from the treeline. No, not just massive. Colossal. Monstrous.

I've seen Alpha in his wolf form. I've admired Rafe's powerful build. This creature dwarfs them both. It could swallow Rafe's wolf in a single bite. How could it even hide among the trees? It's impossibly large.

Midnight-black fur absorbs the moonlight, as if the very essence of shadow clings to its pelt. But there—a faint blue glow pulses beneath, like veins of starlight.

My breath catches. My heart pounds so hard I'm sure the beast can hear it.

This isn't possible. Wolves don't get this big. They don't glow.

I blink hard, certain I must be hallucinating. Maybe I hit my head. Maybe I'm lying unconscious in the forest, and this is all some fever dream.

The wolf takes a step forward. The ground trembles.

Not a dream, then.

I should run. Every instinct screams at me to flee. But my legs won't move. I'm rooted to the spot, caught in the creature's gaze.

Its eyes. God, its eyes. They burn with an intelligence far beyond any animal I've ever encountered. Even the shifters in their wolf forms don't have eyes like this. They're like storm clouds, gray and turbulent.

Ancient. Knowing. Powerful.

And fixed directly on me, of course. Probably heard me coming from a mile away. Stupid, *stupid* Grace. Should have done my best to be quiet, even if it took me a year to get home. At least I'd *get* home, and not get eaten—or worse—by a massive wolf that glows.

"You're trespassing on Blue Mountain Pack's land," I tell the wolf with bravado that doesn't actually exist in my body.

My legs are trembling and I'm pretty sure it can smell my exhaustion and pain. There's no way I'm going to scare off a wolf by myself. I can only hope they fear Alpha's reputation.

The wolf just snorts. Alpha's fearsome reputation does nothing for it, I guess.

My heart hammers as it pads closer, each step deliberate and unhurried. Moonlight catches its fur, but I swear it just sucks it right in, creating darkness around it.

"Stay back," I warn it, trying to stay strong despite the waver in my voice.

I'm not that brave, okay? I'm just a human. Wolves are terrifying creatures. Try standing up to one in the wild; knowing the power in their bodies, it's impossible to stay calm when a strange one approaches you.

They're not like dogs—not that we have dogs around here. They want nothing to do with wolves.

I take a step backward, desperate to maintain distance, but my ankle gives way beneath me. My ass meets grass a second later.

Panic floods my system. I scramble to get back on my feet, hands scrabbling against the earth. But before I can right myself, the wolf does something unexpected.

It lays down.

The massive creature settles onto its belly, mere feet away from me. Its ears prick forward, head tilted in what can only be described as curiosity. I freeze, my breath caught in my throat.

This isn't the behavior of a predator about to attack. The wolf's body language speaks of interest rather than aggression. Yet my muscles remain coiled tight, ready to bolt at the slightest provocation.

"What do you want?" I whisper, as if raising the volume of my words might shatter the uneasy peace.

The wolf's ears twitch at the sound of my voice. Its eyes, luminous in the darkness, remain fixed on me with an unnerving intensity.

A gust of wind whips through the trees, and violent shivers rattle my bones. Whoever threw me into the wild with just a bra and underwear is a sadistic bastard. It's *cold* at night. Near-freezing.

The wolf must notice my discomfort, because it lets out a soft chuff. It tilts its head the other way, as if trying to puzzle me out.

"I don't suppose you have a blanket hidden in that fur coat of yours?"

The wolf's tail thumps once against the ground, but of course it doesn't answer. Great. Now I'm making jokes at a potentially deadly creature. Shock must have set in.

I take a deep, steadying breath, trying to assess my situation. I'm alone in the woods, injured, and face-to-face with a wolf larger than any I've ever seen. And yet... it doesn't seem intent on harming me.

Maybe it's supposed to be here? But I think I'd have heard about a giant-ass wolf. People talk about Alpha's size all the time, saying he's massive. They've clearly never seen this guy.

"Are you here for the Mate Hunt?"

The wolf's ear twitches. I'm positive it's a shifter, but why won't it shift to talk to me? Why remain in wolf form if it doesn't want to attack?

Another shiver wracks my body, and I wrap my arms around myself, trying to conserve what little warmth I have left. The wolf watches this action with what almost looks like concern. Or maybe it's just wishful thinking.

"Don't suppose you'd be willing to share some of that body heat?" I joke weakly. "No? Didn't think so."

To my utter shock, the wolf rises to its feet. My breath catches, fear spiking through me once more. But instead of attacking, it takes a step closer, then another.

Panic courses through me. Why is it coming after me now? I thought we'd already established that it doesn't want to eat me. "What are you doing?" I ask, my voice just a teensy bit on this side of shrill.

The wolf doesn't answer, of course. It simply continues its approach until it's right beside me. Then, with a grace that belies its massive size, it lowers itself to the ground once more. This time, however, it presses its warm, furry body against my side.

I sit there, rigid with disbelief, as the wolf's warmth seeps into me. It's like sitting next to a furry furnace.

A stinky one.

There's also a musky scent that's not quite unpleasant, but hard to ignore.

"Thank you," I tell this strange shifter who prefers to remain anonymous.

It wraps its tail around me, like a blanket warding off the frigid wind, as it lays its head on its paws, closing its eyes.

As the minutes tick by and the wolf makes no move to harm me, I gradually relax. The warmth of its body and the steady rhythm of its breathing lull me into a state of calm I wouldn't have thought possible given the circumstances.

Every so often, a howl breaks the night, making me jerk. That'll probably go on until morning. The wolf glances at the sky each time, ears flicking around as it listens, but doesn't once respond.

As feeling returns to my limbs, mostly in painful pins-and-needles prickling, my mind drifts to thoughts of home. The pack house isn't far—maybe an hour's walk through familiar territory. But it's cold, and I have a feeling my living furnace has no interest in becoming my portable one.

"Planning on heading out before sunrise?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

The wolf exhales heavily through its nose, a sound that seems to say, *"Not a chance."*

I sigh, resigning myself to a night in the forest. At least I'm not alone anymore. The thought of Raphael flashes through my mind, bringing a fresh wave of pain. I push it away, focusing instead on the steady rise and fall of the wolf's chest.

Its tail remains draped over me like a living blanket, and I find myself absently stroking the thick fur. It's softer than I expected, almost silky beneath my fingertips.

"Why don't you shift? We could actually talk, you know."

The wolf's head lifts, gray eyes fixing me with an unreadable stare. Then, without warning, it pulls its tail away. The rush of cold air takes away the warmth I gathered in a mere second, and I can't suppress a bout of violent tremors.

Just as quickly as it left, the tail returns, curling around me once more. The wolf lets out a huff that sounds suspiciously like exasperation. Message received, loud and clear.

"Okay, okay. I get it," I mutter, burrowing deeper into its warmth. "No shifting. Got it."

The realization of what this stranger is doing for me—a human they don't even know—has gratitude welling up deep inside, threatening to spill over in the form of tears. I refuse to shed tears over this situation. Over Rafe. Over... all of it.

"Thank you," I whisper, my voice thick with emotion. "You're very kind. I mean it."

The wolf doesn't acknowledge my words, simply laying its massive head back on its paws. But I swear I feel its body relax just a fraction more against mine.

