

Grace of a Wolf –

Chapter 109: Grace: At the Campground

"This is it," I say, pointing through the windshield as we pull into the campsite. Lyre's fifth-wheel camper sits right where we left it, nestled against the backdrop of beautiful woods.

When we pulled in the first time, it looked beautiful and free.

Today, it looks... ominous.

Perspective is everything, I guess.

"Is something wrong?" Caine asks, his voice rumbling through the truck. The kids are all quiet, even Bun. They understand danger in ways no child should.

I shake my head, but the skin at the nape of my neck prickles. "It looks fine."

But it doesn't feel fine.

The camper sits undisturbed. No broken windows. No kicked-in door. Not a single sign of intrusion. And yet... something heavy hangs in the air. A

pressure against my chest. A whisper just beyond hearing. My fingers twist into the fabric of my jeans.

"Let's get the kids inside," Caine says, steel-eyed as he scans the tree line. He's felt it too. Or he's just naturally suspicious.

"Finally!" Jer mumbles, unbuckling himself from the middle seat and following me out the door. "I have to pee so bad my eyeballs are floating."

Okay, maybe they aren't as freaked out as I thought they were.

"Gross," Sara mutters as she slides out of the back. Her red eyes dart toward the camper with undisguised relief; she's definitely more tense than the younger boy.

Ron, of course, is as teenage-stoic as ever as he grabs Bun and hops down.

"Careful, guys. Stay close."

"We know," Sara and Jer chorus. They're already beelining for the camper door.

Jer reaches it first, yanking the handle.

Nothing happens.

"It's locked," he whines, dancing from foot to foot.

"Hang on," I say, digging in my pocket for the key Lyre gave me. "I've got it."

I hand him the key, watching him slide it into the lock and turn.

No click. No give. The door remains firmly shut.

"Let me," Sara pushes forward, her braid swinging as she grabs the handle and rattles it with surprising force for a nine-year-old. "It's stuck."

"Maybe it's the wrong key?" Ron suggests, shifting Bun to his hip.

"No, this is definitely it."

"Let me try." Ron steps forward, adjusting Bun on his hip.

He grabs the handle, yanking with more strength than either of the younger kids could muster. Nothing. The door remains stubbornly shut, like it's been welded closed.

Bun leans forward in Ron's arms, reaching out her chubby hands toward the door. Before I can stop her, she starts banging her tiny fists against the metal surface, making hollow thumping sounds.

"Bun, honey, that's not going to—" I start, but the look on her face stops me. It's cute, with her giant eyes narrowed in concentration.

Never mind. Keep banging. It's adorable.

But an uneasy feeling slithers up my spine, and I glance around. No one's outside, no one's watching, but it just feels...

Not right.

"Okay, everyone get out of my way," I order the kids, who all back up on command. Bun scowls at the door over Ron's shoulder.

Caine steps closer, his body a wall of heat at my back. The prickling sensation isn't unpleasant—it's almost grounding compared to the creeping unease trailing me all day.

I step forward, suddenly self-conscious with everyone watching. I grip the key tight, my knuckles turning white. Another deep breath, and I slide it into the lock.

The key turns smoothly. No resistance. The handle gives under my palm, and the door swings open with a soft creak.

"See? It was just stuck," I say, trying to sound casual while my heartbeat hammers in my throat. "Come on in."

I step inside, the familiar space of Lyre's camper greeting me—cozy bohemian fabrics, the faint smell of incense, colorful glass bottles catching the afternoon light. But the air's too still and empty, like it's been abandoned.

It's only been, like, two days.

My feelings are all overly dramatized because of the dread. That's all.

I've become paranoid.

"Jer, you can use the bathroom first," I say, turning back to the doorway. "Then Sara."

But Jer isn't following me in. He stands frozen at the threshold, his face scrunched in confusion.

"I can't," he says.

"What do you mean, you can't? The bathroom's right there." I point toward the back of the camper. There are actually two of them, but I figure Lyre might not want them using the one attached to her bedroom.

