



# Falling for My Shifter Defender

**Author:** *Liz Fox*

**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** He's my reluctant protector, my unexpected roommate... and the biggest threat to my heart.

Blackwell's sanctuary was supposed to be a refuge for my sister and me.

But Eli Greystone isn't easy to ignore.

He's older, stronger, and too charming for his own good—

A warrior with sharp hazel eyes that see straight through me.

I shouldn't want him.

But when danger closes in, he's the first to stand between us and the threat.

Now, we're sharing a home, raising my sister, and pretending the tension between us doesn't exist.

In a world where trust is survival, can I risk giving my heart to the shifter who swore to protect me?

This is a Steamy, Wolf-Shifter Romance. No Cliffhangers. This is the eighth in the Wild & Forbidden Mates series, but it can also be read as a standalone. If you love shifter romances with steamy sex scenes and a sweet love story, then you'll love this book.

**Total Pages (Source):** 36

# Page 1

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## Chapter 1

Eli

These damn formal events are going to be the death of me.

I tug at my collar for the hundredth time, feeling like I'm being slowly strangled by Italian silk. The ballroom of the Blackwell estate glitters with more wealth than I've ever seen in one place—crystal chandeliers throwing rainbow prisms across marble floors, candlelight dancing on polished surfaces, the air thick with perfume and power.

And tension. Always tension when this many alphas gather in one place.

I snag a whiskey from a passing server and take a long drink, scanning the crowd.

I spot Adrian near the balcony, surveying his kingdom with that characteristic intensity. The hunter attack is still fresh in everyone's minds—a reminder that danger lurks beyond these walls. But tonight isn't about fear. It's about showing strength.

I make my way through the crowd, nodding at familiar faces. Theo stands near the entrance, deep in conversation with Sawyer—no doubt discussing security protocols. Lucien D'Arcy lounges by the bar, swirling a glass of blood-infused wine with elegant fingers, watching the room with detached amusement.

Adrian doesn't turn as I approach, but his posture shifts slightly—a silent acknowledgment.

"I'll never get used to this," I mutter, adjusting my collar again. The wolf inside me chafes at the confinement, the formality, the pretense.

Adrian arches a brow, still watching the crowd. "Used to what?"

"This," I gesture broadly at the spectacle before us. "Dancing, small talk, pretending we're civilized creatures."

A hint of a smirk touches Adrian's lips. "You're the one who insisted on attending."

I shrug, taking another sip of my drink. "Had to see it for myself. You, of all people, hosting a damn gala." I can't resist needling him a little. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you're starting to enjoy this whole community-building thing."

Adrian doesn't respond, but I know him well enough to read the subtle shift in his expression. The lone wolf is learning to run with a pack again.

"You're not a lone wolf anymore, you know," I say, voicing the thought.

Before Adrian can respond, something catches my attention—a flicker of movement near one of the grand columns at the edge of the ballroom. My senses sharpen, focusing on the disturbance.

A child. A small girl with wide eyes, peeking out from behind the pillar.

Something in my chest tightens. Children don't belong at an event like this—too many predators, too many politics.

"Were kids invited to this thing?" I ask, already moving toward her.

"No," Adrian replies, his tone wary.

I sigh, already stepping away. "I'll take care of it."

"Eli." Adrian's voice stops me. "Everything alright?"

I pause, glancing back. Something stirs in my chest—an inexplicable pull toward the child, a protective instinct that feels both foreign and familiar.

"Always is," I say, flashing my trademark grin to mask the strange feeling. "Go find your mate, Adrian. Some of us have more important things to deal with than fancy parties."

I move through the crowd with purpose, keeping my eyes on the little girl. She doesn't run when she sees me approaching—just watches with curious eyes that seem too knowing for her age.

As I draw closer, a scent hits me—wild, earthy, threaded with something softer. Something that makes my wolf stir with sudden interest.

What the hell?

I crouch down a few feet away from her, making myself smaller, less threatening. "Hey there," I say softly. "You're not supposed to be in here."

The girl tilts her head, studying me with unnerving intensity. She can't be more than six or seven, with a delicate face and bright, intelligent eyes.

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"You're a wolf," she says simply. Not a question.

I blink, surprised. "Yes," I admit. "I am. How did you know that?"

Instead of answering, she steps forward and presses her tiny hand against my chest, right over my heart. The gesture is so unexpected, so disarming, that I go completely still.

My wolf, normally restless in these formal settings, quiets. Protect, it whispers. Pack.

"Where are your parents?" I ask gently.

The girl hesitates, glancing toward the staff entrance. I follow her gaze and spot a woman in a server's uniform frantically searching the room, her movements sharp with panic.

And then it hits me—the full force of that scent I'd caught earlier, now unmistakable as the woman turns in our direction.

She's stunning in the most unassuming way—warm brown eyes wide with worry, her long, wavy chestnut hair hastily pulled back from her face. I can see the graceful curve of her neck, the delicate line of her collarbones visible above her shirt. There's a quiet strength in the way she holds herself, shoulders squared despite her obvious distress. Something about her draws me in—not just her beauty, but a resilience that radiates from her like heat.

My wolf goes utterly still.

Mate.

The realization slams into me like a physical blow, leaving me momentarily stunned. I hadn't been expecting it—hadn't even thought about finding a mate, not after thirty-six years of nothing. And she's human. The shock of it freezes me in place, my mind racing to catch up with what my instincts already know with bone-deep certainty.

My wolf doesn't care about my confusion. She's ours.

I clench my jaw, forcing myself to stay still, to not react. If she were a shifter, she'd recognize the bond too—but she's human, which means she has no idea what's happening between us. What's happening to me.

It's the first time in my life that I feel truly off-balance. I've faced down hunters and rival packs without flinching, but this—this unexpected connection—makes my heart hammer against my ribs.

The little girl tugs at my sleeve. "That's my sister," she whispers, pointing toward the woman. "She's looking for me."

Sister, not mother. I file that information away as I watch the woman's frantic movements. There's fear in her posture—the kind I recognize from years of working with displaced supernaturals. It's not just worry; it's the hypervigilance of someone who's been hunted.

"I should go back," the girl says, but she doesn't move. Instead, she looks up at me with those too-wise eyes. "Are you one of the people building the safe place?"

I nod, unable to look away from her sister. "I am."

"Good." She smiles, revealing a missing front tooth. "Grace says we need to find the

safe place."

Grace. My mate's name is Grace.

The sound of it resonates through me, settling into my bones like it belongs there. Grace. I've never been a poetic man, but there's something about the name that fits her—the quiet dignity in her movements, even as panic drives her forward.

The woman—Grace—finally spots us, and for a moment she freezes, relief washing over her features before wariness takes its place. She moves through the crowd with purpose, her eyes never leaving the little girl.

And fuck, my mate is afraid.

I can smell it on her—the sharp tang of fear mixed with determination. She's not just worried about the girl; she's afraid of what happens next. Of me.

My wolf bristles at the thought. Every instinct in my body screams to protect her, to make her feel safe, but I force myself to remain still. The last thing a frightened woman needs is a strange man making sudden movements.

Grace reaches us and immediately pulls the girl close, her grip firm but not unkind. "Willow," she breathes, dropping to her knees. "What did I tell you about wandering off?"

"I wanted to see the wolves," Willow says, unrepentant.

Grace's eyes flick to me, wary and defensive. She stands, keeping Willow partially behind her. "What were you saying to my sister?"

The protective gesture should irritate me, but instead, something in my chest tightens.

She's fierce, this human woman.

I cross my arms, trying to appear casual despite the riot of instincts inside me. "Relax. She found me."



## Page 3

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Grace's lips press into a tight line, her reluctance to engage evident. But before she can pull Willow away, I sense Adrian approaching. His scent carries notes of authority and suspicion.

"Is there a problem, Eli?" His voice is all business, his eyes assessing the situation with cold precision.

Grace stiffens, recognizing the power in his stance. Her heart rate spikes—I can hear it, a frantic drumming that makes my wolf pace restlessly. She's terrified, but she lifts her chin, meeting Adrian's gaze.

"I apologize for the interruption," she says, her voice steadier than her pulse. "My sister wandered off."

Adrian's eyes narrow. "Staff aren't permitted to bring family members to events."

"I know." Grace swallows hard. "I'm not actually staff. I... borrowed the uniform."

Shit. I almost laugh despite the tension. She snuck in. My mate has balls.

"You infiltrated a private event," Adrian states flatly.

"I needed to find you." Grace's fingers twist in the fabric of her skirt. "Or—whoever's in charge of the sanctuary."

Adrian's posture shifts subtly. "Why?"

I watch as Grace struggles with herself, the battle between pride and necessity playing across her face. It's fascinating, this conflict—and it makes me curious. Who is this woman, and what is she running from?