As the night wears on, the adrenaline that's been keeping me alert begins to fade. My eyelids grow heavy as I struggle to stay awake. It's a losing battle. The rhythmic sound of the wolf's breathing lulls me into a state of half-sleep, my thoughts growing fuzzy and disconnected.

I drift in and out of consciousness, never fully asleep but not quite awake either. In this twilight state, memories and dreams blur together. Raphael's face swims before me, but it's different somehow—colder, more distant. Then it shifts, melting into the warm, stormy gray eyes of the wolf beside me.

A particularly loud howl jerks me back to awareness for a moment. The wolf's ears twitch, but it doesn't move otherwise. I settle back against its side, allowing myself to be pulled under once more.

I'm not sure how much time passes like this. Minutes? Hours? It feels like I've been suspended in this strange, dreamlike state forever when suddenly, everything changes.

The body beneath me goes rigid. A deep, rumbling growl vibrates through the wolf's chest and into mine, snapping me fully awake in an instant. My heart leaps into my throat as I scramble to sit up, every nerve on high alert.

"What is it?" I whisper, scanning the darkness for any sign of danger. "What's wrong?"

The wolf doesn't answer, of course. It's on its feet now, hackles raised and teeth bared at something I can't see. The growl continues, low and menacing.

### **Chapter 3: Grace: Protector**

#### Chapter 3: Grace: Protector

The wind steals every bit of the warmth the strange wolf had gathered, and I crouch behind a tree to block the worst of it.

A slinking shadow skulks forward, slowly coalescing out of the abstract darkness of the forest.

Andrew.

His lithe wolf body slinks forward, lips curled back in a snarl.

My mysterious protector tenses, fur bristling along its spine. Another low, menacing growl rumbles through its chest.

Andrew's head snaps back, releasing a bone-chilling howl that echoes through the forest. Answering calls rise from all directions. I know those sounds. The pack is coming.

Whoever my furry furnace is, he isn't known to the pack. Which means he's an intruder—which means...

The massive wolf at my side snarls, snapping its jaws at the air between itself and Andrew. A clear warning for him to keep his distance.

"Shit." My soft whisper is enough for my protector's ears to swivel in my direction, and I press myself against the tree trunk, hoping I don't get in its way. No, not *it*. Him, I think.

His identity might be a mystery, but he still kept me warm and safe, at least for the last few hours. I don't want him hurt.

Pressing a hand against his flank, I whisper, "You need to go. They're all going to come for you."

The massive wolf beside me throws back his head, unleashing a howl that shakes the very earth beneath my feet. The sound reverberates through my chest, a primal force that steals the breath from my lungs. Even Andrew, cocky and aggressive moments ago, shrinks back, his ears flattening against his skull.

As the last echoes fade, an eerie silence descends upon the forest.

Then, like a dam breaking, answering howls erupt from every direction. The predatory sounds have goosebumps erupting, as if they weren't already pimpling my skin, and I shudder even without the wind.

Andrew recovers quickly, circling us with renewed aggression. His lips curl back, exposing gleaming fangs as he snarls. My protector responds in kind, hackles raised and muscles coiled tight beneath his thick fur.

This isn't my fight, but I'm somehow caught in the crossfire all the same.

The clash comes without warning—at least for me. Some signal I don't recognize has them both darting forward in a whirlwind of fur and fangs, snarls and snaps.

My protector's massive size gives him an advantage, but Andrew is quick and nimble. They tumble across the forest floor. Andrew occasionally escapes the strange wolf's jaws, darting away a few steps with his tail tucked, before dashing back in.

He knows he's unmatched; his body language screams that he's on the defense, even to someone like me, who's rarely seen a true wolf fight. I'm not often around when the betas fight with each other.



I can barely follow the action, but even I can see the moment the tide turns. My protector's jaws close around Andrew's hind leg, and the smaller gray wolf lets out a piercing shriek of pain.

The sound cuts through me like a knife. Andrew might hate me, but he's still Rafe's best friend. Still someone I've grown up with for the past several years...

Andrew wrenches free, limping badly as he scrambles away. His yelps of pain fade into the distance as he flees, leaving behind tufts of fur and spatters of blood on the forest floor.

Relief floods through me, but only for a second. Reality slaps into me as my protector stands tall and arrogant, watching Andrew's pathetic retreat.

The rest of the pack is coming. I can hear them drawing closer, their howls growing louder with each passing second. My wolf isn't safe.

My mysterious protector turns back to me, his storm-sky eyes gleaming with what almost looks like satisfaction. But there's no time for that now. He needs to leave, to get as far away from here as possible before the pack descends upon us.

Without thinking, I dash forward. My palm connects with his hindquarters in a resounding smack that startles us both. "Go!" I yell, my voice cracking with desperation. "Run! You need to get out of here before they come!"

The wolf whirls around in a sleek movement that has me cringing, preparing for retaliation. But there's no time for regrets. "They're coming. All of them. You need to keep yourself safe. Go!"

He tilts his head, one paw raised as he inspects me. A wolf's gaze is intense, but this time I almost feel like prostrating myself to the ground and lifting my neck. Like I'm a wolf myself.

There's a presence to him that even Alpha lacks.

He can't be some random shifter. He must be another alpha wolf himself—a rogue, probably.

The approaching howls have me almost in tears from frustration. The pack is close now, too close. Any moment, they'll burst through the trees.

"Run!" I shout again, waving my arms. "Get out of here!"

The wolf takes a step toward me, and for a wild moment, I think he might try to drag me along with him. But then he pauses, ears swiveling as he tracks the sounds of the approaching pack.

Our eyes lock one final time, and I swear I see something like regret in those dark gray depths. Then he's gone. The massive form melts into the shadows of the forest, leaving me alone once more.

I slump against the nearest tree, suddenly exhausted. All my adrenaline dumps in an instant, leaving me shivering against the rough bark. My hands shake as I run them through my tangled hair, wishing I didn't feel like sobbing at my protector's absence.

The pack is coming. With all of them here, at least *one* of them should have the presence of mind to bring me back to Alpha and get me away from this hunt. It should be long over by now.

But home doesn't feel very much like home anymore.

Rafe was my only ally in this pack. Without him, I'm a miserable and lonely human, adopted on a strange whim even Alpha's never fully explained. Just that he knew my parents long ago.

He takes care of me well enough, I guess. But he isn't *home*. Not like Rafe.

And now I'm alone, without even a furry furnace to keep me company.

#### **Chapter 4: Grace: A Sudden Change**

"Grace."

Alpha's commanding voice has my head snapping up before my brain is even functioning. I must have fallen asleep.

A threadbare blanket falls to the floor as I sit up; someone covered me when I fell asleep on the couch. Several adult wolves had swarmed the clearing only minutes after my protector fled, and—thankfully—were not a part of the sexual haze of the Mate Hunt, but established and mated adults who quickly dragged me home, like a recalcitrant child.

*What were you doing?* they all asked me in exasperation, like I wanted to be there.

No one listened when I tried to explain what happened.

"Alpha," I greet my adoptive father, clearing my throat when my voice croaks. "I'm sorry. I must have fallen asleep."

He waves one massive hand, scrutinizing me with a frown. "Tell me what happened."

Alpha's piercing gaze bores into me, and I can't shake the feeling something's off. His usual stoic demeanor has morphed into something unsettling. I swallow hard, my throat dry as sandpaper.

