

Grace of a Wolf

#Chapter 51: Grace: Charity - Read Grace of a Wolf

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Caine doesn't acknowledge Lyre's words, his stormy eyes never leaving my face. The intensity of his gaze makes me feel stripped bare, as though he's peeling away layers I didn't even know I had.

Then there's my body.

The stupid thing wants to wrap itself around him until his smell seeps into my skin, deep enough it can never be scrubbed away. To lick his neck and see what he tastes like. To put my mouth—

Damn it, my mind's going haywire.

Stupid body. Stupid cologne-ad smell. Stupid sexy werewolf.

"Come on, boss." Jack-Eye claps a hand on his shoulder. "Let's give the ladies their beauty sleep."

Suddenly, I like Caine's beta very much. What a reasonable, thoughtful man.

Andrew remains awkwardly positioned on the ground; he hasn't twitched a muscle this entire time, and no one seems concerned about helping him up. To be fair, I wasn't, either. Knowing he's alive is good enough; I'm not interested in taking him in as a friend and making sure he's happy or anything. I just didn't want his death on my hands.

Backing away, I mount the first step to Lyre's camper. Caine's eyes track the movement, his body tensing as if to follow, and I narrow my eyes.

I climb the second step, still ascending backwards. He hasn't moved, but his fists clench at his sides.

"Turn around," he says roughly, scowling once again. "You're going to fall."

Hmm. Telling him I'm going backward because I want to make sure he isn't following probably won't go over very well. Frowning, I do as commanded, but pause to cautiously peek over my shoulder. He hasn't moved, and he's still glowering at me like I'm doing something wrong.

The third step puts me at the threshold. When I look back for the last time, I swear, Caine stands like a statue, tall and immovable in the darkness.

A cold knot forms in my stomach as I step through the doorway. It feels like turning my back on someone who wants to eat me.

The camper is warmer and less humid than outside. A little safer, too. But the illusion shatters when something large brushes past my legs. I yelp, spinning around to find Fenris already making himself comfortable on the tiny patch of floor in front of the refrigerator.

"Excuse me?" I sputter, flabbergasted by his audacity. "I didn't invite you in."

Lyre is the last to step inside, frowning at the wolf. "Neither did I."

The massive wolf blinks at me, his gray eyes almost amused, then deliberately lowers his head onto his paws.

"Oh no, you can't stay here." I point toward the door. "Out. Now."

Fenris doesn't budge.

"He's the size of a miniature pony," Lyre observes from the doorway, her slitted eyes taking in the scene. "Where exactly do you think we'll put him?"

I glare at the wolf. "Outside, with his master. Go on. Shoo."

Fenris huffs and closes his eyes.

"I don't think he's going anywhere." Lyre steps inside, closing and locking the door behind her. Before it closes completely, I catch a glimpse of Caine's rigid posture, still watching the camper like a hawk.

"Wonderful. Just what we needed—a spy." I rub my temples where a headache begins to throb. "You realize he's going to report everything back to Caine, right?"

Lyre shrugs, stepping over Fenris's massive form to reach the sink. "Maybe. Or maybe he has his own agenda." She fills a glass with water and hands it to me. "Drink. You look like you might pass out."

I hadn't realized how dry my mouth was until the cool liquid touched my lips. I drain the glass in one go, guzzling it down like I've ran a marathon in a desert. The emotional strain of the last half hour feels equal to the experience, anyway.

"You're so calm," I mutter as Lyre takes my empty glass. "Is it normal for you to have werewolves crash at your place?"

"Nothing about my life qualifies as normal, but I've had stranger guests." She refills my glass and hands it over, but my belly's already sloshing, so I shake my head. She pours it into a bowl instead, setting it on the ground by Fenris's head.

Fenris peeks an eye open, his ear flicking one way, then the other.

"Don't you dare tattle. If you do, you're out. I will drag you out by your tail. Got it?"

Said tail thumps against the floor.

"You've verbally agreed to our contract," I warn him. "If you break it..."

Another tail thump.

"I'm not helping you," Lyre announces, taking the wind out of my sails. "I don't think even I can manhandle that beast through the door if he doesn't want to go."

She has a point. Fenris must weigh three hundred pounds, at least. If he decides to stay, we don't have many options.

Ugh.

"Fine. But you are *not*

sleeping in my bed. Stay on the floor. I don't want fur all over my sheets."

Fenris lifts his head with a sudden whine, his ears going flat.

"No arguing. Don't even think of getting on the bed."

Lyre leans back against the sink and crosses her arms, staring at Fenris without any expression. "You know he's just going to sneak onto the bed when you fall asleep."

Jabbing my finger at the wolf, I warn, "Don't you dare. I mean it. If I wake up with you on that bed, you're out. Not just off the bed, but out of this camper. Forever."

Fenris blinks at me, his expression impossibly innocent in the way only animals can do. He lowers his massive head back onto his paws, but the twitch of his ear tells me he heard every word.

"I'll know," I tell him, narrowing my eyes. "I always know when someone's lying to me."

That's a blatant lie. I'm terrible at knowing when people lie to me. I believed Rafe for years, after all. Believed Alpha when he said he loved me like his own daughter. Believed the pack when they said they accepted me.

Fenris huffs, his breath stirring some dust on the floor.

Three sharp knocks on the door cut through the silence, making me groan so loudly it borders on a scream. I bury my face in my hands. "Can't they just leave us alone?"

"Apparently not," Lyre says, her tone dry as she moves to the door. She throws it open with more force than necessary, the hinges squeaking in protest. "What now?"

Jack-Eye stands on the top step, his tall frame filling the doorway. His gaze skips past Lyre to lock onto me. "Sorry to bother you ladies again, but I just had one question."

"And?" Lyre prompts when he doesn't continue.

He clears his throat, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "I need the answer. Honestly, you'd be doing me a favor even answering it at all."

"A favor?" I echo, confused.

"Yes," he says firmly. "The charity of allowing me a night of peaceful rest, if you will."

Lyre sighs. "Cut the sob story and ask your question. Some of us would also like a night of peaceful rest."

Jack-Eye's shoulders slump, and a sheepish grin spreads across his face as he continues to stare at me. "Why were you so happy to see Andrew was still alive?"

I groan.

Chapter 52: Grace: Muffin

Lyre was right.

Fenris hides under the dinette table as I vacuum black fur off the daybed comforter. I'd tried to kick him out when I woke up to a furry, dead weight on my feet, but he's ultimately too heavy to drag out the door.

The vacuum roars as I attack another patch of black fur. Every swipe feels like a tiny rebellion against the wolf—against Caine—against this whole ridiculous situation. If I can't control anything else in my life, at least I can eliminate this evidence of unwanted company.

A pathetic whimper sounds from behind me, followed by the rhythmic *thump-thump-thump* of a tail against the camper's floor. I refuse to turn around. Fenris might look like an oversized puppy right now, but he's not. He's a full-grown wolf, and he knows exactly what he did wrong.

I shut off the vacuum with more force than necessary. The sudden silence feels accusatory.

"You should get dressed." Lyre doesn't look up from her phone, just sips her coffee, her rainbow hair catching the morning light through the windows. "They'll be here soon."

My stomach drops, and I groan. "Do I have to?"

Last night's dreams flash through my mind—fragments of nightmares where I was locked in a stone tower, my blonde hair grown long like Rapunzel's, watching the world through a tiny window. But worse than those were the other dreams—the ones where Caine's hands weren't dragging me away but pulling me close, his mouth not speaking threats but...

Heat crawls up my neck.

"Unless you want to greet the Lycan King in your pajamas." Lyre sounds utterly unconcerned. "Which, honestly, might be a power move."

I'm not sure how pajamas equal power, but I grab one of Lyre's old band t-shirts and a pair of stretchy shorts and take them with me to the bathroom. Five minutes later, I'm back out, second-guessing the shorts. But my jeans are dirty, and Lyre's don't fit.

"Weren't we supposed to go to—" I stop, frowning at Fenris. "You know, away?"

Lyre finally looks up, her slitted eyes unreadable. "It would just be a waste of money at this point."

"What?"

"Gas. Food. Lodging." She ticks off each item on her fingers. "All expensive. And for what? He's not going to let you go so easily."

Ugh.

I'm not sure why Caine's even hunting me down, but after last night, it's pretty clear he's not going anywhere anytime soon.