"We need somewhere safe," she finally says, the words clearly costing her. "I heard... I heard there was a place being built. For people like Willow."

Adrian's gaze flicks to the child, reassessing. "And what exactly is your sister?"

"Half-shifter," Grace says, her voice dropping. "Wolf."

The pieces click into place. The girl's uncanny perception. The way she recognized what I was. The strange pull I felt toward her—not mate, but pack.

"Where are her parents?" Adrian asks, his tone softening almost imperceptibly.

Grace's jaw tightens. "Dead. Hunters."

The single word hangs in the air between us. I see Adrian's expression harden, memories of his own losses reflected in his eyes.

"Please," Grace adds, the word sounding foreign on her tongue. "We've been running for months. I just—I need to know if there's a place for her."

I can see it in the stiff set of her shoulders, the way her grip on Willow tightens—she's about to bolt. One wrong word from Adrian, and she'll disappear into the night. And something in me rebels at the thought of letting her walk away.

Before Adrian can respond, I step forward. "Let's talk outside," I say, keeping my voice low and calm. "No pressure. Just a conversation."

Grace's eyes meet mine, wary but desperate. Something flickers in her gaze—confusion, maybe, at the intensity with which I'm looking at her. The hesitation is brief, but then she exhales and nods.

"Adrian," I say, not looking away from Grace. "I've got this."

## Chapter 2

### Grace

The night air cools my flushed skin as we step outside, away from the suffocating opulence of the ballroom. My heart still hammers against my ribs—partly from being caught, partly from the intensity of the man walking beside me.

Eli Greystone. That's what the other man called him.

He moves with an easy confidence, tall and broad-shouldered in a way that should intimidate me but somehow doesn't. Moonlight catches in his tousled brown hair and highlights the strong line of his jaw, softened only slightly by the hint of stubble. When he glances down at me, his hazel eyes crinkle at the corners, warm and unexpectedly kind beneath stern brows. There's something about him—a steadiness, a quiet strength—that makes my usual wariness falter.

He leads us to a stone bench beneath strings of fairy lights, far enough from the main entrance that we won't be overheard but close enough that I can still map our escape route if needed. I keep Willow close, my hand firm on her shoulder even as she strains toward a cluster of fireflies dancing near the manicured hedges.

"You can let her explore a bit," Eli says, nodding toward the fireflies. "We're safe here."

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I almost laugh at the word. Safe. As if safety is something that exists in the real world and not just in bedtime stories.

But Willow's eyes are pleading, and we've been cooped up in that dingy motel room for days. My fingers loosen their grip against my better judgment.

"Stay where I can see you," I tell her firmly. "Three minutes."

She nods solemnly before darting toward the lights, her small hands cupped to catch their glow. I watch her for a moment, memorizing the rare sight of her unguarded joy, before turning my attention back to Eli.

He's watching me, not Willow. The intensity in his gaze makes something flutter in my stomach—not fear, exactly, but awareness. I tamp it down immediately.

I cross my arms tightly, suddenly conscious of the ill-fitting server's uniform I stole from the hotel laundry. The fabric scratches against my skin, a constant reminder of how far I've fallen.

"I'm sorry for crashing your party," I say, though I'm not really sorry at all. "I didn't know how else to find you."

Eli leans back against the bench, his posture relaxed but attentive. The fairy lights cast shadows across the planes of his face, softening the sharp angles of his jaw. He's handsome in a rugged, unpolished way that makes it hard to look directly at him.

"How did you even hear about us?" he asks.

"Rumors." I scan the grounds, counting exits, cataloging threats. Old habits. A distant strain of violin music drifts from the ballroom, incongruously elegant against the knot of dread in my chest. "In a diner outside of Portland. Two men were talking about Blackwell Corporation building some kind of sanctuary for... people like Willow." I swallow hard. "I've been searching for something like that for months."

"And you just... what? Decided to crash a private gala based on overheard gossip?"

When he puts it that way, it sounds insane. Desperate. I lift my chin. "I've done crazier things to keep her safe."

Something softens in his expression. "I believe that." He runs a hand through his hair, messing up whatever styling product had been keeping it in place. The gesture makes him look younger, less intimidating. His scent reaches me on the night breeze—something woody and warm that makes me think of forests, of hiding places, of earth that holds secrets.

I catch myself leaning slightly toward him and immediately straighten my spine.

"Look, I need to be straight with you," he says, his voice gentler than before. "The sanctuary isn't ready yet."

The words hit like a physical blow. "What do you mean, not ready?"

"I mean it's mostly blueprints and permits right now. We have the land, we have the funding, but we don't have actual buildings. No housing, no infrastructure—just plans."

The fantasy I'd built in my head collapses like a house of cards—high fences keeping hunters out, classrooms where Willow could learn about her shifter side, a bed that was ours for more than a week. Gone. All of it gone.

My throat tightens. "So it was all just talk."

"No," he says firmly. "It's happening. It's just not... finished."

I laugh, the sound sharp and humorless. "Great. That's just fucking great." I push to my feet, needing to move, to think. "Perfect timing as always, Grace," I mutter to myself. "Chase a fairy tale across three states just to find out it doesn't exist yet."

"Where are you staying tonight?" he asks quietly.

I hesitate. We'd checked out of our motel this morning. All our belongings are stashed in the backseat of my car.

"I'll figure something out," I say, the words automatic. They've become my mantra over the past couple years—a promise to myself, to Willow, that somehow I'll make things work.

Eli watches me for a long moment, his hazel eyes unnervingly perceptive. "The motels in town are full," he says. "Tourist season."

I look away, focusing on Willow as she chases fireflies. She looks so small against the vastness of the estate grounds, her secondhand clothes hanging loose on her thin frame. Seven years old and already she's lived in more places than most people do in a lifetime. She keeps glancing back at me, checking my expression, gauging whether she should be afraid or not.

I force my face to relax. She's already too good at reading my fear.

"I have a spare room," Eli says, his voice careful, measured. "You and Willow could stay there. Just until you figure out your next move."

My head snaps back to him, suspicion flaring hot and immediate. "Why would you offer that? You don't know us."

"I know enough." He shrugs, the movement fluid and easy. "You're protecting your sister. You're running from hunters. And you need somewhere to sleep tonight."

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I study him, trying to read the angle, the hidden agenda. Men don't just offer help without wanting something in return. That's not how the world works. Not in my experience.

"What's the catch?" I ask bluntly.

A strange expression crosses his face—something like sadness mixed with understanding. For a moment, I swear his eyes flash with an amber glow, but it's gone so quickly I must have imagined it.

"No catch," he says. "It's just a place to sleep."

"I can't pay you."

"I didn't ask you to."

I swallow hard, hating the desperate hope blooming in my chest. A real bed. A locked door. One night without constantly checking the windows.

"I don't need charity," I say, the words stiff with pride.

Eli doesn't blink. "It's not charity," he says. "It's just a place to sleep."

I look back at Willow, her face lit with wonder as she cups a firefly in her palms. The tiny light illuminates her features, casting shadows that make her look older than her years. She deserves better than another night in a bus station or a park bench. She deserves walls and a roof and a few hours without fear.



"You won't owe me anything," Eli adds quietly, as if reading my thoughts. "You don't even have to talk to me. But the kid deserves a roof over her head."

Something in his tone makes me look at him—really look at him. There's no pity in his eyes, no condescension. Just a steady calm that makes my racing thoughts slow. He shifts slightly, and for a brief moment, I catch a glimpse of tension in his jaw, a tightness in his shoulders that suggests he's holding himself carefully in check.

I don't understand why I feel like I can trust him. I've known him for all of twenty minutes. But something about him feels... safe.

It's not that I'm afraid of shifters—they weren't the ones who destroyed our lives. It was humans, hunters with their cold eyes and calculated cruelty who killed Willow's parents. Who've been hunting us ever since. But trusting anyone, shifter or human, after what happened two years ago... that's what scares me.

"One night," I say finally, the words feeling like surrender. "Just until I figure something else out."

Relief flashes across his face, so brief I almost miss it. "One night," he agrees, and I notice how he exhales slowly, as if he'd been holding his breath waiting for my answer.

Willow bounds back to us, her cupped hands glowing with captured fireflies. "Look, Grace! They're like tiny stars!"

I force a smile, pushing down my unease. "They're beautiful, Wills. But you should let them go now. Living things shouldn't be trapped."

She nods solemnly and opens her hands. The fireflies rise into the air, blinking their silent code as they disperse into the night. One lands briefly on Eli's shoulder before

taking flight again, and Willow giggles.

"We're going to stay with Mr. Greystone tonight," I tell her, watching her reaction carefully.

Her eyes widen, then she turns to Eli with that unnerving directness she sometimes has. "Are you taking us to the safe place?"

