



Chapter 1: Just a Substitute

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(Olivia's POV)

When I arrived at the dinner party to pick up my future mate Ethan Grey, I heard voices inside and paused in my steps. The door was slightly ajar, allowing snippets of conversation to drift out.

Ethan was the Alpha heir of the Grey pack, one of the most powerful pack in Harbor City.

When I came to Harbor City three years ago, our wolves recognized each other as the the destined mate.

We have been in love for three years.

"Ethan, Cassandra is back in town. What about Olivia?" someone asked.

Ethan's voice was indifferent. "What about her?"

I froze, my hand hovering over the doorknob. Something in his tone made my heart stutter.

Behind the half-open door, I could see a haze of cigarette smoke enveloping Ethan's expression as he quietly admitted, "I don't know. I don't want to hurt Olivia, but I can't let go of Cassandra."

His friends sighed collectively. One of them leaned forward, his face partially visible through the gap.

"I don't understand you, man. You've been with Olivia for three years. Three years! And you're still hesitating?"

Another voice chimed in, blunt and cutting. "It's because she's nothing but a substitute. You found her because she looks like Cassandra."

My breath caught in my throat. The words hit me like a physical blow.

Ethan took a long drag of his cigarette, not denying it. "I was drawn to the faint resemblance, yes. All these years, I've been searching for Cassandra's shadow in her."

"So she's just a stand-in," someone sighed.

"When will you break up with her?" another asked.

Ethan icked his ash, looking reluctant. "Not yet. Olivia is obedient and sensible. I'm actually reluctant to lose her."

His friend clapped his shoulder. "You can't have your cake and eat it too, think carefully."

"Hey, what's the big deal? Just keep dating each other." Another friend said nonchalantly, "If you feel sorry for Olivia, just buy her more gifts to coax her. She-wolves are easy to coax."

But Ethan scoffed, "I'm not that promiscuous."

Outside the door, my lips curved with bitter self-mockery. Three years of love, reduced to "obedient and sensible." Three years of devotion, and I was nothing but a placeholder.

Without a word, I turned and left, swallowed by the night.

Stepping out from the restaurant, the chilly river wind tangled my hair while tears slipped silently down my cheeks. The realization was devastating – for three years, I believed in a love that was mutual and genuine.

Only now did I realize I was merely a shadow of his rst love, a substitute to ll Cassandra's absence.

Standing by the riverside, with the bustling city on one side and the endless dark river on the other, I nally made a decision. My wolf, Cora, whimpered inside me, sensing my distress but agreeing with what needed to be done.

I took out my phone and called my father. The phone rang three times before he answered.

"Olivia?" His voice was gruff but held a note of surprise. We hadn't spoken in months.

"Hello, Dad. I agree to come home and accept the arranged marriage."

There was a pause on the other end. "What happened?"

Under the dim glow of the streetlamp, I said quietly, "Nothing happened. I'm just tired of playing around. I want to settle down and get married."

My voice was calm, but my heart trembled as I admitted, "I was wrong back then, childish and rebellious. I shouldn't have argued and run away from home. I've thought it through."

"Olivia..." My father's voice softened slightly.

"I'll return to Riverdale once I tie up things in Harbor City," I promised.

Actually, I am the daughter of the Alpha of Winters pack, one of the oldest werewolf bloodlines in Riverdale.

Three years ago, my father asked me to accept the arranged mating with Connor Rivers, my childhood friend and the most powerful Alpha.

Because I didn't want to accept the marriage, I secretly escaped from Winters pack and settled in Grey pack under a hidden identity.

That's when my wolf found out that Ethan Grey was my mate.

After hanging up, I wandered alone in the night until late. The streets of Harbor City blurred around me as I walked aimlessly, my mind replaying those cruel words over and over.

When I returned to Moonlight Manor past ten o'clock, Martha Jenkins greeted me warmly. The beta werewolf had been with the Grey household for years and always had a soft spot for me.

"Miss Winters, you're back," she said, handing me a bowl. "This is the healing broth you made for Mr. Grey. I reheated it since it had gone cold. I was about to bring it up. Would you like to take it instead?"

Silently, I took the Healing Broth, carrying it upstairs to Ethan's room. The bedroom was empty save for a glowing computer screen, the sound of running water coming from the bathroom.