"I woke up in the middle of the forest during the Mate Hunt. My clothes were gone. I don't know how I got there."

He's shockingly unaffected by the words coming out of his mouth, looking more impatient than anything. "What else?"

"It wasn't safe, so I ran. I was trying to get home, but got lost. A strange wolf found me and kept me warm when I got lost. Andrew found us a while later and they both fought, and the wolf ran away."

With each word, Alpha's frown deepens, etching harsh lines across his face. The air grows thick, oppressive, making it hard for me to breathe. Oxygen makes it into my lungs with shallow, open-mouth breaths as his aura presses down on me.

I'm dizzy. And confused.

Alpha's never used his aura on me before. He says humans are too weak to stand up to it. Now, I see why.

It's like he's stealing the air from around me. Black spots dot my vision.

"Are you hiding anything from me, Grace?"

His tone makes me shudder. He doesn't sound like my adoptive father. He sounds... angry. "What do you mean?"

Alpha's eyes narrow, his jaw clenching. "Are you hiding a shift from me, girl?"

I stare at him, mouth agape, struggling to process his words. "I... what? I'm human. How could I possibly hide a shift?" What insane question is that?

The change in Alpha is instantaneous and terrifying. His face contorts, features twisting into something inhuman. Gone is the stern but caring father figure I've known all these years. In his place stands a stranger, regarding me with cold disdain.

"Alpha?" My voice quivers, barely above a whisper.

He takes a step closer, looming over me. "Don't lie to me, girl. Did you shift?"

I shake my head frantically. "No! No, I didn't shift. I'm human!"

Alpha's hand shoots out, his fingers digging into my jaw. A strangled gasp escapes my lips as he pulls me forward. His eyes blaze golden, feral and unfamiliar. The air thickens, pressing down on me like a physical weight.

"Shift. Now."

His command slams into me, an invisible force threatening to crush my bones. My lungs struggle against the pressure, each breath a battle.

"I can't," I wheeze. "Please, I'm human—"

"Shift!"

The order reverberates through my body, setting every nerve ending on fire. My vision hazes, darkness creeping at the edges. I want to obey, to do anything to make this stop, but there's nothing to obey with. No wolf hiding beneath my skin.

"Alpha, please—"

His grip tightens, nails biting into my flesh. "Shift, damn you!"

The world tilts and spins. My legs give out, but Alpha's grip keeps me upright. Spots dance across my vision as he shakes me, each command more forceful than the last.

Suddenly, I'm airborne. My back slams against the floor, driving what little air remains from my lungs. I lay there, boneless, gasping like a fish out of water. The crushing weight of Alpha's presence lifts, allowing me to draw in ragged, desperate breaths.

Through the haze of pain and confusion, I force my eyes open. Alpha towers over me, his face a mask of disgust and contempt. The replacement father I've known all these years is gone, replaced by this cold, furious stranger.

A voice filters through the ringing in my ears. Beta. When did he arrive?

Alpha's words cut through the fog, clear and devastating. "We wasted these years. She's truly just a human. The bitch betrayed me."

Betrayed? The accusation stings worse than the physical pain. How could I betray him? I've done nothing but try to belong, to prove my worth. Being human in a wolf pack is not an easy life.

"Alpha," I croak, struggling to push myself up. My arms tremble, threatening to give out.

But they ignore me.

"To ignore a mate bond," Beta says, spitting on the ground. "It is good she doesn't share your blood, Alpha. Your line would be weakened with a mother like hers. An honorless whore."

Alpha growls. "To sire a human with my mate mark on her neck... I would kill her again if I could."

Shock steals the very breath from my lungs, what bit of it I've managed to gather with my ragged gasps.

My mother... mated to Alpha? It can't be true. She was human, just like me. Wasn't she?

I stare at Alpha's back, willing him to turn around. To tell me he's joking. That all of this is nothing more than some fever dream.

"What are you talking about?" My voice trembles, barely a whisper, but loud enough for his keen senses. "My mother was human. She couldn't have been your mate."

"Your mother was a liar and a whore. She betrayed our bond."

My mind reels. It's impossible. It has to be.

"What should I do with the girl?"

Alpha turns, his upper lip lifted in a sneer. "She is no daughter of mine. Send her to serve the omegas. It'll keep them silent for a while."

"Understood, Alpha."

## **Chapter 5: Caine: She's Human**

### **CAINE**

*I want to see her.*

My wolf's whine is loud and pathetic in my mental eardrum, but I ignore it. He's had a bug up his ass ever since sneaking into the Blue Mountain Pack's Mate Hunt against my orders.

He was supposed to be checking on the Blue Mountain Alpha's movements, not hunting down some human girl...

The crack of bone against bone echoes through the training room. My beta's fist connects with my jaw, a hit that should knock any other wolf unconscious.

"Your head's not in this." Jack-Eye circles me on the mat, his red hair loose from its tie. "When was the last time I landed a hit that easy? When we were fifteen?"

I spit blood onto the floor. The copper taste lingers on my tongue. "Again."

"Why don't you just tell me what's going on? You've been a prime dick of a boss for days."

*She smells delicious. Like blueberry muffins and spring mornings.* Fenris's voice drifts through my mind, taunting.

"Shut up," I snap.

Jack-Eye's brow raises. "I didn't say anything."

My fingers curl into fists. The tattoos beneath my shirt burn, a constant reminder of the blessing of the Lycan throne. A blessing that's turned into a curse these past days.

Fenris huffs. *You can't keep me away from her.*

"Watch me." I launch at Jack-Eye, channeling my frustration into each strike.

He blocks, barely. "Who are you talking to? Fenris giving you trouble?"

A low growl rumbles through my chest. "Focus on the fight."

"You first!" Jack-Eye sweeps my legs.

I hit the mat. The impact shoots through my spine, but I roll and spring back up. Sweat drips down my chest, soaking through my shirt.

*She needs us,* Fenris insists.

"She needs nothing from us." It takes only a second to close the gap between us. My fist connects with Jack-Eye's ribs. The satisfying crunch does nothing to silence Fenris.

Jack-Eye stumbles back, wheezing. "She? There's a woman involved?"

My eyes narrow as he abandons all pretense of sparring. "Drop it," I warn him, as if he isn't my best friend on top of being my beta.

"You let Fenris go to Blue Mountain's territory." He straightens, pressing a hand to his side as he calculates the situation. "During their Mate Hunt. Did you find yours?"

*Tell him. Tell him how perfect she is. How she trusted us in the forest.*

"Fenris, I swear—"

*You can't deny what you felt. What we both felt.*

Jack-Eye's eyes narrow. "You did. You found your mate, didn't you? Your wolf's obsessed with someone."

My molars grind together. "My wolf needs to remember his place."

*My place is wherever she is.*

The room spins. The tattoos burn hotter, Fenris fighting against our bond. I grab the nearest wall, steadying myself.

"Caine?" Jack-Eye steps forward.

"Stay back!"

*I'm going to her. Tonight. With or without your permission.*

"Like hell you are." The words tear from my throat in a growl.

Pain rips through my chest. The tattoos glow blue beneath my shirt, pulsing with each of Fenris's attempts to break free. My knees buckle.

"What's happening?" Jack-Eye's voice sounds distant.

*She's alone. Scared. They cast her out. They've washed away my scent.*

"That's not our problem."