Eli crouches down to her level, his movements slow and deliberate. "Not yet," he says honestly. "But I can give you a safe place for tonight. Is that okay?"

Willow studies him with an intensity that makes me wonder, not for the first time, how much of her father's wolf instincts she's inherited. Then she nods once, decisive. "Yes. That's okay." She tilts her head. "You smell like the forest."

I tense, embarrassed by her bluntness, but Eli just laughs—a warm, genuine sound that makes something in my chest loosen despite myself.

"That's the wolf in me," he tells her, completely unfazed. "Good nose you've got there."

Willow beams at the praise, and I realize with a pang how starved she is for connection with others like her. For all my efforts to keep her safe, there are parts of her I can't nurture, can't understand.

Eli stands, offering her a small smile before turning back to me. "My car's this way."

I shake my head immediately. "We'll follow in my car."

Something like understanding flashes in Eli's eyes. "Smart," he says simply, no judgment in his tone. "I'm in the east lot. Blue truck."

"We'll be right behind you," I reply, grateful he doesn't push.

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As we walk toward the parking lot, Willow slips her small hand into mine and squeezes. I squeeze back, trying to convey a confidence I don't feel.

Just one night, I remind myself. We've survived worse.

But as I watch Eli's broad shoulders ahead of us, I can't shake the feeling that I've just made a decision I can't take back. That somehow, in agreeing to this one night, I've set us on a path that will change everything.

The floorboards creak beneath my feet as I follow Eli down a narrow hallway, Willow's hand clutched tightly in mine. His cabin smells of cedar and something else—something wild that reminds me of rain-soaked forests. It's not large, but it's solid. Secure. The windows have proper locks, and I've already counted two possible exit routes besides the front door.

"It's not much," Eli says, pushing open a door at the end of the hall, "but it's clean."

The spare room is simple—a full-sized bed with a patchwork quilt, a nightstand with a reading lamp, and a small dresser beneath a window that looks out into dense woods. No decorations, no personal touches. Just the essentials.

"Bathroom's across the hall," he continues, gesturing vaguely. "Towels in the cabinet. Help yourself to whatever you need."

Willow immediately bounces onto the bed, testing its softness with delighted little hops. "It's so squishy!" she exclaims, her earlier wariness momentarily forgotten.

I remain in the doorway, still clutching our backpack. The room feels like a trap and a sanctuary all at once. "Thank you," I manage, the words stiff and unpracticed on my tongue.

Eli nods, keeping a careful distance between us. "I'll be in the living room if you need anything." He hesitates, then adds, "Lock the door if it makes you feel better."

The fact that he understands this need without judgment makes something twist in my chest. I nod once, sharply, unable to meet his eyes.

"Night, Willow," he says, his voice gentling as he addresses my sister.

She stops bouncing long enough to wave. "Night, Mr. Eli!"

"Just Eli is fine," he says with a small smile before turning away.

I wait until his footsteps retreat down the hall before closing the door and engaging the lock with trembling fingers. The soft click brings a momentary relief.

"I like him," Willow declares, resuming her bouncing. "He smells right."

I set our backpack on the dresser and begin unpacking the essentials—toothbrushes, Willow's stuffed wolf, the switchblade I keep wrapped in a washcloth. "What does that mean, he 'smells right'?"

She shrugs, the gesture so adult it makes my heart ache. "Like pack. Like belonging." She stops bouncing, suddenly serious. "The bad men didn't smell right. They smelled like metal and anger."

I swallow hard. Willow rarely speaks about the hunters who killed her parents. Sometimes I wonder how much she actually remembers and how much her mind has

mercifully blurred.

"Come on, time to get ready for bed," I say, deflecting. "Teeth brushed, pajamas on."

She complies without argument, which tells me how exhausted she really is. While she's in the bathroom, I check the window—second floor, but there's a sloped roof beneath it that would make for a possible escape route if necessary. I test the glass, making sure it opens smoothly, before drawing the curtains closed.

When Willow returns, her face scrubbed and her hair a wild tangle, I tuck her into bed and slide in beside her. She curls against me immediately, her small body radiating heat like a tiny furnace.

"Will we stay here tomorrow too?" she asks, her voice already heavy with sleep.

I stroke her hair, untangling it with gentle fingers. "I don't know yet, Wills. We'll figure it out in the morning."

"I hope we stay," she murmurs. "I'm tired of running."

The simple truth of it pierces me. She's seven years old. She should be worried about school projects and making friends, not whether we'll have to flee in the middle of the night again.

"Me too," I whisper.

## Chapter 3

### Grace

I wake with a jolt, heart pounding against my ribs. The room is too quiet, lacking the

hum of vending machines and the distant rumble of highway traffic I've grown accustomed to. For a disorienting moment, I don't know where I am—only that the space beside me is empty.

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Willow.

I bolt upright, scanning the unfamiliar room. Sunlight filters through curtains I don't recognize, illuminating a patchwork quilt and wooden furniture that isn't cheap motel standard. The memories rush back—the gala, Eli Greystone, his cabin in the woods.

And Willow is gone.

I'm out of bed in seconds, not bothering with shoes as I rush from the room. My heart hammers in my throat as I follow the sound of voices, skidding to a stop at the entrance to a small, rustic kitchen.

The scene before me is so startlingly domestic it stops me in my tracks.

Willow sits at a wooden table, her legs swinging freely, a plate of pancakes in front of her. She's laughing—actually laughing—as Eli flips another pancake with a dramatic flourish. He's barefoot, wearing a faded t-shirt and flannel pajama bottoms, looking nothing like the imposing figure from last night's gala.

My breath catches as I take him in—broad shoulders stretching the worn cotton of his shirt, strong forearms exposed where he's pushed up his sleeves, hair still ruffled from sleep. There's something devastatingly attractive about him like this—relaxed, unguarded, a warm smile playing at the corners of his mouth. The morning light filtering through the windows catches on the stubble along his jaw, highlighting the sharp angles of his face in a way that makes my stomach flip unexpectedly.

"Higher!" Willow demands, and he obliges, sending the pancake spinning through the



air before catching it neatly on the spatula.

"Morning," Eli says when he spots me, his voice casual, as if finding me wild-eyed and panicked in his kitchen is perfectly normal. "Coffee's fresh."

Willow turns, her face lit with a smile I haven't seen in months. "Grace! Mr. Eli is making pancakes shaped like animals! Mine was a wolf!"

I stare at the half-eaten pancake on her plate. It does, vaguely, resemble a wolf.

"I—" My voice catches. I'm still trying to process the scene, to reconcile the knot of fear in my chest with the utter normalcy before me. "You should have woken me up."

Eli slides the newest pancake onto a waiting plate. "She only got up about twenty minutes ago. Seemed like you could use the sleep."

There's no judgment in his tone, but heat rises to my cheeks anyway. I'm not used to sleeping deeply enough that someone can remove a child from my side without waking me. It feels like a failure, a dangerous lapse in vigilance.

"I was careful not to wake you," Willow says, as if reading my thoughts. "You looked so peaceful."

I force my breathing to slow, crossing my arms over my chest. I'm suddenly very aware that I'm wearing the same clothes from yesterday, rumpled from sleep.

"Hungry?" Eli asks, nodding toward the stove. "There's plenty."

My stomach growls traitorously, and Willow giggles. "Grace's tummy says yes!"

A reluctant smile tugs at my lips. "I guess that's my answer."

Eli gestures to the empty chair beside Willow. "Sit. I'll bring it over."

I hesitate, then comply, sliding into the chair. The kitchen is small but cozy, with worn wooden countertops and mismatched mugs hanging from hooks. It feels lived-in, personal in a way that makes my chest ache with something I can't name.

Eli sets a plate in front of me—two pancakes vaguely resembling rabbits—followed by a steaming mug of coffee.

"Cream and sugar are on the table," he says, turning back to the stove.

I stare at the mug, then at the pancakes. It's been so long since someone cooked for me that I'm not sure how to respond. "Thank you," I manage, the words stiff and formal.

Willow kicks her feet happily, completely at ease. "Mr. Eli says we can stay as long as we need to," she informs me, syrup dripping down her chin.

I tense, darting a glance at Eli's back. "We'll figure something out today," I say firmly. "We won't impose on Mr. Greystone any longer than necessary."

Eli turns, leaning against the counter with his own mug of coffee. "It's not an imposition," he says simply. "And it's just Eli."

I take a bite of pancake to avoid responding, surprised by how good it tastes. Willow chatters away, telling me about the different animal shapes Eli has made, seemingly oblivious to the tension in my shoulders.

"Do you need to shower?" Eli asks after a moment. "Bathroom's down the hall. Clean towels in the cabinet under the sink."