Maybe he thinks I'm trying to take over the Blue Mountain Pack or something. Taint it with half-human, half-shifter babies? He seems pretty obsessed with bringing up my relationship to Rafe, and now he's worried about Andrew, too.

"That makes sense," I mumble.

"What does?"

"Oh. I think I figured out why Caine's hunting me down. Werewolves are purists, you know? They don't like it when humans mix with their pack. Even before everything went south, it was pretty rough for me."

Setting her phone on her lap, Lyre gives me her full attention, her eyebrows bunching together. She seems concerned more than interested. Maybe she's worried about me. "Okay. Hit me with your theory, then."

Flopping onto the daybed, I fiddle with the ends of my hair, noticing how some strands are lighter than others. "I'm thinking Caine's worried I'll try to... I don't know, seduce Rafe back or something? Use our history to influence him? Or maybe he's concerned I'll corrupt his bloodline."

This probably doesn't make a lot of sense to Lyre, who only has bits and pieces of my backstory. "Rafe's the new alpha of the pack," I add helpfully as she stares at me like I've grown a second head.

She nods slowly. "Okay..."

"Anyway. Shifters are obsessed with purity, right? So it makes sense he'd be suspicious of my intentions."

Lyre's expression doesn't change, but something about her stillness makes me feel like I'm being dissected. "This is the conclusion you've come to?"

"Well, it's just a working theory."

"But why would he think you're trying to take over a pack you're running away from?"

I open my mouth, close it, then fall back against my pillow. She's right. It makes no sense, putting me directly back at square one. Why am I getting chased by the Lycan King?

Fenris huffs.

"Hush," I tell him absently, running my fingers through my hair with enough force to make my scalp sting. "I just don't get it, then. Why is he here?"

"Did you get good grades in school?"

The non sequitur catches me off guard. "What?"

Lyre's face remains blank. "In school. Were you a good student?"

"I mean... I did okay, I guess?"

"Ah. Then it's just willful ignorance."

Before I can ask what she means, three sharp knocks rap against the door. Fenris lays his head on his paws, unimpressed by his master's arrival.

Lyre rolls off the couch and bounces to her feet, all without spilling a drop of coffee. "Breakfast's here," she announces, moseying her way to the door.

A few minutes later, Caine and Jack-Eye stand in the kitchen, crowding our space. Their hulking figures block out most of the morning light, and Lyre seems unimpressed as she flips on the kitchen lights to see what they've brought over.

They're still wearing the same clothes they were in last night and—through the screen door Lyre leaves open—I can see Andrew cleaning up his camp site. The tent's still up, and there's someone else there with him, too. I didn't see him last night.

"There's no way you all fit in that tent together," Lyre says, plucking a to-go container of bacon out of Jack-Eye's hands.

"You're right," Jack-Eye says, balancing more white boxes. "Andrew and Thom slept in the car."

Thom? I don't recognize that name, but he must be the other person outside. I wonder if they got to eat breakfast already. It feels a little weird to exclude them from the food.

Jack-Eye sets everything on the counter, opening each container as he does so. White toast, as requested. Eggs—both over easy and scrambled. French toast dusted with powdered sugar and cinnamon.

My stomach growls at the sight, but I'll wait to get my plate. With two Lycans and Lyre in the kitchen, it's a little too crowded.

Lyre recoils when she sees the French toast. "That's disgusting."

Jack-Eye gasps and clutches a hand over his heart, as if her words mortally wounded him. "Mademoiselle. French toast is the best breakfast food in existence."

"It's soggy bread," Lyre counters, putting eggs on her plate. "Bread that's been dunked in eggs and milk until it's a sad, pathetic version of itself. It's bread that gave up."

"It's bread that was elevated to a higher form of existence." Jack-Eye points at her with a plastic fork. "The way the custard soaks into every—"

"Custard?" Lyre makes a gagging noise. "Just say what it is. Snotty egg juice."

Jack-Eye frowns. "Are you even human?"

"Nope," Lyre says, unfazed. "Are you?"

"Uh—no."

I try not to smile, but there's something cute about their easy banter. Like they've known each other longer than about ten hours, with eight hours of those being sleep.

Then my shoulders tense as I realize I'm already taking this situation for granted, like it's our new normal. How scary.

As they continue on into a French toast versus pancake debate (apparently this is a hill Jack-Eye is willing to die on), Caine pulls out the chair across from me. He's been staring at me without blinking, but I've been trying to ignore his presence.

He sits with the casual, confident air of someone who owns every space they enter. The table between us feels both too small and impossibly wide, and a teeny, tiny, traitorous part of me is upset he's sitting across from me instead of beside me.

No. Scratch that thought. Wipe it from record.

I should grab a plate and join the others in the kitchen. Maybe food will keep my brain working properly and out of Caine's pants.

From my peripheral vision, I see him reach into his jacket. My muscles tense instinctively. What's he pulling out? A weapon? A contract for me to sign in blood? Whatever it is, I'm sure it'll be—

He places a small paper bag on the table between us and pushes it across to me.

"For you," he says, without any inflection at all. Seriously, the man's about as warm and welcoming as the Arctic.

Still, my heart does a traitorous little flutter in my chest. The paper bag is plain and unassuming, but he still bought me something.

Then again, it could have a bomb inside. Unlikely, but we're talking about a mass murderer, here. One can never predict what's going through their heads.

I reach for it cautiously, half expecting it to explode. But the bag crinkles normally in my hand, and when I open it, I just stare in confusion.

A single blueberry muffin sits inside. Not bakery-fresh, from the looks of it—probably from a gas station or convenience store. Its top is dotted with sugar crystals, a few sad blueberries visible beneath the golden-brown surface.

"Thank you?" My voice lilts it into a question. I'm holding the muffin now, the wrapper crinkling between my fingers.

"I thought you'd like one."

My mind races back to our conversation at the Blue Mountain Pack after Alpha died. When Caine was questioning me about my relationship with Rafe and brought me breakfast. When he said...

"You hate blueberry muffins," I blurt out.

His steel-gray eyes don't leave mine. "I'm reconsidering my opinion."

He bought this specifically for me. Not because he likes them, but because...

Oh. He's probably trying to placate me before dragging me back.

Now it makes sense.

Chapter 53: Caine: You Can't Camp Here

CAINE

The Lyre girl's scent is strange, but I can't figure it out. Jack-Eye, the idiot, doesn't seem to mind; then again, he was always partial to women. A little too friendly, a little too willing. Far more gregarious than the typical Lycan.

I glower at Lyre's camper, fingers digging into the cheap plastic armrests of Andrew's folding chair. Something about that woman sets my teeth on edge. The rainbow-haired enigma kicked us out the second breakfast was over—for them. She didn't bat an eye at our half-full plates or still-steaming coffee mugs.

Who does that to the Lycan King? More importantly, who does that to any Lycan without flinching? It's strange.

Fenris lifts his head; he's been moping for the past ten minutes, since he was thrown out with us. He didn't want to leave, but Grace stared at me with her pretty grass-green eyes until I picked him up and took him with me.

My wolf is not happy with me.

She smells wrong, he mutters, apparently willing to converse when we're talking about a mutual enemy.

"I know."

No, you don't understand. I can't place it. Her scent is... slippery.

The hair on my neck stands up. In over two centuries, I've never known Fenris to be unable to categorize a scent, but what he's saying makes sense. I've noticed it, too. It's more than not knowing what she smells like; it's as if something's purposely not allowing us to.

"She's hiding something," I say, watching the camper windows for movement. No hint of shadows. What's Grace doing? Washing dishes? Maybe she's curled up in bed, kicking her pale legs in the air as she reads a book. "No one takes in a stranger out of kindness. Not in this world."

She kicked me out, too. After I worked hard to keep Grace company all night.

I raise an eyebrow. "Sleeping arrangements go poorly?"

Grace doesn't like sharing her bed. Made me sleep on the floor.

My mind floods with an image of Grace in bed—her now-golden hair splayed across a pillow, sheets twisted around her legs, and a stubborn little pout on her lips as she claims the entire mattress. "I'll just make her like it."

Fenris's ears perk up, his massive head swinging toward me. *What was that? Are you finally accepting what I've been telling you?*

The realization of what I said hits me like a brick. I drag a hand down my face with a groan. "No. Stop putting ideas in my head. I'm trying to deal with something important."

Sounded like you were thinking about sharing a bed with Grace.