*It became our problem when you let me protect her that night.*

My fingers dig into the mat. "I didn't let you do anything. You ran off without my consent."

"Who is she?" Jack-Eye crouches beside me, his overly friendly voice grating on my ears.

*Tell him. Tell him how you watched through my eyes as she curled against our fur. How your heart stopped when she smiled.*

"Enough!"

The tattoos flare, and blue light fills the room. When it fades, Fenris stands before us, his massive form casting shadows across the floor. His storm-gray eyes lock with mine.

"*You can't stop me, Caine.*" Fenris's voice echoes in both my mind and the room, flowing out with a pulse of alpha aura, causing Jack-Eye to stumble. "*Not this time.*"

"Fuck. I hate when he does that."

"Get back here." I push to my feet, but Fenris turns away.

"*I'm done watching you deny what we both know.*" His claws click against the floor as he walks. "*She's ours to protect.*"

"She's human. There's never been a fated connection between a Lycan and a human, and you know it."

Fenris pauses at the door. "*She's ours.*"

The blue glow intensifies, and he vanishes. The sudden emptiness in my mind confirms he's gone, racing toward Blue Mountain territory. Toward her.

"Want to tell me what that was about?" Jack-Eye's voice breaks through my rage.

I groan. He's the most persistent bastard, and he has a strange love of the humans' movies. Ones with inexplicably dramatic plot lines. He won't stop until he knows everything. "No."

"Tough. Your wolf just manifested without your permission and ran off to some woman. Start talking."

I slam my fist into the wall. The concrete cracks, blood running down my knuckles. "There's nothing to say."

My beta doesn't even blink, unaffected by my anger. It's not directed at him, anyway, and he knows it. "Right. Because it's totally normal for the Lycan King's wolf to break free and chase after a human girl."

"Don't."

"Is she why you've been distracted? Why you've been letting me land hits that shouldn't connect?"

The blood drips onto the floor. One drop. Two. Three. "She's nothing."

"Tell that to Fenris." Jack-Eye moves to the door. "I'll track him—"

"No." The word comes out as a growl, and it's not because a vision of Jack-Eye comforting the strange woman is more irritating than Fenris's obsession with her. It can't possibly be that. She's just a human girl. "I'll deal with this myself."



Jack-Eye grins. "You know, I think we haven't visited the Blue Mountain Pack in years. They're about due for an official delegation, which is under the beta's purview—"

My eyes narrow at Jack-Eye's smirk. The blood on my knuckles has already dried, cuts already healed, but the sting remains. "Whatever scheme you're plotting, drop it."

"You know what would be hilarious?" He leans his back against the wall, crossing his arms. "If word got out that the mighty Lycan King is searching for his mate. They'd welcome the delegation with open arms."

"Don't even think about it."

"Come on. Think about the possibilities." He gestures with his hands, painting an invisible picture. "The mysterious and brooding High Alpha, finally ready to open his heart again—"

"I will rip out your tongue."

"It would put those other rumors to rest. The ones about..." His voice trails off, but the meaning hangs heavy in the air.

"The rumors help more than they hinder." Ice coats each word. Fear keeps order better than respect.

Jack-Eye's expression sobers. "And how exactly do you plan to explain that to the new girl? 'Welcome to the pack, by the way, everyone thinks I murdered my last mate'?"

A growl builds in my chest, low and threatening. "I'm not bringing some human girl into the pack."

## **Chapter 6: Grace: Revoked Privileges**

The way everything changes so quickly, like I never existed as Alpha's daughter, is shocking. In a week, all my privileges have been stripped away. Even things I didn't realize were a privilege.

Like clothes.

A private bathroom.

Even my name.

"Hey!"

Yeah, that's my new name.

"Hey! You!"

Stopping mid-step, I turn, only to find myself wanting to be swallowed whole. Seriously, a sinkhole opening up right beneath me would be heaven right now.

It's Rafe's mate.

The sight of her approaching sends a jolt through my system, my heart lurching painfully in my chest. She's even more stunning up close, her long black hair cascading over her shoulders like a silken waterfall, those piercing green eyes pure poison as they watch me.

"Remember me?" Her voice drips with honeyed venom.

She's not alone. A few she-wolves follow along behind her. Some are faces I recognize; part of the pack. The others are strangers.

"I..." My voice catches in my throat, barely a whisper. "Yes."

My pride is nonexistent these days. It's nothing to lower my gaze to the ground in front of her. It doesn't tear me up inside at all.

Who am I kidding? It's shredding me apart.

"Good. I'd hate to think I made such a small impression."

She circles me, and I can feel her gaze raking over my body. I'm no longer dressed in *my* clothes; clothes that fit. Instead, I'm in an oversized t-shirt with holes in the hem and jeans that are only held up thanks to a cloth belt. Everything Alpha ever gave me was taken away.

"My, my. How the mighty have fallen." She tuts, shaking her head in mock sympathy. "Your alpha's little pet has been reduced to this. A fake daughter, trying to weasel her way into the pack under his good graces."

The way she's twisted facts around make me want to snap back, to defend myself, but what's the point? I'm nothing now. No one is on my side here.

"What do you want?" Keeping my voice level and calm is the only win I'm going to get today.

She stops in front of me, tilting her head to the side. "Want? Oh, darling. I already have everything I want." Her smile widens, revealing perfect white teeth. "Rafe, the pack, the future. It's all mine now. Haven't you heard?"

Yes, actually. It's all the wolves can talk about; the successful mateship of our pack to the neighboring Forest Springs Pack. I even know her name now.

Ellie. Her dad's the Alpha of Forest Springs.

Her *real* dad. Biological. Wolf and all. Not like me. I'm just Rafe's castaway, the abandoned adopted daughter of his Alpha.

The casual way she claims it all, as if it's her birthright, makes my blood boil. But there's nothing I can do. She's won, and we both know it.

"I just wanted to see it for myself," she continues, reaching out to twirl a strand of my greasy hair around her finger. Baths are also a privilege I've had to give up; there's never enough hot water. Or time. "The human girl who thought she could play with wolves."

I flinch away from her touch, my skin crawling. "I never played—"

"Shh." She presses a finger to my lips, silencing me. "It doesn't matter now, does it? You're where you belong. Among the dregs of the pack."

Her words hit home, each one a fresh wound. I blink back tears, refusing to give her the satisfaction of seeing me cry. Despite telling myself that I wouldn't rise to the occasion, she got it out of me anyway. And so easily, too.

"You know," she leans in close, her breath hot against my ear, "Rafe told me all about you. How you clung to him, desperate for attention. It was pathetic, really."

My heart shatters anew. Did Rafe really say those things? The thought of him laughing at me behind my back, mocking my feelings... The same person who once declared his love to the moon. Who swore he'd keep me safe.

"That's not true," I whisper, but it sounds weak and unconvincing.

I guess there's still a part of me in denial about the wolf he's become.

She laughs, the sound like tinkling bells. Even in her venom, it's a beautiful sound. "Oh, sweetie. Did you really think he cared for you? A human? He was just amusing himself." She circles me again. "A little game to pass the time until he found his true mate. Me."

The possessive way she says it makes my stomach churn.

Maybe her pretty designer clothes wouldn't be so elegant with my vomit all over her. I clench my fists, nails digging into my palms, breathing in sharp, shallow breaths.