The offer of a hot shower—a real shower, not the lukewarm trickle of budget motels—is almost too tempting to resist. But accepting feels like sinking deeper into the quicksand of his hospitality.

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"I need to find a job today," I say instead. "And a place for us to stay."

Eli doesn't look surprised, just thoughtful. "I might be able to help with the job part. A friend of mine runs a security company. They could use someone to handle the administrative side."

I narrow my eyes. "I don't need charity."

"It's not charity." His voice is calm, but there's a firmness underneath that wasn't there before. "Theo's expanding his operation. He needs someone organized who can manage the office while he's in the field. It's a real job with real pay."

"I don't have references," I admit grudgingly. "We've been moving around too much."

Eli shrugs. "Theo's a wolf. He can tell if you're lying about your skills." A hint of a smile touches his lips. "Besides, my recommendation goes a long way."

I want to argue, to insist I can find something on my own, but the reality of our situation weighs on me. We have no money, no connections, and Willow needs stability. Pride is a luxury I can't afford.

"Fine," I say finally. "I'll talk to him."

Willow beams, syrup smeared across her chin. "Does that mean we get to stay?"

I reach over with a napkin, wiping her face. "It means we're going to try to make things work here. For a while."

The smile she gives me is worth every ounce of pride I'm swallowing.

"I should get cleaned up," I say, pushing away from the table. "If I'm going to meet your friend."

Eli nods. "Take your time. I'll call Theo and see when he's available."

I hesitate, then ask, "Where are the towels again?"

"In the bathroom. And—" He pauses, looking slightly uncomfortable for the first time. "I left a new toothbrush on the counter for you. Still in the package."

The simple gesture—a toothbrush—hits me with unexpected force. It's such a small thing, but it speaks of forethought, of preparation. Of expecting us to stay, at least for a little while.

"Thank you," I say quietly, and retreat before he can see the confusion on my face.

The bathroom is clean and modest, with worn but good-quality fixtures. I turn on the shower, letting the steam fill the small space as I undress. My reflection in the mirror looks tired, wary—the face of someone who's been running too long.

The hot water is glorious, washing away the tension of the past twenty-four hours. I stand under the spray longer than necessary, savoring the simple luxury. When I finally step out, I feel more human than I have in weeks.

The toothbrush sits on the counter, still in its packaging—blue, brand new. I unwrap it slowly, the plastic crinkling in my hands. Such a small thing, and yet it feels monumental. A toothbrush means staying, at least for a night or two. It means Eli expected us, prepared for us.

I don't know how to feel about that.

After breakfast, Eli suggests we take a drive to see the Sanctuary site. I hesitate, but Willow's already bouncing in her seat at the idea of going somewhere new.

"Please, Grace?" she begs, her eyes wide and hopeful. "I want to see where the wolves live!"

I sigh, outnumbered. "Alright. But just for a little while."

Eli's truck is clean but clearly well-used, with a comfortable lived-in feel. Willow climbs into the back seat, buckling herself in with practiced ease. I slide into the passenger seat, hyper-aware of Eli's presence beside me.

The drive is quiet but not uncomfortable. Willow peppers Eli with questions about wolves and shifters, and he answers each one patiently, his deep voice filling the cab of the truck. I watch the scenery pass by—dense forest giving way to clearings, then back to forest again. Whispering Pines is beautiful, I have to admit. Peaceful in a way that soothes something raw inside me.

We turn onto a dirt road that winds through the trees, eventually opening into a large clearing. Construction equipment sits idle near stacks of lumber and other building materials. The foundation of what looks like a large building has been laid at the center.

"This is it," Eli says, parking the truck. "The future home of the Whispering Pines Sanctuary."

Willow unbuckles her seatbelt the moment the engine stops, eager to explore. I follow more cautiously, taking in the expansive property.

"It's... big," I say lamely, unsure how else to describe it.

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Eli smiles, a genuine expression that transforms his face. "That's the idea. Room for everyone who needs a safe place."

We walk the perimeter slowly, Willow running ahead, kicking at pine needles and chasing butterflies. Eli points out where different structures will be built—cabins for families, a schoolhouse, a clinic, communal gardens, gathering spaces.

"The main lodge will be there," he says, indicating the foundation we passed. "Administrative offices, community kitchen, meeting rooms. The heart of the place."

I listen, watching as he gestures, his face animated in a way I haven't seen before. This isn't just a project for him—it's a purpose. A mission.

"How long will it take?" I ask.

"To finish everything? A couple of years, probably. But we'll have the first phase up and running within six months, if all goes well."

Willow runs back to us, her cheeks flushed with excitement. She holds out a pinecone, offering it to Eli like a treasure. "Look what I found!"

To my surprise, Eli kneels down to her level, accepting the pinecone with exaggerated reverence. "This is a perfect one," he says seriously. "Where did you find it?"

Willow points proudly to a cluster of pine trees. "Over there! There are lots more, but this one's the biggest."



"It's excellent," Eli agrees. "Should we keep it as the official First Pinecone of the Sanctuary?"

Willow giggles, delighted by the idea. "Yes! We can put it in a special place when the buildings are done."

"Deal." Eli tucks the pinecone carefully into his jacket pocket, then rises to his feet.

Something in my chest aches at the exchange—the casual kindness, the way he treats her words with genuine consideration. Willow beams up at him before running off again, chasing a leaf caught in the breeze.

"She's a great kid," Eli says quietly, watching her go.

"She is," I agree, swallowing past the lump in my throat. "She deserves better than what I've been able to give her."

Eli's gaze shifts to me, his expression unreadable. "You've kept her safe. That's no small thing."

I shake my head. "Safe, but always running. Always afraid." I gesture to the clearing around us. "I'd like her to have this—*areal* home, someday. Somewhere she doesn't have to look over her shoulder."

"That's what the Sanctuary is meant to be," Eli says. "Not just a safe place for supernaturals, but for anyone who's been hurt, hunted, or lost." His voice softens. "Everyone deserves somewhere they can exhale."

The conviction in his voice catches me off guard. "I'd like to live here," I admit quietly. "When it's finished."

Eli doesn't smile, but there's a warmth in his voice when he says, "I'd like that too."

We watch Willow in silence for a moment, her laughter carrying across the clearing as she skips through the tall grass.

"The offer stands," Eli says finally. "You can stay at my place as long as you need. No pressure. No timeline."

I should refuse. I should insist we find our own place, maintain our independence. But watching Willow, seeing her truly happy for the first time in months, weakens my resolve.

My instincts have kept us safe these past two years. I've learned to trust that quiet voice inside me—the one that whispers when danger is near, when it's time to run. And right now, that same voice is telling me something entirely different. It's telling me that Eli is safe. That this place could be safe.

I'm so tired. Tired of running, tired of looking over my shoulder, tired of teaching Willow to fear the world instead of embrace it. The Sanctuary might be just a dream right now, stakes in the ground and blueprints on paper, but it represents everything I've wanted since the night we fled—a place where Willow can grow up without fear, where she can learn about her shifter heritage without hiding who she is.

"Okay," I say, the word barely audible. "But just until I get a job and find a place of our own."

Eli nods, accepting my terms without argument.

On the drive back, he swings through a local fast-food drive-thru without warning. "Anyone hungry?"

"Yes!" Willow exclaims from the back seat.

"We just had breakfast," I protest.

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Eli shrugs. "Growing kids need fuel. And their guardians need fries."

Before I can argue further, he's ordering—fries, milkshakes, chicken nuggets for Willow. I try to reach for my wallet, but he waves me off.

"It's not a big deal," he says, passing the bag to me after paying.

The warm weight of it in my lap feels like a luxury I don't deserve. Willow happily munches on nuggets in the back seat, and Eli sips his milkshake as he drives, looking completely at ease.

I take a fry, savoring the salt and grease. It's been so long since I've had fast food—a frivolous expense when every dollar counts. The simple pleasure of it makes my throat tight.

"Thank you," I say, the words inadequate.

Eli glances at me, then back at the road. "You're welcome."

Three simple words, but they settle something in me—a quiet acknowledgment that maybe, just maybe, it's okay to accept help sometimes.

That night, after Willow is tucked into bed in the guest room, I find myself lingering in Eli's kitchen. He made tea without asking if I wanted any, simply setting a steaming mug in front of me before turning to wash the dinner dishes.

I wrap my hands around the mug, savoring the warmth. The silence between us is

comfortable, not awkward—the kind that exists between people who don't need to fill the space with words.

Eli stands at the sink, rinsing plates, his sleeves pushed up to his forearms. He moves with an easy confidence, completely at home in his own space. The muscles in his arms flex as he works, and I find my gaze drawn to the strong line of his shoulders, the casual grace of his movements.

He looks... good. Too good.

I catch myself staring and quickly look away, but not before a flush of heat rises to my cheeks. It's been so long since I've let myself notice a man this way—since I've felt anything beyond wariness or distrust.