Jer steps forward—at least, he tries to. His foot reaches the doorway and stops, like he's hit an invisible wall. He pushes against nothing, his sneaker meeting resistance where there shouldn't be any.

"I can't get in," he says, voice rising. "It won't let me."

Sara pushes past him, rolling her eyes. "You're just being dramatic." But the same thing happens to her. She hits the invisible barrier and bounces back slightly, her red eyes widening. "What the hell?"

"Language," I say automatically, but my mouth has gone dry.

Ron steps up next, still holding Bun. His expression is grim as he reaches out one hand toward the door frame. His palm flattens against thin air, like he's touching glass. Bun makes a frustrated sound, reaching for me, her little fingers splaying against the nothing that's keeping her out.

"Grace," Caine says, his voice a low warning. He doesn't need to elaborate. We both know this isn't normal.

"Hey, kids," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "Why don't you wait by the truck for a minute? I need to call Lyre."

"But I have to pee!" Jer hisses, hopping from one foot to the other.

"Go behind a tree," Ron mutters, already leading them away. "Like a normal animal."

"I'm not an animal right now!" the younger one protests, but he follows. Sara lingers, her eyes narrowed at the camper.

"It's magic, isn't it?" she asks quietly.

Smart kid. Too smart for her own good. "Lyre probably has it spelled against intruders." Which is both relieving and unbelievably unwanted at this point in time.

When they're out of earshot, Caine steps forward, his massive frame blocking out the sun. He reaches toward the door—no hesitation, no surprise when his hand passes through without resistance. He steps inside, close enough that I can smell his scent. His dark, cologne-ad smell is as distracting as usual.

His gray eyes scan the camper's interior, missing nothing. "A protection spell. But why would it keep out the cubs and not us?"

"Lyre didn't know them when she put it together, obviously. Just give me a minute. I'll call her."

Chapter 110: Grace: Being Watched

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I pull my phone from my pocket, hands shaking slightly as I find Lyre's number. It rings once, twice, three times. My heart sinks with each unanswered tone. What if she doesn't pick up? What if something's happened to her? What if—

"Grace?" Lyre's voice fills my ear, sounding slightly breathless. "I was just thinking about you."

Relief floods through me. "Lyre, thank the Goddess. We have a problem."

"When don't we?" she says, but the sarcasm sounds strained. "What's happening?"

"We're at the camper, but the kids can't get in. There's some kind of... barrier keeping them out."

"Oh, that." Lyre sounds utterly untroubled. "Access ward. Safety feature. Got tired of jackasses breaking in whenever I park somewhere remote. It'll disengage once you hitch it to the truck. Don't worry about it."

"Don't worry—" I bite back the rest of my sentence, too aware of little ears. "Fine. Thanks."

"You good otherwise?" she asks, suddenly sharper.

I hesitate, not wanting to voice the creeping dread slithering up my spine. "Yeah. We're fine."

"Hmm." She doesn't sound convinced. "Call if you need anything else. I mean it."

I hang up and turn to the kids. "Slight change of plans. The door won't open until we hook the camper to the truck."

"But I need to pee!" Jer wails.

"Go in the trees," Sara says, pointing.

"I'm not peeing in the trees! There could be bears!"

"There are definitely bears," Ron says, deadpan.

Jer's eyes widen in horror.

"Enough," Caine's voice cuts through the bickering. The kids fall silent immediately. Even Bun stares at him with her huge, solemn eyes. "Everyone back in the truck. Lock the doors. I'll help Grace prepare the camper."

"I think you should all stay in the truck," I say quietly. "Even you."

Caine's eyes narrow. "You can't do this alone."

"I've seen Lyre do it. It's not that complicated."

"Then I'll help make it faster."

I shake my head. "Ever pack up an RV before?"

"No."

"Then you'll be in the way. Stay with the kids. I'll do it."

He nods once before striding back to the truck. I exhale shakily, relieved to have space to work without his looming presence adding to my anxiety.