If I throw up on her, I'm just going to have to clean it up.

That wouldn't be worth the brief joy.

"Face it, Grace." She spits my name like it's poison on her tongue. "You were never anything more than a temporary distraction. A human toy for a bored wolf."

I flinch. Why can she hurt me with these stupid words? Why is the mention of Rafe such an intense wound? I should be cold. Angry. Waiting for revenge or something.

But none of that comes. Only the further shriveling of my soul.

"Now," she says, her tone suddenly businesslike, "let's establish some ground rules, shall we?"

I blink at her, confused. "Rules?"

"Yes, rules. Pay attention." She taps my forehead with her perfectly manicured nail. "You're to stay away from Rafe. No talking to him, no looking at him, nothing. As far as you're concerned, he doesn't exist. He's mine now. The sooner you accept that, the easier your miserable little life will be."

She leans in close, her green eyes boring into mine. "And if I catch you so much as breathing in his direction, I'll make sure you regret it. Understood?"

I nod mutely, unable to form words past the lump in my throat.

"Good girl," she coos, patting my cheek condescendingly. "Run along now. I'm sure you have some important omega duties to attend to."

She turns on her heel and saunters away, leaving me standing there, shattered and alone. I watch her go, her graceful movements a stark contrast to my own awkward, human gait. Her little posse of she-wolves follow behind, giggling and whispering among themselves.

Oh, yes. Laugh at the pathetic human girl. Ha, ha.

As soon as she's out of sight, I crumple to the ground, my legs no longer able to support me. The tears I've been holding back finally spill over, hot and bitter on my cheeks.

A human among wolves. Alone. Unwanted. Forgotten.

## **Chapter 7: Grace: Put to Work**

My new life routine is simple.

Wake up every morning before the sun rises. Cook and feed everyone in the omega lodge—both male and female. Clean when everyone leaves for the day. Do the piles of

laundry. Lunch, thankfully, isn't my problem—but it also means I don't get to eat. And then, of course, dinner, and more cleaning.

There are other staff who work at the omega lodge, but unlike me, they're proper omega wolves. Anything they don't feel like doing lands on my shoulders, and if I don't get them done, it's somehow my fault.

The first week of my new lifestyle ended with me being whipped five nights straight.

It isn't a normal punishment for shirking your duties. They just wanted an excuse to do it.

It wasn't a secret that many of the pack hated having a human brought in, when Alpha first adopted me. Like me, they lived in ignorance of my mother's identity. I'm sure they would have recognized her if they saw a picture, but I don't have anything like that. Only my memories.

It wasn't until the night of the Mate Hunt, when Alpha kicked me out of his home and family, that the pack learned the truth.

Mom was once mated to Alpha. Not as a proper Luna, of course. Mom, like me, was human. But she still bore his mating mark and was treated as his mate within the pack—until one day she disappeared, never to be seen again. From the gossip running rampant these days, I quickly learned that everyone thought she was dead.

My father—my *real* father—is also my biological father. They were killed in a house invasion gone wrong on my twelfth birthday. Three days later, I was taken in by a supposed family friend: Alpha.

His apparent care and warm home were more appealing than any foster home, even if I had to live among wolves.

If I'd known, I would have begged the foster system to keep me, but I doubt it would have made a difference. I had a home to go to, and someone willing to foot the bill. Why would they keep me in that situation?

I sigh, my hands sinking into the mountain of clean laundry before me. The scent of detergent tickles my nose as I sort through the pile, grimacing at the sheer number of boxers. Men's underwear. Great.

"At least they're clean," I mutter, folding each pair with quick, efficient movements.

My fingers brush against the soft cotton, and I can't help but think of Rafe. Did I ever fold his laundry? Of course not. That was a task reserved for the pack's domestic staff, not Alpha's daughter.

But I dreamed of being his wife. His mate. Dreamed of doing the laundry, of greeting him at the door with a home-cooked meal.

Now here I am, reduced to handling strangers' intimates.

I shake my head, banishing thoughts of my ex.

Focus on the task at hand, Grace. One pair at a time.

The basket marked 'Jason' slowly fills with neatly folded clothes. T-shirts, jeans, socks, and yes, those dreaded boxers. I smooth out a wrinkle in a shirt, wondering idly about the man who wears it. Is he kind? Cruel? Does he even know my name?

Probably not. To most of the pack, I'm just the human. The outsider. The one who doesn't belong.

I place the last item in Jason's basket and set it aside, ready for delivery. A small victory in a day full of endless chores.

"Human girl! Get up here!"

The shrill voice of the head omega cuts through the air, echoing from the kitchen.

My feet drag as I make my way to the kitchen, dreading whatever new task awaits me. The linoleum floor creaks under my weight, announcing my arrival before I even reach the doorway.

The head omega is a stern-faced woman named Margo. She dresses like a secretary, with a black suit and hair pulled back into a classic bun, and always with a phone in hand. She's also burly enough that, if I was asked with a gun to my head, I would have assumed her to be a bear shifter.

While I was still Alpha's daughter, she treated me with respect.

Now, I'm dirt beneath her shoe.

"There you are," she says, her tone clipped. "You're needed at the main lodge. They're short-handed."

"Yes, ma'am." I've learned to treat her with respect; she's the one who orders my punishments at the end of the night. I've watched as she ordered ten lashes, five nights in a row. Her expression never changed.

This woman wouldn't care if I died of exhaustion, as long as my work was done.

She looks me over, her lips pinched in disapproval. "Is that all you have to wear?"

Glancing at my oversized hoodie and sweatpants—one of my three outfits these days—I can only say, "Yes."

She sighs, clearly frustrated. "You'll need to find something else to wear. Wearing that reflects poorly on Alpha."

I blink at her words, the only outward evidence of my surprise. Since when do any of these wolves care? They've been mocking me since my downfall, saying human trash doesn't even deserve the clothes on my back.

Margo grimaces, shooing me away. "I'll find you something. For now, help them at the main lodge."

\* \* \*

Arriving at the main lodge is a bit of a nerve-wracking affair.

Being holed up at the omega lodge buried beneath a mountain of chores had one bright side: I never had to worry about running into Rafe.

Being in the main part of town, where all the wolves gather, increases that risk exponentially. I have no desire to run into him, either alone or with Ellie. My heart's still wounded and bleeding; it doesn't need to be torn apart any further.

The air outside the omega lodge crackles with an unfamiliar energy. Our small werewolf city, usually a picture of serene efficiency, now buzzes with frantic activity. Wolves dart to and fro, their movements urgent and purposeful. The central garden, once a lush oasis of tranquility, lies in ruins. Dirt flies as workers tear up flowerbeds and uproot shrubs with ruthless efficiency.

What in the world...?

The giant main lodge looms ahead, and I quicken my pace.

"Grace!"

I freeze, my heart leaping into my throat. That voice. No. Please, no.

But luck, as always, isn't on my side. From the corner of my eye, I catch a flash of golden hair. Rafe. And beside him, dark hair gleaming in the sunlight, Ellie. Two picture-perfect mates, arm-in-arm.

I don't wait to see more, rushing for the front doors of the main lodge. I burst through the entrance, chest heaving in relief, only to collide with a wall of muscle. Stumbling back, I look up into Beta's scowling face.