"I don't trust Lyre," I growl, steering the conversation back. "She's too comfortable ordering Lycans around. I even let some dominance slip this morning, and she didn't so much as twitch." Of course, I only let out the tiniest sliver. Didn't want to upset Grace. She seems perturbed by my presence as it is.

She's not afraid of us.

"Exactly." I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees. "And what does she want with Grace? A human girl with no apparent value? No money, no connections—"

Other than you.

"—and no..." My mind catches on Fenris's interjection. "What do you mean?"

Perhaps Lyre knows something we don't. About Grace. About you. About us.

A chill runs through me. I'd considered obvious angles: ransom and simple human trafficking. But could it be? Is Grace somehow different...?

Of course she's different. She's our mate.

I bare my teeth at Fenris, though it's half-hearted. I'm on edge and rattled, and I blame not being able to touch her. Grace had avoided any physical contact like I was some sort of bug. And Lyre seemed to purposely get between us. It's enough to make my head throb out of frustration.

Footsteps approach from behind, and I catch the scent of Jack-Eye mingled with an unfamiliar human male. Sweat, cheap detergent, and the sour stink of fear. Yes. This is the normal response to our presence. But why did Jack-Eye bring him here? Wasn't he supposed to see what the local store had available for amenities? We don't have enough sleeping bags for all four of us, and walking to the water fountain every time we're thirsty is already getting old.

Driving to a store with such things in stock is the obvious solution, but I didn't want to leave Grace.

"Um, excuse me, gentlemen," the man says. He's wearing a dirty white t-shirt with a handkerchief knotted around his neck. The campground logo is emblazoned across his chest. "I'm real sorry, but you can't pitch a tent on an RV spot."

I tilt my head and stare at him, letting the silence stretch uncomfortably. He shifts under the weight of my attention. "Then you'll need to make an exception."

The man's pulse hammers in his neck. I can hear it from here. His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows hard. "Sir, I can't—we have rules. You can't tent camp on an RV site. We have other areas for—"

"I said," I repeat slowly, "you'll need to make an exception."

Jack-Eye steps forward, physically blocking my line of sight to the trembling human. "It's fine, Bob. I can call you Bob, right?"

"Actually, my name is Mike—"

"Don't worry about it, Bob. We'll pack up and move along. No trouble. Right, Caine?"

Bob wrings his hands. "I appreciate that. If you need a tent site, I can direct you—"

"We're fine right here," I interject.

Jack-Eye throws me a warning look over his shoulder, and I frown. Why is he backing down in front of a measly human? Andrew and Thom are even crowding around to watch this pathetic situation.

Imagine if the local wolf pack appeared and saw the Lycan King bowing down to some arbitrary human rule.

My face settles into a heavy, impassive mask. The authority of my throne cannot be undermined. I'll have to—

"I'm sorry," the man stutters, finding some reserve of courage. Probably because Jack-Eye is blocking most of me. "If you don't relocate, it's trespassing. I'll have to call the police."

I growl, and he startles.

Chapter 54: Caine: Let It Slip

CAINE

"That won't be necessary," Jack-Eye assures the human with a placating smile. "Give us an hour."

Bob's shoulders relax. Of course; he's stood up to us without immediate repercussion. He must be feeling quite pleased with himself. Strong. Capable of fighting back.

My fingers curl into the plastic fabric of the camping chair.

Wait, Fenris says, nipping at my knee. It's quickly becoming an unpleasant habit. See *what Jack-Eye is thinking first*.

"One hour," the insipid little human agrees, backing away. "Or I call the cops, okay?"

I bare my teeth. Bob quickens his retreat.

"What the hell was that?" I demand of Jack-Eye once he's out of earshot. "Since when do we bow to humans?"

My beta looks uncharacteristically serious as he crosses his arms and widens his stance. This is body language I know a little too well; he always stands like this when he's willfully defiant.

Of course, he usually has a reason.

"You're trying to get on Grace's good side, aren't you?"

My eye twitches. I grunt noncommittally. Saying no is harder than I expected. I'm not agreeing with him; of course not. But I am interested in what ridiculous excuse he's come up with.

Jack-Eye does have quite the experience with females, Fenris muses. His mating habits are unparalleled among the Lycans.

I study Jack-Eye's face. It isn't like I don't know what he looks like; he's been by my side for years. But it's my first time really noting how unmarred it remains compared to most in our pack. His skin is smooth and free of battle scars Lycans typically wear like badges of honor. Or survival.

Most of us carry the marks of our conquest.

And yet my Beta has managed to keep his face relatively untouched. It's almost unnerving.

It's not his pretty face that attracts females, Fenris interjects with a dismissive mental snort. It's his personality. He knows how to charm them. Makes them feel special before he moves on to the next.

Hmm.

"Then perhaps," Jack-Eye says dryly, oblivious to our side conversation, "dominating and terrorizing other humans isn't the best approach."

I flinch. Of course Grace is human. I know this. But somehow, I've begun thinking of her as... apart. Different from others of her kind. Special.

In fact, I only seem to mention her humanity when Fenris brings her up as a mate prospect.

"The girl in that camper," Jack-Eye continues, gesturing toward Lyre's RV, "has already earned Grace's trust. You haven't. And bullying a campground worker won't help your case."

"I don't bully," I mutter.

Jack-Eye raises a skeptical eyebrow.

A rustling sound from the camper draws my attention. Through the window, I catch a flicker of movement—a flash of rainbow hair. Lyre stands just beyond the glass, watching us. For a split second, her eyes meet mine, and something cold slithers down my spine.

"Did you see *that*?" Fenris's voice rumbles between us, so Jack-Eye can hear. Andrew and Thom are oblivious; they don't have access to our pack link.

I frown in the strange woman's direction. "See what?"

"Her eyes. They shifted. She appears human, but for a minute they looked like a cat's."

It's a level of detail I would have never noticed, but Lyre's already disappeared from the window.

"There's something not right about that woman," I mutter.

"You're just annoyed she threw us out." But Jack-Eye also frowns at the camper; Fenris's words must have shaken him.

A human with cat eyes? "Could she be some sort of cat shifter?"

He scratches at his red hair, squinting at nothing. "No, I don't think so. We would be able to smell it if she was."

Strange. "We're not leaving." As if I'm going to leave Grace in that woman's hands without supervision.

But my beta ignores me.

"Pack up," Jack-Eye commands, turning to Andrew and Thom. "We're relocating in an hour."

My jaw clenches. Jack-Eye has been my beta since the beginning, but his audacity has been growing over the years. Granted, I've allowed it to happen, trusting in his judgment, but—

"Start breaking down the tent," Jack-Eye continues, not even glancing in my direction. As if my opinion is irrelevant. As if his king's word means nothing.

The rage rises so suddenly I can barely contain it. Heat courses through my veins, turning my blood to liquid fire. I stand, the flimsy camping chair toppling backward with a clatter.

"I said we're staying." My voice drops an octave, rumbling from somewhere deeper than my chest. The air around us thickens, and the campground grows unnaturally still. Every living creature for fifty yards instinctively freezes.

Jack-Eye's shoulders stiffen, but he doesn't turn.

That's when I let it slip—just a taste of what I've been restraining. The power of dominance rolls off me in waves, invisible but devastating.

Jack-Eye's body jerks like he's been struck. He drops to one knee, a strangled sound escaping his throat. Behind him, Andrew and Thom collapse face-first onto the ground, limbs twitching as they struggle against the crushing weight of my command.

"You do not countermand me," I growl, each word vibrating with power. "You do not ignore me. You do not make decisions without my approval."

The pressure intensifies, and Jack-Eye's other knee buckles. His palms hit the dirt, but his face remains stoic.

"I am not some petty Alpha you can placate or redirect. I am your King."

The dominance pouring from me is uncontrolled now, feral. It presses down on everything around us—flattening the grass, stirring the dust, raising goosebumps on exposed skin. Even the air seems to bend beneath its weight.

Fenris's voice slashes through my rage. *You're drawing attention. The local pack will sense this display.*

"Let them come," I snarl, too far gone to care. "Let them see what happens when my authority is questioned."

Think of Grace.

Grace. My dominance falters for half a second—just enough for Jack-Eye to suck in a breath.

The pressure in the air still throbs with each beat of my heart when a sudden loud crack splits the tension.