But there's something about Eli that draws my eye, that makes my pulse quicken despite my best efforts to remain detached.

He turns, catching me mid-thought, and I drop my gaze to my tea. If he notices my discomfort, he doesn't comment on it. Instead, he simply holds out a clean dish towel.

"You don't have to help," he says. "But I won't stop you."

I manage a tight smile, taking the towel from him. Our fingers brush for the briefest moment, and I ignore the spark of awareness that shoots through me.

We work in silence, him washing, me drying. It's a simple domestic routine, but it feels foreign to me—this quietpartnership, this shared task. I can't remember the last time I stood beside someone like this, comfortable enough to simply exist in the same space.

It terrifies me how easily I could get used to this.

As I place the last dried plate in the cabinet, I realize what scares me most isn't the possibility of being hurt again. It's the possibility of hoping again—of believing that maybe, just maybe, we could have something like this. A home. Safety. Someone to stand beside me at the end of the day.

"Thank you," I say abruptly, hanging the towel on its hook. "For everything today."

Eli leans against the counter, studying me with those perceptive eyes. "You're welcome."

I should go to bed. I should walk away before I do something foolish, like tell him how his kindness makes my chest ache, or how scared I am of wanting more than I should.

Instead, I linger, caught in his gaze, aware of every breath between us.

"Goodnight, Grace," he says finally, his voice low.

"Goodnight," I whisper, and force myself to walk away before I can change my mind.

## Chapter 4

### Grace

The car rumbles to a stop outside Theo Waverly's building—a sleek structure with large windows and subtle security features that only someone looking for them would notice. The modern façade blends seamlessly with the town's aesthetic, but I can see the reinforced glass, the discreet cameras, and the state-of-the-art keypad beside the main entrance.

"You sure about this?" Eli asks, his eyes meeting mine in the rearview mirror.

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I straighten my blouse—the cleanest one I own, though it's seen better days—and nod. "I need a job. They need someone organized who can keep their mouth shut about supernatural business. Seems like a match."

"Theo can be... intense," Eli warns, turning in his seat to face me. The morning light catches in his hazel eyes, turning them almost golden. "Don't let him intimidate you. Under all that Alpha posturing, he's fair."

"I've dealt with worse than reserved werewolves," I say, more confidently than I feel. In truth, the prospect of working for an Alpha makes my stomach knot—not from fear, exactly, but from the uncertainty of entering another power dynamic I can't control.

From the backseat, Willow pipes up. "Will I get to see the werewolves shift? Like you showed me yesterday, Eli?"

I shoot Eli a look, and he has the grace to appear slightly sheepish. "You shifted for her?"

"Just my hand," he explains, flexing his fingers as if to demonstrate. "She was curious about the difference between her partial shifts and an adult's controlled transformation."

I want to be annoyed, but I can't. Willow needs someone who understands the shifter side of her—a side I can support but never truly comprehend. Still, the casual way Eli has stepped into this role makes my chest tighten with an emotion I'm not ready to name.

"We'll stay right here," Eli promises as I reach for the door handle. "Take your time."

"Can we get popcorn?" Willow asks, pointing to a vendor across the street.

"If your sister says it's okay," Eli replies, looking to me for permission.

I hesitate. Old habits die hard—I don't like being separated from Willow, even for a short time. But we're in the middle of town, in broad daylight, with a wolf-shifter who could track her by scent alone. "Just don't go far," I finally concede.

Willow's face lights up, and Eli gives me a reassuring nod. "We won't go anywhere else. Promise."

Taking a deep breath, I step out of the car and approach the building. When I enter the code Eli provided, the door clicks open with a soft electronic sound. Inside, the lobby is surprisingly warm—both in temperature and atmosphere. The walls are a deep blue, adorned with photographs of forests and mountains. The reception desk is polished wood, and behind it sits a young woman with a welcoming smile.

The receptionist glances up. "You must be Grace. Theo's expecting you. Down the hall, second door on the right."

I nod my thanks and follow her directions, my footsteps silent on the carpeted floor. I walk to Theo's office and knock firmly on the door.

"Come in," a deep voice commands.

Theo Waverly rises slightly as I enter—not fully standing, but acknowledging my presence with the subtle courtesy of a leader who doesn't need to prove his dominance. He's tall, with broad shoulders and the kind of presence that fills a room without effort. His office is surprisingly comfortable—a large desk of the same



polished wood as the reception area, bookshelves lining one wall, and large windows overlooking the town square.

"Grace Connelly," he says, gesturing to the chair across from his desk. Not a question but a statement. "Eli speaks highly of you."

"That's generous of him," I reply, taking the seat. I refuse to fidget under Theo's assessing gaze, meeting his eyes steadily instead.

"He says you need a job," Theo continues, leaning back slightly.

"I do," I confirm. "And from what I understand, you need someone to help with administrative work for your security team."

His eyebrow raises slightly. "And what makes you qualified for that position?"

"I've spent the last seven years keeping my sister and myself alive, moving constantly, managing resources, anticipating threats, and staying three steps ahead of people who wanted to find us." I lean forward slightly, my voice even. "I'm organized, I work well under pressure, and I know how to keep secrets. I'm also very good at spotting patterns—useful when you're filing reports about potential threats."

"You're human," he points out, though there's more curiosity than accusation in his tone.

"Yes," I acknowledge. "But my sister isn't. And I've been living in the supernatural world long enough to understand the stakes."

Theo studies me, his expression thoughtful rather than dismissive. "Why Whispering Pines? Why now?"

It's the question I've been expecting. For once, I decide on honesty instead of evasion.

"We came for the Sanctuary," I say simply. "Willow needs to learn about her shifter side in a safe environment. She deserves stability, a community that understands her." I take a breath, finding it easier to speak about Willow's needs than my own. "Everyone says this is becoming the safest place for supernatural beings. After years of running... we need that."

"We've neutralized the most dangerous hunters in the area," Theo says. "But that doesn't mean we can relax our guard."

I hesitate, not wanting to oversell myself. "I don't have security experience, but I'm organized and detail-oriented. I've spent years keeping Willow safe, staying vigilant. I can learn whatever systems you need me to manage."

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Something shifts in his expression—a flicker of respect, perhaps. He leans forward, resting his elbows on the desk.

"The job isn't glamorous," he warns. "You'd be coordinating patrol schedules, updating our tracking systems, managing supply deliveries for the Sanctuary construction. Sometimes long hours."

"I can handle it," I assure him. "As long as I can arrange my schedule around Willow's needs."

He considers this, then nods once. "Two-week trial period. You start tomorrow, 9 AM sharp. I'll have someone show you the systems." He pauses, then adds, "I understand your situation is... complicated. If you need flexibility for your sister, we can work something out."

The unexpected accommodation catches me off guard. "Thank you," I manage, trying not to show my surprise. "I won't let you down."

"See that you don't," he says, but there's less edge to his voice than I expected. "Eli vouched for you. That carries weight here."

I'm not sure how to respond to that, so I simply nod and stand. As I turn to leave, Theo adds, "And Grace? Watch yourself in town. Not everyone is as accepting of humans as Blackwell's people. Old prejudices die hard."

The warning sends a familiar chill down my spine, but I manage a tight smile. "I'm used to watching my back."

"I don't doubt it," he replies, and for a moment, I think I see something like sympathy in his eyes. "But here, you don't have to do it alone."

When I step outside, the bright midday sun momentarily blinds me. I pause on the steps, letting the warmth seep into my skin, feeling the tension in my shoulders ease just slightly. For a moment—just a moment—I allow myself to breathe without scanning for threats.

Then reality reasserts itself, and I scan the street, looking for Willow. My heart stutters for a second before I spot them—Eli and Willow sitting on a bench across the street, sharing a bag of popcorn. Willow is gesturing wildly, clearly in the middle of a story, and Eli is watching her with complete attention, nodding and smiling at all the right moments.

"And then the squirrel did a flip!" Willow exclaims as I approach. "Like a tiny acrobat!"

"That's impressive," Eli says seriously. "Squirrels are natural athletes, but flips? That's advanced stuff."

Willow giggles, then spots me. "Grace! Did you get the job? Can we stay?" The hope in her voice is almost painful to hear.

Eli looks up, his eyes finding mine. That lopsided grin of his appears, warm and somehow just for me. "Well? Verdict?"

I can't help but smile back—a real smile, not the tight, guarded one I've perfected over years of keeping people at a distance. "I start tomorrow. Two-week trial period."

"I knew you'd get it," Eli says, and there's something in his voice—quiet approval, like he never doubted me for a second—that makes my stomach flutter. It's been a

long time since anyone believed in me that way.