Alone, I move faster. Inside, everything loose gets shoved into nearby cabinets. Certain pieces of furniture are moved together to keep them from moving around with any bouncing movement of the trailer. Anything questionable goes on Lyre's bed in the front.

Then it's making sure there are no dirty dishes in the sink.

A quick press of a button dumps the black tank. Lyre likes to rinse it out a few times, but my shoulders keep prickling, so I forego the extra step. The gray tanks are next. A little water and some black tank treatment and they're all ready to go.

Slides go in, and the camper's ready—on the inside, anyway.

Outside, it goes quicker. Disconnect the water hose and electric. Stow away the gross sewer hoses. Use about half a bottle of sanitizer, even though I used gloves. Pull strange

triangular blocks from the wheels, which are supposed to keep them from moving. Once it's ready, I rap on Caine's window and have him back up so we can hitch the trailer.

All in all, I think it takes about forty-five minutes. I'm sure Jer's about ready to burst, and I'm only about half certain I did everything right.

My breath comes in shallow puffs, the feeling of being watched intensifying with each passing minute.

I stop, scanning the trees again. Nothing moves except leaves stirring in the breeze.

"You're being paranoid," I whisper to myself.

Swallowing hard, I hit the button to retract the slides. The mechanical whirr seems obscenely loud in the quietness of the forest. Sweat trickles down my back despite the cool air.

Caine's taken Jer to the campground bathroom, and I'm about to burst with anxiety. Thankfully, the sheer terror over what ifs somehow meanders down the idea of horrible disasters, and horrible disasters reminds me to turn off the propane tanks.

That would have been dangerous.

Done. Everything Lyre showed me is now complete. Maybe. Hopefully.

If I break her trailer, I really hope she doesn't make get too mad, but other than that little fear? A tiny spark of pride flares.

I did it all. By myself.

The trailer's now ready to go,

Still, I don't linger to savor the feeling. Instead, I sprint back toward the truck, suddenly desperate not to be alone for another second.

Just as my fingers brush the door handle, something moves in the trees behind me—a flash of shadow, a rustle too deliberate to be wind.

I freeze, whirling around, my heart in my throat.

Nothing. Just sun-dappled foliage and the gentle sway of pine boughs.

"Wind," I whisper. "Just the wind."

But I know better.

I yank the truck door open and scramble inside, slamming it shut behind me.

"Something wrong?" Ron asks, way too observant.

"No. Just wind." Locking the doors, I huddle a little further into my seat. Caine and Jer should be back soon. "We ready for our adventure?"

"Adventure?" Sara asks in confusion. "I thought we were running away."

"We're not running away," I say, forcing brightness into my voice. "We're just being overly cautious. Like a fire drill, you know? Better safe than sorry."

Sara's eyes narrow, skepticism etched across her small face. "Then why did you tell us to pack everything we own?"

My stomach knots. "Because we might be gone for a few days. It's an adventure while we wait for Owen to come back."

"An adventure," she repeats flatly.

I nod with more conviction than I feel. "Exactly. We'll find a nice campsite. You guys can explore, and we can do s'mores at night." I'm laying it on too thick, but I can't seem to stop. "It'll be fun. Promise."

Ron catches my gaze in the rearview mirror. His dark eyes cut through my bullshit like a knife through butter. He knows. Of course he knows. The slight tilt of his head, the tightening of his jaw—he's not calling me out, but he's not buying it either.

I look away first, unable to hold his stare any longer. Shame crawls up my neck.

"But what about Owen?" Sara persists. "How will he find us?"

"He's with Lyre, and Lyre told us about this camping spot. Don't worry."

Bun gurgles from her spot between them, sprouting delicate rabbit ears. They keep twitching. She must be picking up on my anxiety.

"It's okay, Bun," I reach back to stroke her cheek. The rabbit ears recede, replaced by normal human ones. "Everything's fine. Maybe we'll even stop by a store and get you a proper carseat. Would that be fun?"

"Fuh," she chirps.

Another lie. Nothing is fine. I have no idea what I'm doing or where we're going. I just know we can't stay here.