The camper door flies open, slamming against the exterior wall hard enough to rattle the windows. "Stop that. Grace can't breathe."

Chapter 55: Grace: Sympathy For a Wolf

Lyre won't stop staring in the direction of Andrew's camp lot, even after closing the blinds. She can't even see through the black fabric, so I'm not sure why she keeps looking over there.

Every few minutes, she lifts the blinds and peeks underneath, only to close them again. But she's so nonchalant about it, like it's something people do on a daily basis.

It's not. Even I know that.

I'm about to ask her what she's looking for when she suddenly drops her head with a long, heavy sigh that makes me jump.

"Your boyfriend's lost it." Her voice sounds almost bored, but her fingers tap rapidly against her thigh.

I blink, and my stomach plummets to the vicinity of my toes. "Rafe's my ex. Is he really here?"

Lyre turns to me with an expression so flat it could level mountains. Her left eyebrow wings up after a few seconds, and her tapping speeds up.

It seems like I'm missing something.

"What?" I ask, genuinely confused.

"I never thought I'd feel sympathy for a wolf." Her nose wrinkles. "Yet here we are."

This doesn't sound good. "Is Caine... Did he... is Rafe dead?"

I step closer, a little panicked now. Much like Andrew, I don't really want Rafe's life on my hands. I also never want to see him again. Obviously, his death would fulfill my wish, but it would leave me with a whole ton of guilt I'm not willing to shoulder.

Guilt means remembering.

I don't want to remember *any* of it.

Lyre raises her hand, palm out, and I freeze. "Stop. Just stop talking." Her eyes flick toward the door, then back to me, still tapping away. "I guess I need to move things along before this gets worse."

"Before *what*

gets worse?"

But Lyre doesn't answer; you'd think I'd be getting used to it by now. I'm not. Instead, she straightens her spine, squares her shoulders, and marches directly to the door. I barely have time to process what's happening before she shoves it open with enough force it slams against the side of the camper.

"Stop that," she commands to whoever's outside. "Grace can't breathe."

My hands fly to my throat reflexively. I look down at my chest as if I might actually see my lungs malfunctioning, but... everything seems normal? My breathing is steady, if a bit quick with anxiety. I'm not gasping or struggling for air.

I peer around Lyre's slim frame and immediately wish I hadn't.

Jack-Eye, Andrew, and the stranger I'd seen earlier are on the ground. The beta is on his knees, but the other two are flat on the ground. If anyone's having problems breathing, it's them—not me.

It only takes a second to recognize what's happening. I've already seen it once before, after all.

But I feel... nothing. No pressure, no compulsion to kneel, no difficulty breathing. No hint of Caine's dominance touches me. Or Lyre, apparently.

"I'm breathing fine," I whisper to Lyre, who makes a shooing gesture behind her back. I guess my input is unnecessary.

"Grace...?" Caine says, sounding strange. Distant.

Lyre spins toward me, mouth set in a stern line. She holds a palm up, mouthing "*stay right here*" before backing down the camper steps. She does it with such ease, like she has eyes in the back of her head.

I strain to hear what's happening outside, but the wind brings her voice right to me.

"Grace is inside. Don't you want to check on her?"

Is Lyre talking to Caine? Or is she talking to Rafe? And if it is Rafe, where is he? I didn't see him out there.

Screw it. I peek around the doorway again, only to verify Lyre is talking to Caine—whose eyes meet mine almost immediately.

He shoves Lyre aside without ceremony, storming forward. His weight on the stairs sways the RV. When he ducks through the doorway to come inside, my mouth goes dry.

The door slams shut behind him; he didn't do it. Lyre, I guess.

Now I'm alone with him. So much for being on my side. First Fenris, now Lyre, both abandoning me in my time of need.

Caine's presence has always been overwhelming, but now he looks positively feral. Veins stand out against his neck. His eyes have darkened to storm clouds, and his jaw clenches so hard I can almost hear his teeth grinding together. Even his breathing is loud, heavy and rough.

Every inch of him radiates barely contained violence.

He stalks toward me, and I flinch back instinctively.

"Um, hi?" The word's more of a squeak anything else, but he doesn't respond, much less blink.

His legs eat up the distance between us in long strides as I retreat, hands behind me feeling for obstacles. The small space of the camper suddenly feels like a trap. My lower back hits something solid—the entertainment center—and panic flutters in my chest.

Nowhere to run.

Before I can dodge sideways, Caine's hands shoot out. He yanks me against him with enough force to knock the breath from my lungs. One arm bands around my waist like steel while the other hand cradles the back of my head, yanking it to the side as he buries his face into the crook of my neck.

His breath scorches my skin as he inhales deeply, over and over, his chest expanding against mine with each desperate breath.

My arms hover awkwardly in the air, fingers spread like starfish. I have no idea what to do with my hands. Pat his back? Push him away? Both options seem equally dangerous.

Once again, I'm reminded of a simple fact. The Lycan King is unhinged.

The tip of his nose traces a line up to the sensitive spot behind my ear, and I can't suppress a shiver. His grip tightens even further, crushing me against the hard plane of his chest.

"I'm breathing fine," I get out, my voice higher than normal. "But if you keep squeezing me like this, I won't be for long."

Something strange happens then. The rigid tension in his body relaxes. Not completely, but enough to ease the crushing pressure of his embrace. The arm around my waist loosens slightly. The hand at the back of my head becomes less demanding, more cradling. His breathing, which had been ragged and harsh, gradually slows to match mine.

Cautiously, I let my hands settle on his shoulders. His muscles feel like granite beneath my palms, but even as I touch him, they soften.

"Are you okay?"

Caine makes a sound deep in his throat. Not quite a growl, not quite a sigh. His lips brush against my pulse point when he speaks. "No."

Oh.

"It isn't enough," he adds, but his words don't match his actions as he takes a step back, letting me go.

"What isn't—ah!"

The sound bursts from my throat—a half scream, half gasp—as the fabric of my shirt gives way without resistance. Yeah, Caine let me go. But then he'd lifted his hand to my collar, and...

Well, there goes Lyre's band shirt.

I glance down in shock, my mind struggling to process what just happened. Air brushes against my skin, leaving goosebumps. Three clean slices run from my collar all the way down to the hem. Not torn by hands, but by—

Claws.

The shredded fabric hangs limply from my shoulders, revealing a plain beige bra and my bare stomach. "What are you—?"

"Shh." Caine's doesn't even pretend to care about my reaction as his large hands grip what remains of my shirt and shove the fabric down my arms in one smooth motion. The tattered remnant of my shirt pools at my feet, leaving me nearly naked from the waist up.

"W-Wait. What are you..."

My words die in my throat as Caine yanks his own shirt over his head in a single fluid movement, revealing a torso mapped with intricate tattoos. They curl and wind across his skin like ancient text.

Fuck.

His muscles are fabulous.

His shirt joins mine on the floor, looking like the steamy leadup in to a sex scene in basically any romantic comedy ever made.

My brain ditches sanity.

I'm supposed to be protesting, telling him he can't just tear my shirt off. Instead, my eyes linger on the tapering line of hair leading from his belly button and trailing down to—

No, no. His eyes are attached to his face. Not down there. Have some decency, Grace. Don't be *that* girl.

Caine pulls me against him again with a soft groan. My bare skin connects with his. My intelligence retires. My body sells its soul.

And my hands press flat against his chest, caught between us as he shoves his face into my neck again, breathing like he's oxygen-deprived.

Jesus. I'm standing here naked against my will and letting a man salivate all over my neck. I'm pretty sure I'm not supposed to be enjoying this.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" My protest is more of an obligation than what I really want, and my hands curl against the hard planes of muscle they're shoved against. So warm.

"Breathing," he murmurs, puffing out hot breath with each syllable.

Oh. Yep. I like that a lot, too.

Shouldn't.

Can't.

Mustn't.

But I do.

His hands span my lower back, pressing me against him, but they don't wander. They stay firmly in place, almost... respectful in their stillness.

Despite, you know, literally stripping me without consent.

"Need this," he says, grazing his teeth against my skin. "Need you."

Caine inhales deeply, over and over, like a drowning man finally breaking the surface. Each breath sounds desperate and ragged.

Chapter 56: Grace: I Can't Let You Go

We stay like this for what feels like forever.

Desire once boiled in my veins, but now simmers, left untended. Mundane issues shove away the fog of arousal and obsessive cataloging of each breath he takes.