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The forest thickens around us as Eli's truck navigates deeper into Whispering Pines territory. Tall evergreens crowd the narrow dirt road, their branches creating a canopy.

"Where are we going again?" I ask.

Eli's mouth quirks up at one corner. "The Whispering Pines pack community center. Some of the women run a sort of daycare there for pack kids and other supernatural children. I thought it might be good for Willow to meet some other kids her age." He glances at me. "And for you to meet some of the pack women."

"I don't need a playdate," I mutter.

He laughs, the sound rich and warm. "Trust me, these aren't the playdate type. They're more the 'could probably take down a hunter with one hand while holding a baby in the other' type."

Despite myself, I smile. "That, I can work with."

The truck rounds a bend, and suddenly the trees part to reveal a sun-dappled clearing. In the center stands a large timber building, its wide windows reflecting the afternoon light. A wraparound porch skirts the structure, dotted with rocking chairs and hanging plants. Behind it, I can make out what looks like a playground, the sound of children's laughter carrying on the breeze.

"It's beautiful," I whisper, not meaning to say it aloud.

"The pack built it together," Eli says, pride evident in his voice as he parks the truck. "Ryan and Jenna wanted a place where supernatural kids could be themselves without hiding."

In the backseat, Willow presses her face against the window, eyes wide with wonder. "Are there other shifters like me?"

"Lots," Eli assures her.

As we approach the building, I feel Willow's small hand slip into mine, squeezing tight. I look down to find her watching the door with a mixture of excitement and apprehension. I know exactly how she feels.

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The door swings open before we reach it, and a woman with warm brown hair and kind eyes steps onto the porch. She's human—I can tell by the way she moves, by the lack of that predatory grace all shifters seem to possess. But there's a quiet strength in her stance, a confidence that speaks of someone who's found her place in a world not quite her own.

"You must be Grace and Willow," she says, her smile genuine as she descends the steps. "I'm Jenna Cooper. Welcome to Whispering Pines."

She crouches down to Willow's level, her voice softening. "I hear you're a very special girl. We have a few other shifter children inside who would love to meet you."

Willow's grip on my hand tightens for a moment, then slowly relaxes. "I haven't shifted yet," she admits in a small voice. "I don't know how."

Jenna's expression is so understanding it makes my chest ache. "That's perfectly normal at your age. Some children shift early, some later. That's why we're here—to learn together." She glances up at me. "We have experienced pack members who can help guide her when the time comes."

I nod, grateful she addressed my unspoken concern.

"Eli!" A tall woman with dark hair bounds down the steps, pulling him into a quick hug. "About time you brought them by."

"Hannah," he says with obvious affection. "Grace, this is Hannah Thorne, Ryan's

sister and the pack's resident troublemaker."

Hannah rolls her eyes but grins. "Ignore him. I'm the fun one." She winks at Willow. "Want to see where we keep the good snacks?"

Willow looks up at me, seeking permission. I hesitate, old instincts screaming at me not to let her out of my sight, but Eli's steady presence beside me and the open warmth of these women helps me push past it.

"Go ahead," I tell her. "I'll be right here."

With a delighted smile, Willow follows Hannah inside, already chattering away about her favorite cookies.

"She'll be fine," Jenna assures me, nodding for us to follow. "The kids are in the back playroom with a few of our pack members. You can peek in if you want, but first, let me introduce you to everyone."

Inside, the community center is even more beautiful than its exterior promised. Sunlight streams through the windows, illuminating a spacious room with comfortable furniture and walls decorated with colorful murals of forest scenes. A long wooden table dominates one end, surrounded by mismatched chairs that somehow look perfectly at home together.

Several women look up as we enter, their conversations pausing. I brace myself for the questions, the suspicion, the careful distance I've grown accustomed to when meeting new people. Instead, a woman with silver-streaked black hair hands me a steaming mug of tea and guides me to the table.

"Sit," she says. "You look like you could use this."



Before I know it, I'm seated between Jenna and a younger woman who introduces herself as Lily, listening as they talk about everything from the upcoming community potluck to the latest antics of the pack's youngest members. No one asks why I'm here or how long I'm staying. No one treats me like I'm temporary.

Through a doorway, I can see Willow in the playroom, already engaged in what appears to be an elaborate game involving stuffed animals and a makeshift fort. She's laughing, her face more relaxed than I've seen it in months.

"She could start school here when she's ready," Jenna says, following my gaze. "I teach at the elementary school. We have both human and shifter children there, so we balance regular subjects with helping the little ones learn control."

"That would be..." I trail off, not sure how to express what it would mean for Willow to have a place where she doesn't have to hide who she is.

"It's a lot to take in," Jenna says, understanding in her eyes. "When I first came to Whispering Pines, I had no idea what I was getting into. Being human in a shifter world isn't always easy, but it's worth it."

I study her, this woman who chose this life. "How did you know? That you could trust them?"

She considers the question, her fingers tracing the rim of her mug. "I didn't, not at first. But Ryan showed me, day after day, that I could. And then one day, I realized I already did." She smiles. "Sometimes trust isn't a decision you make. It's just something that happens while you're busy trying to keep your walls up."

The door opens, and Eli walks in with a tall, imposing man who can only be Ryan Thorne. They've clearly been discussing something serious, but Ryan's stern expression softens when he spots Jenna.

"Ladies," Ryan nods to the group, his eyes lingering on his mate with unmistakable affection before he turns to me. "Grace. Welcome to our home."

"Thank you for having us," I say, surprised by how much I mean it.

As Ryan moves to greet the others, Jenna leans closer to me with a conspiratorial smile. "I see the way Eli looks at you when you're not watching. He's been stealing glances at you all afternoon."

I follow her gaze to where Eli stands, his broad shoulders relaxed. The afternoon light catches in his tousled brown hair, highlighting the sharp angles of his jaw. As if sensing our attention, he turns our way, and the warmth in his eyes when they meet mine makes something flutter in my chest.

Heat rises in my cheeks. "We're not—he's just letting us stay with him until we figure things out."

Jenna's knowing look tells me she doesn't believe me for a second. "Mmhmm. That's how it starts."

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Before I can protest further, Eli approaches. "Ready to head back? I promised Willow we'd stop for ice cream on the way home."

Home. The word echoes in my mind, both tempting and terrifying.

As we gather Willow and say our goodbyes, I'm struck by how natural it all feels—the casual invitations to return, the genuine smiles, Willow's reluctance to leave her new friends. For a moment, I let myself imagine what it would be like to belong here, to have this be our life.

The thought is still with me as we walk back to the truck, Willow skipping ahead, chattering excitedly about all the things she learned.

"So..." Eli says once we're out of earshot of the others. "Stealing glances, huh?"

I groan and give his arm a playful shove. "You heard that?"

"Wolf hearing," he reminds me, tapping his ear with a grin. "Hard to miss."

"She was just teasing," I say, but the laughter in my voice betrays me.

"Mmhmm." His eyes meet mine, amusement dancing in their depths, but there's something else there too—a warmth, an invitation, a promise.

For the first time in years, I don't immediately look away. Instead, I let myself feel the connection between us, this fragile thing taking root despite my best efforts to stay detached.

Later that night, after Willow is asleep and the cabin is quiet, I stand in my bedroom staring at the duffel bag I still haven't fully unpacked. My clothes remain mostly folded inside, ready to grab at a moment's notice. Ready to run.

The memories come unbidden, as they always do when I let my guard down. Two years ago. Coming home from my shift at the diner to find the front door of our little rental house splintered open. The metallic scent of blood hitting me before I even stepped inside. Our father sprawled across the living room floor, his eyes vacant, his chest torn open. Willow's mother in the kitchen, her body crumpled beside the back door like she'd tried to run.

I remember the silence most of all. The terrible, suffocating silence that made me think I was too late, that they'd taken Willow too.

Until I heard it—the softest whimper coming from the kitchen cupboard. I yanked it open to find her curled into a ball, her five-year-old body trembling, tears streaking her dirt-smudged face.

"Don't let the bad men get me," she'd whispered.

We were gone within the hour. Everything we could carry stuffed into two bags, my college fund emptied from the bank, and Willow clutching her stuffed rabbit as we hopped in my janky car and headed anywhere but there. She told me what little she'd seen through the slats in the cupboard door—men with guns and knives, talking about "the half-breed child" and "cleaning up the bloodlines."

Hunters. Looking for Willow.

I never saw their faces. I don't know their names. I have no idea if they're still looking for us or if they gave up months ago. But I couldn't take that chance. Not with Willow's life.

So we kept moving. New town, new names, new story every few months. Never staying long enough to be found. Never staying long enough to belong.

I reach for a stack of shirts, then hesitate, my hand hovering over the bag. The job with Theo starts Monday. Willow has made friends. Eli's cabin feels more like home than anywhere we've stayed in years.

