

Grace of a Wolf Book 2

Grace of a Wolf Chapter 2 - Grace: Abandoned **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. The perfect mate for Alpha's chosen heir.

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.

1

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, as the most eligible heir to Alpha's position. 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.

2

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.

3

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.

1

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.

1

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.

2

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.

1

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.