My back hurts.

He's got me partially bent over his arm, and the unnatural position leaves me off-kilter, my balance thwarted and my core muscles begging for a gym membership.

I pat Caine's back gently at first. A tentative tap-tap against rigid muscles, warm and soft beneath my hands. No response. His face remains buried in the crook of my neck, his breathing deep and ravenous, like he's inhaling me into his soul. Sometimes, I almost feel like he really is—like something inside of me is being absorbed into him. But it's just my addled imagination going haywire.

"Caine," I whisper, my voice barely audible over the aggressive drone of all three of the RV's air conditioning units.

Another grunt. He nuzzles closer, his stubble scraping against the sensitive skin below my ear. A shiver runs through me, desire spiking sharp and hot before fading back to a dull throb.

My pats turn firmer. More insistent. The gentle rhythm becomes an urgent drumming against his broad back.

"Caine." Louder this time, my voice steady even as my legs tremble beneath their demand. "Caine, please."

But he's lost somewhere I can't follow. His grip tightens fractionally, and I feel the hard planes of his chest press against mine with each breath he takes. A tremor passes through him, and an answering shiver of want flares dangerously low in my abdomen.

And then it's gone again, doused by the growing ache in my spine.

"You're going to snap me in half," I finally gasp, shoving against his shoulders. I'm desperate for relief. "Please, let me go. My back hurts!"

His entire body goes stiff.

For one blessed moment, I think he's heard me. That he'll release me and let blood flow back into my cramping limbs and ease my body's muscle failure.

Instead, his arms constrict further, an iron vise crushing me against him. His grip becomes almost painful, bordering on desperate.

"No." His denial is hot against my skin. "I can't let you go."

The anguish in his words is enough to stem my rising irritation. This isn't the terrifying Lycan King speaking. This isn't even the overbearing Caine who stormed into the camper moments ago.

This is another him entirely, something broken and vulnerable. My chest hurts hearing him.

Reluctantly, I wrap my arms around him again, patting his back gently as I sigh. "At least let me stand up straight."

When he first ripped off my shirt, my mind had gone straight into the gutter, assuming a much more sordid situation to come. Unfortunately, he hasn't done a thing except... breathe. A lot of hot, heavy breathing.

Wait—did I just say that's *unfortunate*...?

Caine grunts, which is not an answer to my question at all. Then his hands drop lower, fingers curving around my ass and pressing dangerously close to the sensitive area between my thighs.

My breath hitches.

He suddenly lifts me off the ground. Instinct kicks in, and I tighten my embrace around his neck, my legs flying around his waist on their own accord. A small shriek escapes my lips, echoing through the cramped camper.

But my back finally has the relief it was begging for.

"What are you—"

He doesn't answer, doesn't even look at me. His face remains buried in the crook of my neck, puffing out hot breaths as we walk the few steps to Lyre's daybed. Each movement jostles me against him, creating delicious friction.

The simmer returns to a boil.

My thighs clench tighter around him for stability, and he lets out a tortured groan.

"Stop," he growls against my skin, his voice rough like gravel. "Stop, or I'll lose what little control I have left."

The absurdity of his statement hits me. He *tore off my shirt*.

"Control?" I ask blankly. "You consider what you're doing right now 'in control'?"

His only response is to tighten his grip on my ass, fingers digging into the soft flesh there. The daybed creaks under our combined weight as he lowers us down, somehow managing to keep me straddling him. The position feels dangerously intimate, yet he still hasn't looked at my face even once.

"Caine," I try again, fighting against the fog of desire clouding my judgment. With the relative safety of the bed against my back, I slide my arms from around him and press my hands against his chest, attempting to create some space between us. "This isn't normal. You can't just burst in here and—"

"You're driving me crazy," he interrupts, pressing soft kisses against my neck.

I grind my teeth together, fighting my body's debauched insistence on letting him do whatever he wants with me. "You tore off my shirt."

He finally lifts his head from the crook of my neck, staring down at me. It shouldn't be as sexy as it is, but here we are, drowning in an ocean of sexually gray boundaries. "It was in the way. I need your skin against mine, Grace. I need your scent. Your warmth."

The possession in his voice sends a contradictory thrill through me. Part of me wants to slap him for his arrogance, while another part—a part I'm not particularly proud of—has already given him the keys to my body, giving him full ownership.

"No," I manage firmly, though my body betrays me by melting further against him. "You can't."

"You're mine," he rumbles, ignoring my protest. "Mine to protect. Mine to..." He trails off, his eyes darkening as they roam over my face.

"To what?" I challenge, my heart hammering against my ribs. As if I'm waiting for a specific answer.

Am I?

Instead of answering, Caine brings his hands to either side of my head before lowering himself onto his elbows. His nose bumps mine. His lips brush against my lips. Once. Twice. Then there's space again as he pulls back, watching me with pupils so dilated only a thin ring of gray remains.

"Just mine," he repeats, his voice rougher than before.

Limbo has me in a chokehold, leaving me hovering between desire and reason.

"What if I don't want to be yours?"

His lips quirk into something almost resembling a smile—the first I've seen from him.

Ah. When did the scary aura around him fade?

"Then why are your legs still wrapped around me?" he asks, light and teasing. Like he's a whole different person from the man who found me in the forest. From the one who dominated an entire pack with his fury. Who told me I was his prisoner.

A fierce blush suffuses my cheeks and I turn my head away from his tempting face. But when I try to unlock my legs, they just... don't listen. They remain wrapped around his waist as he rocks his hips forward, shoving against the most sensitive part of me.

Lyre's shorts, which were already a questionable length to begin with, have ridden up until they barely cover what's necessary. My thighs are completely bare against the heat of his skin, even hidden behind denim.

A soft moan comes out of me unbidden, and Caine chuckles. The sound is dark. An invitation to sin.

"Look at me, Grace."

Chapter 57: Grace: I'll Ruin You For Anyone Else

No way.

Even if he tells me to, I really can't do it.

I keep my face turned away, staring at the faded flower pattern of the comforter. My pulse has spiked to the stratosphere, but I'm determined not to look at his face. If I do, I'll be lost, dropping so far into the sinful depths of hell, I don't think I'll ever be able to return.

I'm not ready.

"Grace." His voice drops to a silken murmur near my ear.

I squeeze my eyes shut. "Don't."

But he doesn't listen. Instead, warm lips press against my cheek, the contact feather-light and devastatingly sweet. My breath catches as he traces a lazy path across my skin, unhurried, as if he has all the time in the world to map every contour of my face.

"Look at me," he repeats, his breath hot against my temple.

I shake my head, the movement barely perceptible. His answering chuckle vibrates through my bones.

"Stubborn," he whispers, the word not an accusation but something like praise. My hips undulate without permission, and he rocks forward in response.

I'm putty.

His mouth travels down to my ear, teeth grazing the sensitive shell before his tongue traces the delicate curve. A traitorous shiver wracks through me, and my fingers curl into the hard planes of his chest.

"I can hear your heartbeat, Grace." His lips brush against my ear with each syllable. "It beats for me."

"It's supposed to beat," I choke out, ruining my attempt at seeming flippant and unaffected.

The wet heat of his tongue dips into the hollow beneath my earlobe, and a soft gasp escapes me before I can trap it behind my teeth. His satisfied hum tells me he caught the sound.

"Your body knows, Grace."

The camper suddenly feels too small, too hot. My chest rises and falls with rapid breaths, each inhale laced with his scent.

"Stop talking," I manage to say, my voice strained. The sound of his voice is unraveling every last millimeter of my control.

"No? I'd rather make you stop breathing."

My heart lurches, and I suck in a swift breath.

He chuckles. "Yeah. Just like that."

Asshole.

His lips trace down the column of my throat, pausing at the frantic pulse point beneath my jaw. He inhales deeply, and the sound is so animal, so *wolf*, that another shudder ripples through me.

I should be terrified. This man kills without hesitation. He tore through a pack like they were nothing. He told me I was his prisoner.

Yet here I am, melting beneath his touch as if the Goddess herself had handed me to him, wrapped in a pretty red bow.

Caine shifts his weight onto one arm, the movement pressing his hips more firmly against mine. The hard ridge of him strains against denim, and heat pools low in my belly. His free hand slides up my bare side, palm rough against my skin, fingertips charting a path of goosebumps in their wake.