I realized he was showering early tonight, likely to leave soon. I set down the broth and noticed incessant message alerts on his computer. Curiosity and dread drove me to move the mouse.

On the messaging app, Cassandra's messages ashed before my eyes.

"Ethan, I'm back. My ight lands at 11:30 tonight at Harbor City Regional Airport. Will you come pick me up?"

"During these years apart, I never stopped thinking about you. I regret leaving for my career."

"We were both too proud, unable to bow our heads. But I know you still have me in your heart, right?"

"I dated other men, but none lasted long. I always felt something missing. It was you. I realized I never stopped loving you."

"I was afraid to return, afraid you'd hate me, afraid to see you with someone else, afraid you no longer loved me."

"I was wrong, Ethan. Can you forgive me?"

Before I could close it, Ethan's reply appeared, typed during his shower: "Cassandra, I just want to know — do you still love me?"

My heart tightened painfully. He's so busy he often ignores my messages, yet for Cassandra, he replies even while bathing. The difference in affection was painfully clear.

Cassandra's reply was instant: "Yes, I only love you."

His nal answer: "Good. I'll come pick you up."

At that moment, I felt our three years together crumble into a cruel joke. I quietly restored the screen, hiding my heartbreak, and left the room.

Downstairs, I served myself a bowl of the broth I made with such care. I had learned the recipe just for Ethan's sensitive digestion, simmering it for hours with healing herbs, barley, red beans, millet, and wild yam.

Two years of devotion, all because he once said he liked it. Now, I ate it spoonful by spoonful, alone.

When Ethan descended freshly showered, hair dried, dressed sharply, he asked casually, "Where did you go? I didn't see you earlier."

I answered softly, "Just went for a walk."

He started putting on his shoes, declaring, "I need to go out for something urgent. Don't wait up."

I lowered my gaze, voice mild, "Will you come back tonight?"

He paused, then said, "Probably not. I have work at the pack house and if it's too late, I won't return."

"Okay." I remained gentle and undemanding, as always. Without further words, Ethan left, never glancing back.

Upstairs, I saw the broth I brought still untouched beside his computer. My phone lit up with a message from Connor Rivers:

"Liv, when will you come back to Riverdale?"

To me, this ancé candidate had always been a gentle elder brother, never quite a lover. We'd known each other since childhood, and he'd always been protective of me.

"After I nish things here," I replied.

"Alright. If you need help, just say it."

"Thank you, Con."

"Rest early. Good night."

That night, Ethan did not return. I lay awake, staring at the ceiling, Cora restless within me. My wolf had never liked how Ethan treated me, always pushing me to assert myself more. Now she seemed almost satished that we were nally leaving.

At dawn, I was awakened by a phone call. "Hello?"

"Liv, my birthday is the day after tomorrow. Don't forget to come to my party!" It was Sophie Parker, a friend from Ethan's social circle whom I got along with.

Sophie was one of the elite wolves in the Grey pack, always hosting exclusive parties and gatherings. Despite her privileged background, she'd always been friendly to me.

"Sure, send me the address," I replied, my voice still husky from sleep.

After hanging up, I dressed and headed to the mall, carefully selecting a latest-model platinum wolf pendant from a prestigious jewelry house — a gift that suited Sophie's style perfectly.

The saleswoman assured me it was authentic, providing a certificate of authenticity. It cost nearly a month of my salary, but Sophie had been kind to me when others in Ethan's circle had not.

On Sophie's birthday, I arrived early at the elegant venue she'd chosen. The room was already lling with members of the Grey pack's elite social circle, all dressed impeccably.

"Happy birthday, Soph," I said warmly, handing over the gift.

As we exchanged pleasantries, the room suddenly quieted. I turned to see what had caught everyone's attention.

Ethan had arrived late, his arm intimately around an unfamiliar woman. No, not unfamiliar — I recognized her from photos. Cassandra Evans, his rst love, had returned.

She was beautiful, with a subtle resemblance to me that was now painfully obvious. Her green-gold eyes sparkled as she laughed at something Ethan whispered in her ear.

Our eyes met across the room, and Ethan froze, stunned. The color drained from his face as he realized I was there, witnessing his betrayal rsthand.

"Liv, why are you here?" he asked, his voice strained.