But unpacking means staying. Unpacking means believing we're safe. Unpacking means trusting.

After a long moment, I close the bag and slide it back under the bed. Not yet. But maybe soon.

## Chapter 5

Eli

I can't sit still.

My wolf paces beneath my skin, restless in a way that has nothing to do with danger and everything to do with the woman and her little half-shifter sister who've turned my quiet cabin into something that finally feels like a home. My wolf knows what my human side is still processing—Grace is our mate. The certainty of it hums in my blood, a truth as undeniable as the moon's pull. But Grace isn't ready to hear that. Hell, I'm barely ready to admit it to myself.

Grace is at her first day working for Theo's security company, and Willow is spending the afternoon with Jenna and the other women of Whispering Pines. For the first time in days, I have the place to myself.

And I hate it.

The silence that used to comfort me now feels hollow. There's no little girl asking endless questions about shifters, no quiet footsteps of Grace moving through the kitchen, no scent of coffee brewing or crayons on paper.

"This is pathetic," I mutter to myself, grabbing my keys. "They've been here less than a week."

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But my wolf doesn't care about timeframes. It recognizes what's happening even if I'm reluctant to name it. These two—the fierce, guarded woman and her bright-eyed little sister—they belong here. With me. And every part of me wants them to stay.

I drive into town with purpose, parking outside the small shopping center that serves Whispering Pines. Inside, I move with uncharacteristic focus, filling a cart with items I've mentally cataloged over the past few days. A proper dresser for Grace, since she's still living out of a duffel bag.

A small bookshelf for Willow's growing collection of library books.

A nightlight shaped like a crescent moon.

Pantry staples I've noticed Grace reaching for—cinnamon for her coffee, a specific brand of pasta, the honey she stirs into Willow's tea when the little girl can't sleep.

I pause in front of a display of throw blankets, running my fingers over a soft lavender one. Grace wraps herself in the threadbare one from the couch every night, curling into the corner with a book. This one is plush, comforting. I add it to the cart.

At the craft store, I find a watercolor paint set that makes me think of Willow's wide-eyed fascination with colors. At the nursery next door, a small potted plant with delicate green leaves catches my eye. Something alive. Something rooted.

Every choice is deliberate. Every item is a quiet invitation: stay.

I pick up Grace's coffee mug from the counter where she left it this morning, my

thumb brushing over the lipstick mark on the rim. The faint scent of her lingers on it—vanilla and something uniquely hers. Something that makes my chest tighten with a longing I haven't felt in years. Maybe ever.

I set the mug down, suddenly aware of how much I'm crossing my own carefully drawn lines. I've never been the type to get attached. To want someone to stay. But with Grace and Willow, everything is different.

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By the time I hear Grace's car in the driveway, I've arranged everything with careful casualness. The dresser is assembled in her room, the bookshelf in Willow's. The other items are still in their bags, waiting on the kitchen counter.

The front door opens, and Willow bursts in first, her face flushed with excitement.

"Eli! Miss Jenna taught me how to make friendship bracelets, and I made one for you!" She bounds over, thrusting a woven band of blue and green threads toward me. "It matches your eyes!"

I kneel down, accepting the gift with exaggerated reverence. "This is the best present I've ever gotten," I tell her, and I'm not even lying. I slip it onto my wrist, and her face lights up.

Grace follows more slowly, setting her bag on the counter. She looks tired but satisfied, her hair pulled back in a messy ponytail. There's a smudge of ink on her cheek that she hasn't noticed.

"How was work?" I ask, straightening.

"Good." She offers a small smile. "Theo's actually letting me reorganize their entire



filing system. It's a disaster."

"Sounds like you're having fun," I tease.

She rolls her eyes, but the smile lingers. "It's nice to be useful."

I start pulling ingredients from the fridge. "Hungry?"

"Starving," Willow announces, climbing onto a stool at the counter. "Can I help?"

"Absolutely." I hand her a colander of green beans. "Can you snap the ends off these?"

She nods solemnly, taking the task with complete seriousness.

Grace watches us for a moment, something unreadable in her expression, before she moves to wash her hands. "I'll help with the chicken."

We work together in easy rhythm, moving around each other in the small kitchen. Her arm brushes mine as she reaches for a knife, and I catch the slight hitch in her breath. We both pause for a fraction of a second before continuing as if nothing happened.

Willow chatters about her day, about the women who showed her how to braid hair and the cookies they baked. Grace interjects occasionally, asking questions, while I flip the chicken in the skillet.

"Miss Hannah said she could show me how to shift when I'm older," Willow says, eyes bright with excitement.

I notice Grace's hand tighten around her glass, her knuckles whitening. She sets it

down with a too-careful motion, her smile not quite reaching her eyes. "That's nice of her, baby. But we don't know when that will happen."

Willow's face falls slightly. "But I want to learn. Miss Hannah says I should be able to soon."

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"We'll see," Grace says, her voice tight. She glances at the window, a habit I've noticed—always checking, always watching. For a moment, her guard is fully up, the carefree atmosphere of our kitchen evaporating.

When we sit down to eat, I deliberately keep the conversation light, steering away from topics that might trigger Grace's anxiety. But Willow, with a child's innocent persistence, circles back.

"Does it hurt?" she asks, eyes wide. "Turning into a wolf?"

"The first few times, it can be uncomfortable," I admit. "But your body was made to do it. It's like—" I search for a comparison she'll understand. "Like stretching when you've been sitting too long. It might pull a little, but then it feels right."

Grace is quiet, pushing food around her plate. I can tell she's worried about Willow's inevitable first shift. Most shifter children start showing signs around seven or eight—exactly Willow's age.

"What does it feel like?" Willow persists. "Inside your head, I mean. Are you still you?"

I consider this, aware of Grace's stillness. "You're always you," I say carefully. "Your wolf isn't separate—it's part of who you are. The instincts might feel stronger, but they're yours."

Grace's fork clinks against her plate as she sets it down. "I think that's enough shifter talk for dinner," she says, her voice gentle but firm.

I catch her eye, offering a small nod of understanding. She relaxes marginally, and the meal continues.

After dinner, while Grace helps Willow wash up, I clear my throat. "Got a couple things while you were out."

I bring out the items: the slippers, the blanket, the paint set. Willow squeals in delight, immediately tearing into the art supplies.

"Look, Grace! Watercolors! Can I paint right now? Please?"

I watch Grace's face, seeing the moment her expression shifts. She goes very still, her hands freezing mid-motion as she dries a plate. Something flickers in her eyes—not anger, but a complicated mixture of gratitude and fear.

"These are beautiful," she says softly, fingers trailing over the soft blanket. Then her shoulders tense almost imperceptibly. She swallows, and when she speaks again, her voice is careful. "But you didn't have to do this. We don't—we can't accept so much."

I sense the real message beneath her words. This isn't about the gifts themselves—it's about what they represent. Permanence. Belonging. Things she's afraid to claim.

"It's not charity," I say gently. "It's just... I noticed what you both needed. That's all."

Her eyes meet mine, vulnerable in a way I haven't seen before. "Eli..."

"And they're yours," I continue, keeping my voice casual. "Because you're here now."

Something in her expression shutters. The walls come up so quickly I can almost hear them slam into place. "We're not—" she begins, then stops, glancing at Willow. When she continues, her voice is barely above a whisper. "We're not staying. Not

permanently."

The words lack conviction, as if she's trying to remind herself more than inform me.

I set the blanket down carefully. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

"It's just..." Grace crosses her arms, a defensive gesture I recognize all too well. "These things—they're so... permanent. Like we belong here."

"Don't we belong here?" Willow asks, looking up from the paintbrushes with confusion in her eyes. "I thought we were going to live in Whispering Pines now."

Grace kneels beside her sister. "We are staying in Whispering Pines, sweetie. But this is Eli's home. We can't impose forever."

"But I like it here," Willow insists, her lower lip trembling slightly. "With Eli."

I clear my throat. "You're not imposing. You know that, right? This place has never felt more like a home than it does with you two in it."

Grace shakes her head, not meeting my eyes. "That's kind of you, but we need our own place eventually. Our own life."

"Our own life can include Eli," Willow says with a child's simple logic. Her voice rises with emotion. "Why do we always have to leave the people we like?"

Willow freezes, her small shoulders rising as she senses the tension crackling between us. Her fingers tighten around the paintbrush. "I like it here," she whispers again, not looking up.

Grace's mouth opens—maybe to say something, maybe to apologize—but Willow

lets out a small, choked gasp. Her little body trembles. Her eyes flash amber in the kitchen light.

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"Willow?" I keep my voice calm, steady, even as adrenaline surges through me.

Grace turns, and I see the moment she understands what's happening. "Willow? Baby?"