"Your skin is softer than I imagined." His thumb slips under the tight band of my bra and traces the underside of my breast, a preview of his ill intentions. "And I've imagined it every night. Since I first caught your scent."

My breath whooshes out in shock. He could have fooled me, with all of his throat-grabbing and threats.

But he wins, because the admission drags my gaze to his face at last. His eyes burn into mine, pupils blown wide with desire, all pretense of control stripped away. The raw hunger I find there steals what little breath remains in my lungs.

"There you are," he murmurs, satisfaction evident in the curve of his lips. "I was beginning to think you'd never look at me again."

Words fail me. I can only stare, caught in the magnetic pull of his gaze as his whole hand finally sneaks up under my bra to cup my breast fully, his thumb brushing across the sensitive peak. My back arches involuntarily, pushing into his touch.

"So beautiful," he breathes. "So responsive. So perfect."

His hand leaves my breast to trail up my neck, tilting my face toward his. Time suspends as he hovers above me, our breaths mingling in the narrow space between our lips.

Anticipation races along my nerves, leaving them sparking and frantic.

"I'm going to taste you now, Grace," he says, his voice a low rumble that I feel more than hear. "And after this, nothing will ever taste as sweet."

His words keep wrecking me.

The first press of his lips against mine is gentle—a stark contrast to the predatory hunger in his eyes. Soft. Testing. As if he's savoring the initial contact, memorizing the texture and warmth.

I remain frozen beneath him, torn between pushing him away and pulling him closer. My indecision lasts only seconds before his tongue traces the seam of my lips, seeking entry. When I yield—God help me, I *yield*

—the kiss transforms.

Possession replaces gentleness. His tongue slides against mine, claiming my mouth with the same dominance he wields over everything else. His hand leaves my jaw to slide into my hair, fingers tightening as he holds me exactly where he wants me.

My fingers curl into fists against his chest before sliding up to grip his shoulders, anchoring myself against the tide of sensation threatening to sweep me away.

He groans into my mouth, shoving his hips against my damp heat, grinding with deliberate pressure; a moan tears out of me, only to be swallowed as he kisses me harder, deeper, until I'm dizzy with want and ready to beg for more.

When he finally breaks away, we're both panting. His forehead rests against mine, our breaths mingling in the charged space between us.

"You taste like blueberries," he murmurs, voice rough with desire. "Like something I could devour for eternity and still crave more."

Blueberries...

Something about his statement nudges at my memories, but then it's gone, whisked away as his mouth crashes back onto mine, all restraint abandoned. This isn't a kiss—it's consumption. Ravenous and desperate. His tongue plunders, teeth nip at my bottom lip, drawing out a startled gasp he exploits with ruthless precision.

His hand slides down my side once again, gripping my hip with bruising intensity before curving beneath my thigh, hitching my leg higher around his waist. The adjustment brings me flush against the hard length of him, and I arch my back, trying to gain enough purchase to grind against him.

Friction is delicious.

He breaks the kiss to trail his mouth along my jaw, down my throat, teeth scraping over my collarbone. "I've killed for less than the torture of wanting you."

His statement should be horrifying, not thrilling. Liquid heat courses through my veins, pooling between my thighs, where his hardness presses insistently.

His head lifts, and our eyes meet. Something between us surges. My heart won't stop hammering, my chest almost too tight.

"Tell me you feel this too," he demands, pushing off me to grab both sides of my hips and lift them higher. He rocks forward again, a desperate tease of what's to come. "Tell me I'm not alone in this madness."

I can't say anything. Breaking his stare, I turn my face away, wishing my cheeks weren't so red. Wishing embarrassment didn't have me in a death grip, listening to what he says so easily. What he commands.

"Tell me, Grace."

My head shakes frantically.

His growl vibrates his body as his hand slides down my thigh, his fingers working their way beneath my shorts. My breath comes in soft pants as I squeeze my eyes shut.

His fingertips brush tantalizingly close to where I throb, but it isn't enough. Not nearly enough.

"I'll ruin you for anyone else," he murmurs. "After me, there won't be anyone else. Just ashes."

Chapter 58: Grace: Climax (END OF BOOK ONE)

Why does he keep talking? Every time he opens his damn mouth, it makes the throbbing harder.

"You want this."

Telling him I don't seems kind of... well, pointless. Because my body, my actions, my everything right now is giving him an entire different story. And he isn't wrong. Murderer or whatever, it doesn't change the fire he's bringing to my blood, the tense anticipation which has me quivering as his fingers slip just a little bit closer.

"Say it, Grace," Caine demands. The words are so rough, his voice so deep, my hips jerk. "Tell me you want this."

I press my lips together. Some wanton part of me wants to do as he says, but the overwhelming majority denies his request, the embarrassment too much to overcome. Even with it flushing my cheeks, though, my body continues its responses. A shiver here. A sharp intake of breath there. A wiggle of my hips to entice his fingers further, until they finally reach the edge of my panties.

More.

Higher.

"Stubborn little human," he murmurs. "I can hear your heartbeat racing. I can smell your desire. It's so thick I could choke on it. Is that what you want, Grace? For me to die in your arms?"

How does he say things so easily? It just comes out like he doesn't feel any mortification at all. Meanwhile, I'm slamming my palms against my face, hiding behind them as if they might shield me from his shamelessly erotic words. As if covering my flaming cheeks might somehow cool the heat spreading throughout my body.

"Look at me."

I shake my head behind my hands once more.

His hips shift, his legs spreading mine wider. Then his hand leaves my hip to wrap around one of my wrists; not pulling, just holding it where it rests. "I want to see your eyes when you admit what's happening between us."

The gentleness in his voice almost undoes me. Almost. I expected the Lycan King to continue his demands. To force. Conquer. This patient coaxing feels more dangerous somehow.

"You've never felt this before, have you?" His thumb traces circles on the inside of my wrist. "With him."

The mention of Rafe should douse the fire, but instead it burns hotter with indignation. I stiffen, but his fingers swoop under the edge of my underwear, gaining access to the slick arousal beneath. My breath hitches.

Caine chuckles, the sound dark and knowing. "Your silence tells me everything I need to know."

He sounds so smug, but the brief flash of irritation over Rafe's name disappears under the assault from down below. Hard, hot fingers glide, shoving my panties to the side, and I arch my hips up, moaning when they brush the entrance. There's a small spot there, more sensitive than the rest, and I want him to press it hard. To grind down. To rub and do whatever he wishes.

But instead his fingers slide up, finding something just as good. He flicks and pinches and twists, harassing my clit just a little before sliding down again. Back and forth. Leaving me breathless and whimpering, legs quivering.

He taps his fingers at the entrance of me; not shoving inside, but almost like... I'm not sure. It's hard to catalogue what I'm feeling down there.

It feels like he's covering my vagina like a freaking garden hose, and *why* does it feel so good? I rotate my pelvis, and one finger slides just a millimeter inside, pushing down. I groan in half relief, but it isn't enough. I need more.

"I could make you beg, you know." His voice drops an octave, rougher now. "I could touch you until you forget who you are. Until the only word left for you to scream is my name."

Ah, that beautiful mouth of his.

My breath catches. My eyes squeeze shut even tighter, as if darkness might somehow dilute everything.

It doesn't.

"Fuck," he mutters, and his teasing fingers press harder. "Your scent..."

Suddenly, he swivels his hand a little and something blunt and hot slides inside, stretching the sensitive skin. It's a pleasant ache. More than pleasant. I want... more.

Bigger.

Deeper.

"Two," he groans. "Fuck. You're tight, but you're wet enough to take two right away. How fucking perfect."

A sharp, rapid-fire knocking interrupts the perfection.

Caine freezes above me, a low growl building in his chest. I should be horrified. Mortified.

All my arousal should be flying out the window.

Instead, I push my hips down, forcing his fingers in just a little farther. My hands slide off my face, eyes still closed as I reach frantically for the hand between my thighs.

"I know I'm interrupting," Lyre's unmistakably bored voice filters through the door, "but your boyfriend's presence is required."

Caine growls. "Ignore her."

I already am, grabbing onto his forearm with both hands and pulling.

He obeys instantly, slamming his fingers all the way in without warning. My back arches as I let out a little scream, and he bends over me with a groan, grabbing my jaw and yanking my face toward his.

"Open your fucking eyes, Grace."

"Again, his presence is required," Lyre intones, knocking again.