"Watch where you're going, human," he growls, lip curling in disgust.

He used to pat my head and tell me everything would be okay. Used to—

Ugh. No point in dwelling in memories of false care.

"I'm sorry. Margo sent me—"

"I don't care what that omega wants," Beta cuts me off. His eyes narrow, sweeping over my disheveled appearance. "But since you're here now, make yourself useful."

Before I can protest, he turns and barks at a nearby wolf. "You there! I've got someone to help you move those bushes."

"What?" I gasp, but Beta's already shoving me toward the door. "Wait, I—"

"Get to work," he snarls, and suddenly I'm outside again, blinking in the harsh sunlight.

A burly wolf grabs my arm, dragging me toward the ravaged garden. "Come on, we don't have all day."

I stumble after him. From a random errand to doing manual labor I'm in no way equipped to handle. Awesome.

Just another day in the life, I guess.

It's clear no one cares what I'm supposed to be doing. To them, I'm just another pair of hands. Expendable. Replaceable.

The wolf releases me with a grunt, gesturing at a row of uprooted bushes. "Start hauling these to the compost pile. And be quick about it."

I stare at the bushes, my stomach sinking. They're enormous, their root balls easily the size of my torso. There's no way I can lift these on my own.

"Is there some sort of equipment for this, or—"

He snorts. "Equipment? Just lift it up and take it over."

Yeah, that's about what I expected.

They know I'm human; they have to realize this task is just about impossible. But he storms off to do something else in the raucous atmosphere of the garden renovation.

Gritting my teeth, I bend down and wrap my arms around the nearest bush. Branches and leaves stab at my face as I struggle to lift it.



It doesn't budge.

Panic rises in my throat. If I can't do this, they'll punish me. Or worse, throw me out entirely. And then where would I go? I'm an adult now. There's no program in the human world to save me from homelessness and a lack of money.

I'm educated—if you count a werewolf high school diploma as educated.

But that's about it.

I try again, straining with all my might. My muscles scream in protest, but slowly, inch by agonizing inch, the bush lifts off the ground.

"That's it," a gruff voice says behind me. I guess he's back. "Now move it to the pile."

Sweat drips into my eyes as I stagger forward, the bush's weight threatening to crush me at any moment. Each step is a battle, my arms trembling with the effort of keeping the massive plant aloft.

After what feels like an eternity, I reach the compost pile. With a gasp of relief, I let the bush tumble from my grasp.

"Good," the man grunts. "Now do it again."

I turn back to the garden, my heart sinking at the sight of the dozens of bushes still waiting to be moved. This is going to be a long, painful day.

As I trudge back to grab another bush, movement near the lodge catches my eye. Rafe and Ellie stand on the steps, watching the activity in the garden. Watching *me*.

Ellie's lips curl into a smirk as she leans in close to Rafe, whispering something in his ear. Whatever she says makes him laugh, his eyes never leaving my struggling form.

## **Chapter 8: Grace: Exhausted**

As it turns out, there's some sort of massive event happening. The Lycan King is coming.

No one knows why, but there are a lot of whispers. He's been without a new mate for a long time, and has no heir. He's probably on the search for a mate, or so the rumors declare. Then again, the same rumors claim he killed the last one, so I'm not sure how reliable the gossip mill is.

Wolves aren't exactly like humans; their positions aren't handed down solely because of bloodline. A wolf must be an alpha to lead, but not all alpha fathers sire alpha children.

Also, females can be an alpha wolf—in theory—but are never accepted as leaders in their own right.

Alphas and Betas, as the leaders of a pack, are always an alpha wolf and beta wolf in designation. There can be many alphas and beta designations within a pack, but only two wolves carry the title.

It's enough to make a human's head spin, but it all makes sense once you're living within a pack, as I am.

With all that said—it is rare to ever produce offspring of higher designation than the parents, though it isn't uncommon for them to be of lower strength. So, two betas can't make an alpha. And two omegas can't make a beta. At least, that's the general rule.

So, in order to have a Lycan Prince—the Lycan King needs an heir.

Though, if one were to ask what happens when a Lycan King dies without one—well, I have no idea. I don't pay much attention to the Lycan court. I'm struggling enough to live in a wolf pack as a human.

"That's enough for today. Clear out!"

The overseeing wolf's bark cuts through the humid evening air. My shoulders sag with relief, the weight of exhaustion settling deep in my bones. I drop the shovel, my blistered hands screaming in protest as I flex my fingers.

Sweat and dirt cake my skin, mingling with streaks of blood from the cuts littering my arms. Each step sends jolts of pain through my feet.

There are numerous blisters rubbing raw against the inside of my ill-fitting shoes. The thought of the long walk back to the omega lodge makes me want to curl up right here in the torn-up garden.

But if I do that, I'll be free game to any of my tormenters passing by. While there's no one who will protect me at the omega lodge, at least I have a room to hide in.

I force myself to move, one agonizing step after another. The pack bustles around me, their excited chatter about the Lycan King's impending visit grating on my nerves. To them, it's a momentous occasion. I'm sure the she-wolves who didn't find their mates during the Mate Hunt are primping and prepping in hopes of becoming a Lycan Queen. None of them seem to care about the widespread rumor that he killed his last mate.

But to me, this chatter is just another reminder of how I don't belong.

My stomach growls, a painful reminder that I've had nothing but a single glass of water while doing manual labor. The thirst is almost worse than the hunger, my throat dry and scratchy.

As I trudge along the darkening path, my mind wanders to the Lycan King's arrival. Where will I hide? The omega lodge is out of the question—it'll be crawling with visiting wolves. My old room in Alpha's house is no longer an option.

A bitter laugh tears at my dry throat. Life in the wolf pack sucks.

I can't stay here forever. It's impossible. Living here as a human is too dangerous.

The omega lodge looms ahead, a dingy silhouette against the night sky. No warm lights welcome me, no comforting scents of home-cooked meals. Just the acrid stench of unwashed bodies and stale air.

Some omegas don't keep themselves clean. Wolves are usually pretty finicky about their hygiene, but those at the bottom of the pack don't always care about it.

I slip inside, praying I can make it to the showers without—

"Well, well. Look what the cat dragged in."

Margo's sneering voice stops me in my tracks. She's standing in the darkness, her eyes glinting in the dim light. "You smell terrible. Are you covered in dirt? Don't even think about tracking that filth through here."

I bite back a retort. Arguing will only make things worse. "I just need to shower and sleep."

"There's no time to sleep. The kitchens need scrubbing before the Lycan King arrives. Can't have any human stink offending his royal nose, can we?"

My heart sinks. "But I haven't eaten—"

"Not my problem." Margo's dismissiveness is cold. "Now get moving."

I shuffle towards the kitchen, my body screaming in protest. The thought of hours of more work makes me want to cry.

The kitchen is a disaster zone. Pots and pans piled high, counters sticky with spills, floors caked with who-knows-what.

It's clear no one's done a thing while I wasn't around.

I grab a sponge and get to work, trying to ignore the gnawing emptiness in my stomach.

As I scrub, my mind drifts back to the Lycan King's last visit. I was barely thirteen, peeking through the curtains as sleek black cars rolled up the driveway. The wolves that emerged were nothing like our pack. They moved with a fluid grace that spoke of power beyond anything I'd ever seen.

