

# Grace of a Wolf Book 2

## Chapter 1 - Grace: Awakening to Pursuit

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

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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.

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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 childless 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?"

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A gust of wind whips through, sending a violent tremor down my spine. Goosebumps prickles 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?"

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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.

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"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?"

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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.

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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.

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How did everything go so wrong so fast?