Everything downstairs tenses. She could open the door at any time. Walk in. See what we're doing. It would be a horribly embarrassing situation; I'd never be able to look her in the eyes again.

So why is my entire body writhing, shoving harder against him? Why am I opening my eyes at his command?

Fuck reason. Fuck rationality. I don't even know what's happening anymore.

"Please." The word flies from my mouth without permission. "Please, Caine."

I cringe at the desperate sound of my own voice, too arousal-drunk to care. He's still, frozen above me as if my plea surprised him as much as it did me. I meet his eyes, vulnerable and helpless. *Pleading.*

His lips twitch with a suppressed smile. Storm-gray eyes brighten. They're glittering with intent and wildness, bringing a flutter to my stomach.

I swear it still feels as if there's something connecting us, pulling something out of me and shoving it all into him at every point our skin makes contact. Especially down there, with his fingers...

"What a good girl, Grace." He shifts his hand, curling his fingers inside me. Watching my face as he moves them. "Is that what you want, Grace? Do you want more?"

"Yes."

The admission costs me all my self-respect.

He rocks his fingers inside me. Slow at first, dragging them out, then in, as my body acclimates to the gentle stretch. It's exquisite and still not enough, but soon his pace increases until he's pistoning his fingers, creating the most awkwardly erotic squelching I've ever heard.

Half of me wants to kick him off and run because *oh my God*

, is that the sound my body makes when his finger's inside of me?

But the other half...

"More," I whimper, my hips shaking and rolling and rocking with each thrust. "Harder, please."

His fingers stutter for a second, only for his thumb to rub against my clit. Electricity shoots through me, white-hot and pulsing, and then he's moving again, circling and pressing and curling his fingers in time with the flick of his thumb.

"Seriously, I'm going to open the door in five seconds," Lyre shouts.

"Come for me," he demands on a growl. "Come on my fingers like a good girl before your friend comes in and sees you spread out like this, taking all my fingers inside you."

His dirty words are too much, and it's like flipping a switch. My spine bows, arching up off the cushions, and I squeeze my eyes shut as a strangled cry rips from my throat. That strange feeling of *energy* between us grows; this time it isn't the feeling of a gentle absorption. It's like a gushing river, from me to him.

"Four seconds!"

My entire body snaps like a rubber band stretched thin as his fingers return to pistoning, slamming into me harder. Deeper. Just like I'd requested.

And I come like a geyser, bearing down with all the tension in my body as something pours out of me, drenching his hand.

"Three seconds. I'm not kidding, you perverts."

It's too much. Too perfect.

"What a good fucking *girl*," he says, slamming into me one last time with the last word.

I collapse, spent, little more than a puddle of Grace on the daybed.

My limbs are impossibly heavy as Caine's fingers slip free. The room's spinning, the ceiling moving in circles above me.

"That was..." I can't finish the thought. My tongue is thick and clumsy in my mouth, like I've the strength even to form words.

Caine hovers over me, his face blurring at the edges. Something's wrong. My vision darkens around the periphery, narrowing to a pinpoint. The strange *connection* between us pulses once more, but now it feels as if there's nothing left in me to pull from.

Like I've been drained dry.

"Grace?" His voice sounds distant, underwater.

My eyelids flutter. Too heavy to keep open. How strange. It's like... am I fainting?

Lyre's voice is the last thing I hear, distorted beneath the haze filling my ears. "Two seconds and I'm coming in there, even if your dick is out."

Blackness swallows me before I can hear the rest.

Chapter 59: Caine: Took Everything She Had to Give

CAINE

Grace's limp body fuels a new feeling, something old and unfamiliar. It's an emotion I haven't felt since I was a young pup, long before I came into strength and power.

Terror.

What is it? Fenris asks. He's been silent, politely blocking himself off from our intimacy, even when that rainbow-haired chit was banging on the door.

She's unconscious.

"Grace."

I shake her shoulder, the skin under my palm cool to the touch. Too cool.

"Grace, wake up."

Her head lolls as I jostle her, hair splaying across the pillow in bleached golden waves. Not a flutter of eyelashes, not a twitch. My stomach drops with dread.

"Grace!" My voice sharpens with command, an alpha's order.

Nothing. Just her pale face, lips slightly parted, chest rising and falling in shallow breaths.

What's wrong with her? Why isn't she waking?

Fenris explodes into panic, his howl ripping through my mind and air both. Strange voices join in, but they're the least of my worries.

You killed her. You killed our mate!

"Shut up," I growl, placing two fingers against the pulse in her throat. It flutters weakly beneath my touch. "She's alive."

The sudden crash of the door flying open makes me whip around, a snarl building in my throat as I storm around the corner and into the hall, Grace still limp on the daybed. Just moments ago, she'd been so alive, so vibrant, with the scent of her climax filling the air.

Now...

"Your dick better be put awa—" The rainbow-haired nuisance halts as soon as she sees my face, and her eyes flick behind me.

"Call a human ambulance," I order, trying to contain the panic edging into my voice. A Lycan King doesn't panic. We're calm and composed at every moment.

Fenris howls again, a wild, uncontrolled yodel of pain.

Lyre blinks at me. Something shifts in her strange eyes, until her pupils become slitted. It's exactly what Jack-Eye had mentioned before, but the mystery of her identity is no longer a priority. Grace needs help.

"You idiot," she growls, rushing forward to shove past me with surprising strength for her diminutive, humanoid size. "You couldn't hold back?"

My chest aches with the accusation. Did I demand too much of her fragile human body?

I stumble against the wall as she rushes to Grace, pushing me aside as if I'm not the most dangerous predator she'll ever encounter. As if I haven't killed for less.

The floor sways with all of our movement.

The woman Grace calls Lyre doesn't look at me again, her focus entirely on Grace. She presses two fingers to my mate's wrist, then leans close to her face, watching her breathe.

Under normal circumstances, it would bother me she can see Grace's naked torso.

Under this circumstance, it... still bothers me. I dash past Lyre to yank a corner of the comforter over Grace, protecting her from the other woman's view.

"What happened?" she demands, her voice as sharp as any Lycan's. The command within it is no less than an alpha's.

"We were—" The words stick in my throat.

"Having sex, I got that part." Her fingers press gently along Grace's throat, examining the skin with a scowl. There's no mark there. Not yet. "When did she pass out? Before, during, after?"

"After." I rake a hand through my hair, hating how dependent I am on this strange woman to care for my Grace. "She was fine. Then she just... went limp."

"Ambulance. Right." Lyre mutters, fishing a phone from her pocket. "This far out, it'll take thirty minutes minimum."

Thirty minutes. My chest squeezes painfully. "That's too long."

"No shit." She punches in numbers, holds the phone to her ear. "We could drive her, but moving her might—"

She breaks off, attention shifting to the call. "Yes, medical emergency. My friend, a young woman, is unconscious and unresponsive after..." A quick glance at Grace's shorts, still on. She frowns at me. "After intercourse."

There's a volley of questions, and Lyre answers them decisively as I pull Grace's limp body into my arms, fighting a growl when she reaches out to check her pulse.

"No, no visible trauma," Lyre says, and I flinch.

Do they think I...? No. It wasn't like that.

I stroke Grace's hair, noticing Fenris behind Lyre. He's flat on the ground, his eyes never leaving Grace.

Will she be okay?

My heart constricts at the question. I'd just accepted this tiny, frail little human as mine. And now...

It's only proof humans can never be mates with a wolf.

No, Fenris murmurs. Our bond would never hurt her.

And yet it has.

Lyre sits beside me, rubbing her hand down Grace's back. Her phone's on the couch across the room; she must have hung up.

She's not panicked. Angry, yes. The acrid scent of fury radiates from her. But she's not afraid.

"She'll be okay," Lyre says confidently. "Probably going to need some fluids to help stabilize, though."

My eyes narrow. She knows something. "What's wrong with her?"

Lyre's multi-colored hair falls forward as she leans closer to Grace, and I fight back the growl trying to escape my chest. "Her energy is... depleted. Dangerously so."

"What does that mean?" I demand.

"It means you took too much." She shoots me a venomous look. "You didn't hold back. Just took everything she had to give, you brainless sack of muscle."

"I didn't—"

"You did," she cuts me off. Then she pauses. "Maybe not intentionally. But you did."

She places a hand on Grace's forehead, then over her heart. The touch, though clearly medical, makes Fenris snarl. I swallow the sound before it can escape.