One of them—a tall, imposing figure with eyes that seemed to glow—had looked right at my window. I'd ducked away, heart pounding, Alpha's warnings ringing in my ears.

Now, years later, the thought of facing those wolves without even the illusion of Alpha's protection sends a chill down my spine. Where can I possibly hide? Alpha always told me to stay hidden during their visit. They hate humans.

My arms ache as I attack a particularly stubborn stain. Maybe I could sneak into one of the unused storage sheds on the outskirts of pack territory. It would be cramped and uncomfortable, but at least I'd be out of sight.

For some reason, as I clean the kitchen from top to bottom, my arms and back screaming with the effort, I can't shake the feeling of those glowing eyes looking my way.

## **Chapter 9: Grace: Unwelcome Advances**

I have to leave the pack.

This realization is a long time coming, but when I wake up to Rafe's face staring down at me, in the relative safety of *my own room*, it's a decision made for me.

I'm not safe anywhere. Not even where I sleep.

"Don't shout," he whispers, placing a hand over my mouth.

I wasn't going to, anyway. No one would come to my aid here.

My nod seems to relieve him, because he lets me go and sits on my bed without asking for permission.

I sit up, my fingers clutching the blanket and pulling it over my chest. The thin fabric offers little protection, but it's all I have against Rafe's piercing blue gaze. I'm still wearing my clothes from yesterday, but being in my bed—in my room—leaves me feeling vulnerable.

My heart pounds, a traitorous rhythm that threatens to betray my resolve.

"What are you doing here?"

Rafe's sun-bright hair catches the dim light, a halo around his perfect features. His blue eyes, once a source of comfort, now make my stomach twist.

All I can see is how he dumped me for Ellie the moment he realized they were mates.

"How are you doing, Grace?"

His hand reaches for mine. I flinch away, pressing myself against the headboard.

"What are you doing here?" The words come out sharper this time.

Rafe's shoulders slump, and he runs a hand through his hair, mussing the perfect strands. "I'm worried about you."

A harsh laugh escapes my lips before I can stop it. "That's rich."

"I mean it, Grace. I care about you."

"You have a funny way of showing it."

His sad facade fades as his jaw clenches. There's a tick beneath his skin, a twitching that only serves to remind me he's changed. Like a personality transplant. Or, worse—I never knew him at all. "It's complicated."

"No, it's not. You chose her. You made that perfectly clear."

There's a flash of amber bleeding into the blue of his eyes. My lack of submission must anger his wolf, too. "It's not that simple. The mate bond—"

"Save it." I cut him off, wishing my words came out with more scorn and less trembling. "I don't want to hear about your precious mate bond."

Rafe leans forward, his scent washing over me. Trees and earth and everything I once called home. "Grace, please. I never meant to hurt you."

"But you did." The words hang between us, heavy and undeniable. Making me sound way too fragile.

He reaches for me again, and this time I let him take my hand. His touch sends sparks racing up my arm, and I hate myself for the way my body responds to him.

"I miss you," he whispers.

For a moment, I let myself believe him. Let myself imagine a world where we could go back to the way things were. But then I remember Ellie's cruel smile. His indifference in

the forest, when I was near-naked and terrified. And how impossible it is for me to remain in this abusive pack.

I pull my hand away. "You don't get to miss me. You don't get to come in here and act like you care."

"I do care!" Rafe's voice rises, and I flinch. He takes a deep breath, visibly trying to calm himself. "I know things are different now, but that doesn't mean I've stopped caring about you."

"Different?" The word is so fucking pathetic for this situation, leaving me with no way to express how I feel. So I laugh. A brittle, sharp, broken sound. "Like how your new mate treats me like dirt? How the entire pack looks at me like I'm nothing?"

Rafe's face twists into something ugly, before it smooths out again. He leans forward, grabbing my hand and holding tight, not letting me go. "I'll talk to Ellie. I'll make sure she treats you better."

"You don't get it, do you?" I shake my head, disbelief coursing through me. "It's not just about how Ellie treats me. It's about how you let her treat me. How you stand by and watch while I'm humiliated and abused."

"I can't go against my mate, Grace. You know that."

"Then why are you here?" I demand, anger finally overtaking the hurt. "What do you want from me?"

Rafe's eyes darken, and suddenly he's too close. His hand cups my cheek, and I hate the way I lean into his touch. Like a bad fucking habit. "I want you," he breathes.

For a heartbeat, I'm tempted. To give in, to let him kiss me, to pretend that nothing has changed. It would be so much easier.

I hate him.

But I miss him. So much.

He was my everything. I dreamed of a future with him. I loved him.

I shove him away, scrambling out of bed. "Get out."

"Grace—"

"No." I stand tall, even as my legs shake beneath me. The temptation of the familiar is terrifying. "You don't get to have both of us. You made your choice, Rafe. Now live with it."

His face hardens, that alpha presence I once found so attractive now feeling oppressive. "You're mine, Grace. You've always been mine."

"Yours?" It's amazing how much my heart hurts. Again. "No, I'm not. I'm human, remember? I don't belong to this pack, and I certainly don't belong to you."

Rafe stands, towering over me. His eyes blaze with amber fire; his wolf is fighting for control. He steps forward, and I step back, only for the wall to hit my back.

"You *are* mine," he insists, resting a hand on the wall beside my head. "You're just angry with me. It's okay, Gracie. I understand. I get it. I hurt you."

He lifts a hand, brushing it against my jaw in a whisper-soft caress that has my stomach churning.

This is not the Rafe I loved.

He wasn't stupid like this. He cared about my feelings. My thoughts. He wanted me to be true to myself. He loved me for me.

He didn't ever claim to own me.

"Please leave." My demands downgrade to pleas. "I just want to be left alone. If Ellie finds out you're here—"

"She won't find out," he breathes, his eyes drawn to my lips. "We'll keep it quiet. I promise I won't let you get hurt, Grace."

"Rafe, she's not stupid. She'll know—"

He swoops in to kiss me, but I get my hand between our lips just in time. My heart races at the anger darkening his eyes, even as his hand strokes my cheek in a gentle caress. "It's okay, Gracie. I'll make it okay. We can still be together in the end. I know I said things that hurt you, but it was all in the hunting haze."

He presses his lips against my hand, in soft, sensual kisses that only make my skin crawl.

"I made a mistake, Grace. But I'm going to get you back. You'll see. You were meant for me."

\* \* \*

Rafe eventually leaves.

And I shower, because his touch leaves me feeling filthy.

Which, of course, means Margo screams at me for being a filthy laze-about, then sends me back to the main lodge to continue work on the garden, despite having had only a couple hours of sleep.

In short? Rafe ruined my entire day, all to steal a few kisses behind his precious mate's back.

Instead of heading to the garden, like Margo demands, I sneak back into my room to pack the few things I now have. But a girl needs clothes. And shoes that fit. And food.

Those aren't in my room.

The kitchen is too busy, so I can't steal food from there. But there's a mini pantry on each floor, filled with simple things like graham crackers, water bottles, and beef jerky.

I've stolen a few things from them before, but Margo caught me with empty wrappers on the first day. I never tried to take snacks again.

This time? I don't care. I have a large backpack (which, I admit, I stole from someone's room) and I fill it with as much as I can. There's even a machete (also stolen from someone's room). I do have to sneak around to avoid Margo, but I score a pair of shoes (yes, stolen from someone's room). They fit better than what I was given... because they're *my* shoes, given away to a random omega, all to show me how little I mean to the pack.