"Why didn't you warn me?" I snap. Better to be angry with someone. It's easier to handle anger.

Lyre laughs—a harsh, humorless sound. "Oh, I'm sorry. Was I supposed to give the terrifying Lycan King sex education before he fucked her senseless? My bad."

My temper flares hot and dangerous. "You left us alone, but you knew this could happen, didn't you?"

Lyre meets my rage with a flat, unblinking stare. Those cat-slitted eyes don't waver, don't flinch. Something in her gaze—the absolute absence of fear—makes my anger shrivel like a flame doused with ice water.

It isn't from backing down.

It's from the blame her stare lays on my shoulders. Blame rightfully placed.

I did this, somehow.

"I never expected the big, bad Lycan King to be so fucking useless he'd drain his own mate," she says, her voice low and deliberate. "Guess that's on me for assuming basic competence."

Chapter 60: Caine: Fiddleback

CAINE

"Put Grace down," Lyre says.

"No."

No, Fenris echoes.

My arms tighten around my limp mate, clutching her to my chest. I refuse to let her go. My lips press against her temple, feeling how cool her skin is. Her breathing's shallow. Her pulse is weak.

The thought of letting her go—even for a moment—stabs through me like silver.

"Put. Her. Down," Lyre orders, as if commanding the Lycan King is something she can do on a whim. "Your emotions are all over her right now. She doesn't need your panic seeping into what little energy she has left."

"No."

Lyre's slitted eyes narrow further. "Do you *want* to kill her?"

Of course not. She's the other half of my soul. The fated connection I'd denied is burning bright in my chest, rattled by the thought of losing her.

Losing a mate is hard, but the thought of losing Grace is... impossible. Dying would be preferable.

Lyre sighs and stomps out of the room, shaking the camper with each step. A short while later, she's back, with a soft white t-shirt. "Here. You can put this on her."

Grace's torn shirt is still on the floor, and shame washes through me at the evidence of my lack of control. Everything that happened between us had been perfect, transcendent—until it wasn't.

Pathetic fool. I should have held back. It was obvious a human couldn't handle what we have between us.

She can handle it, Fenris insists. Something is wrong. It isn't our bond. The Goddess would not allow it.

With the greatest reluctance, I lower Grace back onto the bed. Lyre doesn't waste time, pushing in beside me to slip the shirt over Grace's head. She's like a ragdoll, without even a hint of resistance.

Even the scent of blueberries is faint, hard to pinpoint in the mix of other smells.

"I need to stay with her." My hands hover uselessly above Grace's still form. "I need to fix this."

"She'll be fine. She needs rest more than anything. But you..." Lyre frowns, smacking my hands away. "You have something else to do. Go put your clothes on."

I want to snap at this strange enigma of a woman, but Grace holds her in great affection. If I hurt her...

The thought of Grace's beautiful, grass-green eyes staring at me with accusation makes my stomach quiver. It seems I've acquired many new fears today.

Deciding upon magnanimity, I ignore Lyre's audacity and grab my shirt off the floor, pulling it on. The fabric feels restrictive, unwelcome against my skin.

A strange emptiness gnaws at me—something beyond the paralyzing fear of losing Grace. My body feels different. Lighter. As if something coiled within me for years has loosened its grip.

Even Fenris's presence feels... clearer, somehow.

"I'll explain what's happening to her when there's time," Lyre says, not even glancing my way. "But there's something more important you need to deal with right now."

"Nothing is more important than her." The words tear from my throat in a feral snarl.

Lyre doesn't flinch. Doesn't blink. Just stares at me with her uncanny eyes. Then she shakes her head with a sigh.

"Get outside and deal with who you brought here with your pointless display of dominance." Her voice drops to a hiss. "Or they'll be breaking down my door, and I promise you don't want that."

"What are you talking about?"

"Your little tantrum summoned an audience. Your beta's dealing with them right now, but you need to deal with it."

Ah.

I can feel it—the press of unfamiliar wolf energy against the periphery of my awareness. A pack. Territory holders. A presence I would have noticed immediately, if I wasn't so focused on Grace.

I growl through clenched teeth.

"Indeed." Lyre places her hand on Grace's forehead. "The ambulance will be here soon, so take care of them before they scare off the EMTs. I've got Grace. Go be a king."

One more look at Grace, memorizing the curve of her cheek, the scatter of faint freckles across her nose, the slow rise and fall of her chest.

"I'll be right back," I whisper to her. "I promise."

Lyre sighs. "Just go."

Outside, Jack-Eye stands at the foot of the RV steps, his broad back a barrier between what's mine and a semicircle of wolves—eight of them, various ranks within their pack, all bristling with restrained aggression.

Their alpha isn't here, but the one might be their beta.

"Sir," Jack-Eye says, relief evident in his voice. "The Fiddleback Pack was concerned about our... presence."

I should be enraged. I should want to tear through these lesser wolves for daring to interrupt when my mate lies unconscious. Even Fenris should be clawing at my control, demanding blood for this intrusion.

But Fenris remains by Grace, silent in my head, leaving it to me.

And I feel... contained. A strange lucidity courses through my veins where molten fury should be. I can still access my anger—it's there, simmering beneath my skin—but it no longer threatens to consume me whole. The sensation is so alien I nearly stumble.

Jack-Eye studies my face with a frown.

I give Jack-Eye a curt nod, sidestepping him to face these interlopers directly. My shoulders square, stance widening—the posture of a king who refuses to acknowledge any challenge as legitimate.

The moment they catch my scent, and the light dominance rolling through the air, their faces grow pale. Jack-Eye's presence should have been enough, but not all wolves are smart enough to recognize a Lycan. Especially when they're weak.

"Where is your alpha?" My question cracks through the air.

The wolves shift uncomfortably, exchanging glances. This pack was clearly unprepared for a direct confrontation with the Lycan King. Their discomfort saturates the air, the forced bravado of those who've stumbled into something far beyond their capabilities.

A female wolf steps forward from their ranks. Mid-thirties, compact build, with sharp features and calculating eyes. Not their alpha, but someone of authority.

"High Alpha." She keeps her gaze fixed somewhere near my collar, avoiding direct eye contact. Smart. "I am Elizabeth, of the Fiddleback Pack."

I incline my head. "Why are you here?"

Elizabeth squares her shoulders, her face grim. "Until we felt a surge of alpha dominance unlike anything we've experienced before. In human domain. Our protocols

require investigation of unusual shifter activity, especially this close to human populations."

My jaw tenses. "You do not recognize the authority of the Lycan Throne?"

"We do," she assures hastily. "We recognize your authority, High Alpha. We were just... unaware of your presence until now. I apologize for interrupting..." Her eyes flick to the camper. "Your pleasure."

I can feel Jack-Eye's amusement behind me, though his face is likely impassive. It's a sixth sense borne of years of friendship.

"Was my beta's presence not enough for you?"

"My apologies, High Alpha. It is our first experience with Lycans in our territory."

I grimace. The reasoning is fair; packs like Fiddleback are small, based in rural areas. "Now you know. Now leave. My business here is my own."

Elizabeth regards me for a moment, then clears her throat. "We mean no offense, High Alpha. The Fiddleback Pack would be honored to offer you hospitality during your stay in our territory." She straightens her posture, schooling her features into a mask of deference. "Our compound has suitable accommodations for you and your entourage."

A heavy hand smacks down on my shoulder. I don't have to look; I already know Jack-Eye's grinning like a fool. He loves anything free; he calls it an occupational hazard, after helping with our pack finances for so many years.

"We'll take you up on that generous offer," he says, voice warm with charm.

A growl builds in my chest. I'm not leaving Grace.

We need somewhere to stay, anyway, Jack-Eye pack-links directly to me. His mental voice is pragmatic. *And it means we can keep Andrew away from her.*

My shoulders relax. Yes, distance between the two would be ideal.

My gaze drifts beyond the confrontation. Andrew stands by my car, arms folded across his chest, eyeing the wolves with suspicion. Thom hovers beside him, nervously fiddling with his copper-wired glasses. Behind them sits a pile of our belongings—the collapsed tent, sleeping bags, some bags of unknown provisions. Everything already packed up and ready to move.

How long was I in that camper with Grace? Long enough for them to break down our entire camp.

"Jack-Eye, take Andrew and Thom to the compound. I will stay here."