My heart pounds against my ribs as I slip out of the omega lodge. The weight of the stolen backpack feels like an anchor, threatening to drag me back into the hell I'm desperate to escape. Each step away from the building sends a jolt of adrenaline through my veins.

Surely someone will stop me. A hand will grab my shoulder, or Margo's shrill voice will cut through the air. But nothing happens.

The forest looms ahead.

I don't bother trying to hide my trail. What's the point? They're wolves. They'll catch my scent no matter what I do. Instead, I stick to the well-worn path, my stolen shoes—*my* shoes—carrying me deeper into the forest.

The plan, if you can call it that, is simple. Follow the trail until I reach the river, then use the water to mask my scent. It's not foolproof, but it's all I've got. My real hope lies in the chaos back at the pack. With the Lycan King's impending arrival, maybe they won't notice I'm gone until it's too late.

Leaving is an impulsive decision, obviously. But I can't stay.



I'll die there. Either from a jealous mate, or overwork, or unchecked bullying by angry wolves. And, if Rafe doesn't stop whatever delusions he's on, I'm going to end up violated with more than a stolen kiss.

The forest air fills my lungs, crisp and clean. It should feel like freedom, but all I taste is fear. What am I doing? Where am I going? The questions swirl in my mind, threatening to overwhelm me.

No money. No real plan. Just a backpack full of stolen goods and a desperate need to escape. The thought of finding some sort of help in the city is a thin thread of hope I cling to.

The trail winds through the trees, familiar yet suddenly alien. How many times had I walked this path with Rafe? The memory of his touch, once comforting, now makes my skin crawl. I push the thought away, focusing on the sound of my footsteps and the rustle of leaves overhead.

A twig snaps somewhere to my left. I freeze, my heart leaping into my throat. Is this it? Have they found me already? I strain my ears, listening for the telltale sound of wolf paws on forest floor.

Nothing.

Just a squirrel, scampering up a nearby tree. I let out a shaky breath, forcing my legs to move again.

## **Chapter 10: Grace: Great Escape**

The beam of my flashlight flickers, casting eerie shadows across the forest floor. My heart skips a beat. Not now. Please, not now. I tap the plastic casing, and the light steadies.

Thank God.

A gust of wind whips through the trees, sending a shiver down my spine. The temperature's dropping fast. I fumble with my backpack, fishing out the extra sweater I'd snagged from the omega lodge. It smells of mothballs and desperation, but it's warm. I pull it over my head, grateful for the added layer.

My stomach rumbles painfully with hunger. I've sipped at water and snacked on jerky through the day, but my supplies are finite. I can't eat them too quickly.

I tear off a small piece of jerky with my teeth, chewing slowly. Like it's gum.

One foot in front of the other. That's all I can focus on now. My legs ache, muscles screaming for rest. My blisters tore open miles ago. But I can't stop. Not yet. I need to reach humans.

The river's behind me, its rushing waters a distant memory. I pray it's enough to throw them off my scent. Not forever—I'm not stupid enough to hope for that. I just need time.

Margo's probably realized I'm gone by now. The thought sends a fresh wave of panic through me. Will they come looking? Part of me hopes they will. That someone, anyone, cares enough to wonder where I've gone.

But that's the old Grace talking. The one who still believed she belonged. I know better now.

"Let them forget about me," I mutter, though the words are bitter on my tongue. "It's what they've always wanted, anyway."

Okay, yeah. I'm feeling a little sorry for myself, but it isn't all hopeless.

The irony isn't lost on me. A week ago, the idea of being forgotten would have shattered me. Now? It might be my only chance at freedom.

Each step takes me further from the home I've had for years. It would be a lie to say I have confidence in surviving with humans. I'm not even sure how things work in the human world anymore.

The forest grows denser, the trees closing in around me. My tiny flashlight barely penetrates the gloom. Shadows dance at the edge of my vision, playing tricks on my exhausted mind.

A branch scrapes across my cheek, drawing blood. I wince, touching the spot gingerly. It stings, a sharp reminder of how ill-equipped I am for this journey. What was I thinking? I'm no survivalist. Just a human girl, alone in a world of wolves.

Had I known this day would come, I would have slacked off a lot less in training. Though, no one ever expected me out on some sort of survival-level mission, so maybe it wouldn't have helped that much.

My foot catches on a root, sending me sprawling. The flashlight flies from my hand, clattering against a rock. The light flickers once, twice, then dies. Darkness engulfs me.

"No, no, no," I whisper, scrambling on hands and knees. My fingers brush against the cold plastic, and I shake it frantically. The light flickers back on, sending a rush of shaky relief through my limbs.

Unlike wolves, I can't see in the dark.

I *need* this light.

Something clatters to my left and I freeze.

My eyes dart around, searching for movement in the inky darkness beyond my flashlight's beam.

Nothing.

Probably just a rabbit. Or another squirrel. I force myself to exhale slowly, willing my racing heart to calm. But the seed of doubt has been planted, and it takes root quickly in the fertile soil of my fear.

I start walking again, my pace a touch quicker than before.

A rustle in the underbrush to my right. I whip my head around, the beam of light dancing wildly across the forest floor.

Again, nothing. But the prickling sensation at the base of my neck intensifies.

*You're being paranoid, Grace. No one's following you. They don't care enough to bother.*

The thought should be comforting, but it only twists the knife of loneliness deeper.

An owl hoots in the distance, the sound carrying clearly through the still night air. I jump, a small yelp escaping my lips before I can stop it. The noise seems to echo, bouncing off the trees and coming back to mock me.

Pathetic.

I grit my teeth, anger flaring hot in my chest. "Get it together," I mutter to myself. "You're not some helpless damsel. You can do this."

A distant howl cuts through the night, freezing the blood in my veins. I stop dead in my tracks, ears straining to pinpoint the direction. It came from behind me, far off but clear.

No. No, it can't be. They're not looking for me. They don't care enough to bother.

But what if they are?

The thought sends a fresh surge of adrenaline coursing through my body. I pick up my pace, no longer caring about stealth. My footsteps seem thunderously loud in the quiet forest, but I can't bring myself to slow down. The need to put distance between myself and that howl overrides everything else.

Branches whip at my face as I push through the undergrowth, leaving stinging scratches in their wake. My lungs burn with each ragged breath.

A heavy weight slams into my back, knocking the air from my lungs. I hit the forest floor hard, leaves and twigs digging into my palms as I scream.

Heart pounding, I scramble to my feet, spinning around wildly.

A massive black wolf stands mere feet away. A familiar ethereal glow surrounds him, casting the nearby trees in an otherworldly light.

My savior.

He pants heavily, sides heaving with each breath. His head tilts to one side, regarding me with a human-like curiosity. There's no aggression in his stance, just... interest.

"You," I whisper, my voice barely audible over the thundering of my own pulse.

The wolf's ears prick forward at the sound. He takes a step closer, and I instinctively back away. My heel catches on a root, nearly sending me sprawling again.

He pauses, head cocking to the other side now. A low whine escapes him, sounding apologetic.

I swallow hard, trying to steady my breathing. "Why are you back? I told you to go."

But, of course, he doesn't answer.