Bones shift beneath skin, and fur ripples along Willow's arms and cheeks. It's too fast, too sudden—triggered not by danger, but by emotion. The first shift is always unpredictable, but it's rare for it to happen so abruptly.

Grace panics. "No, baby, not yet. Not now." But Willow is already halfway changed, caught between girl and wolf, whimpering in confusion and fear.

I step in calmly, gently easing Grace back. "It's okay. It's normal. She's just shifting for the first time."

"But she's too young—she's not ready—" Grace is near tears, her hands trembling as she reaches for her sister.

I place myself between them, not to separate but to guide. "Grace, listen to me. She needs to complete the shift. Trying to stop it will only hurt her."

I kneel beside Willow, speaking softly. "You're safe, pup. You're strong. Let it happen. Breathe with me."

Willow's eyes, wide with fear but trusting, lock onto mine. I breathe deeply, exaggeratedly, and she tries to mimic me through her whimpers.

"That's it. Let your body do what it knows how to do."

After a few agonizing minutes, Willow shifts fully into a small, silvery wolf pup with big, frightened eyes. She whines and pads to me, and I pick her up gently, cradling her against my chest.

Grace is stunned, frozen in place, her face pale. I hold Willow close and say, "She did good. This is something to celebrate, not fear."

Grace takes a deep breath, then another. Her expression transforms from shock to wonder as she truly sees her sister in wolf form for the first time.

"Oh my god," she whispers, stepping closer. "She's beautiful."

Grace reaches out with trembling fingers, gently stroking Willow's silvery fur. The little wolf pup's tail gives a tentative wag, and Grace's face breaks into a smile of pure amazement.

"Look at you," she murmurs, scratching behind Willow's ears. "You're the most beautiful wolf I've ever seen." She meets my eyes over Willow's head, her own shining with tears and pride. "I'm so proud of you, Willow. So, so proud."

Slowly, Willow's body begins to shift back, the process smoother than the first transformation. When she's fully human again, she's naked and exhausted, her small body trembling with the effort. I wrap her in the lavender blanket I bought, tucking it around her while Grace kneels beside us, holding her sister's hand.

"I turned into a wolf," Willow whispers, awed and exhausted. "Did you see me, Grace? I was a wolf."

Grace nods, tears in her eyes. "I saw you, baby. You were beautiful."



"I'm tired," Willow murmurs, her eyelids drooping.

"That's normal," I assure them both. "The first shift takes a lot of energy. She needs rest."

Grace picks Willow up, blanket and all, and carries her toward the stairs. "I'll tuck her in," she says, her voice steady despite the storm I can see in her eyes.

I nod, giving them space. "I'll be here."

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When Grace comes back downstairs twenty minutes later, I'm sitting on the couch, the potted plant on the table beside me. I look up, sensing her approach, the turmoil of emotions she's barely containing.

She sits down beside me, hands wringing in her lap. "I'm sorry I snapped. About the gifts." She takes a shaky breath. "And... thank you. For everything tonight. With Willow."

I regard her softly. "You don't have to thank me. I want to be here. For both of you."

Her eyes well with tears. "I'm not used to this. People helping. Wanting things to stay the same." She stares at her hands. "It's good, but it scares me."

I take a chance. "What happened, Grace? What are you and Willow running from?"

She hesitates, then exhales slowly. "It was about a year ago. Hunters came for Willow's family—her mom and our dad. They were killed. Brutally." Her voice catches. "I saw enough to know we couldn't stay. They didn't know Willow had shifted yet, but I couldn't take the risk. I grabbed her and ran."

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She pauses, voice wavering. "We've been moving ever since. Cheap motels, odd jobs, always one eye over my shoulder. I thought maybe we lost them, but I never stopped waiting for them to find us again."

She swallows hard. "I'm human. I don't have claws, or instincts, or a pack. I've been doing my best, but sometimes it feels like it's not enough. Like I'm not enough. And when I heard about thisplace—about the Sanctuary—I didn't think. I just drove. I needed something solid. Somewhere safe. For her."

I listen without interrupting, my heart aching for what she's been through. For the weight she's carried alone for so long.

"You are enough," I tell her, the words rough with emotion. "You've kept her alive. Kept her safe. That's everything, Grace."

She starts to cry—quiet, silent tears that aren't about pain, but about release. I don't say anything more. I pull her into my arms, letting her bury her face against my chest. Her tears soak through my shirt, but I don't move. I hold her like she's something sacred. Like she's not broken, just tired.

I feel her breath warm against my chest, the gentle rise and fall of her body gradually syncing with mine. The scent of her hair—something floral and faint—fills my senses. My wolf stirs, protective and possessive in equal measure. Mine, it whispers. Ours to protect.

She pulls back slightly, looks up at me, eyes shimmering in the low light. I lean forward, slowly. Giving her time to speak up. To pull away.

She doesn't.

Our eyes meet, and for a moment, we share a breath—the air between us charged with something neither of us is ready to name. I brush a strand of hair from her face, my fingers lingering against her cheek.

Our lips meet—soft, searching, hesitant. But when she kisses me back, it's with a hunger that steals my breath. My hands come up to frame her face, thumbs brushing away the dampness on her cheeks. Her fingers clutch at my shirt, pulling me closer.

When we pull apart, Grace whispers, "What are we doing?"

I answer, voice low: "Whatever you're ready for."

She doesn't say anything else. She just leans into me, not kissing, but being held. And for now, that's enough. I wrap my arms around her, resting my chin on top of her head, and we sit together in the quiet.

The potted plant sits on the table, small but alive. Ready to grow roots, if given the chance.

## Chapter 6

Grace

The office phone rings for the third time in ten minutes, and I catch it before the second chime. "Whispering Pines Security, how can I help you?"

I listen to the caller, a young werewolf named Jamie who's having trouble with his patrol schedule. His voice is anxious, explaining that he's been double-booked for tonight—both on perimeter patrol and for a training session with newer recruits.

"Let me check the system," I say, pulling up the security company's schedule on the desktop computer. Four days into this job, and I'm already getting the hang of their scheduling software. "I see the conflict. Let me fix that for you."

I quickly reassign another available guard to the training session, making a note in the system. "You're all set, Jamie. You've got perimeter patrol tonight as originally planned, and we've moved someone else to handle the training."

His relief is palpable through the phone. "Thanks, Grace. You're a lifesaver."

I never thought I'd find comfort in answering phones and organizing files, but there's something satisfying about bringing order to chaos. Every report I file, every schedule I fix, every message I relay—it all helps keep the people who are building this sanctuary safe.

Theo emerges from his office, his broad frame filling the doorway. His expression is as stern as ever, but I've learned that's just his default. He nods toward my computer screen.

"Heard you fixed the scheduling conflict," he says, his voice gruff.

"Yes. I moved Liam to the training session since he's certified for that, and kept Jamie on patrol."

Theo studies me for a moment, then gives me a rare, approving nod. "Keep this up, and I might put you in charge of the office," he mutters, already turning to leave.

I try not to smile too obviously at what passes for high praise from the alpha. I'm still not entirely comfortable around him—his intensity is intimidating—but I appreciate that he judges me on my work, not my species. Being human in a supernatural security firm could have been awkward, but most of the shifters treat me with a

professional respect I wasn't expecting.

The front door swings open, and Jake Mercer strolls in, sandy hair windblown and a half-eaten protein bar in hand. The security company's field coordinator has a perpetual smirk that somehow manages to be both irritating and charming.

"If it isn't our new gatekeeper," he says, leaning against my desk. "Got time to help a desperate man?"

I arch an eyebrow. "Depends on how desperate."

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"I filed a report on those hikers we found camping too close to the north border last week. Theo says he never got it, but I swear I put it in the system." He gives me his best pleading look. "Help me find it before he makes me rewrite the whole thing?"

I roll my eyes but turn to my computer. "Name of the report?"

"North Border Incident, filed last Thursday."

A few keystrokes later, I've located his mistake. "You filed it under 'Border Patrol' instead of 'Civilian Contact.' That's why it didn't flag for Theo's review."

Jake groans. "The filing system in this place is impossible."

"It's actually very logical once you understand it," I say, unable to keep the hint of smugness from my voice as I reroute his report to the correct folder.

"You've been here four days," he points out.

"And I already understand the system better than you do." I hand him a printout of his report. "Here. Now Theo has it."

Jake takes the paper, his amber eyes twinkling with amusement. "Remind me never to get on your bad side." He gives me a mock salute before heading toward Theo's office.

I shake my head, but there's a smile tugging at my lips. For someone who's spent years avoiding connections, I'm starting to feel like I belong here—at least a little.

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At lunch, I escape the office and find a quiet spot under a towering pine tree. The air is crisp with early autumn, and the distant sounds of construction—hammers, saws, and occasional shouts—create a strangely comforting backdrop. I unwrap my sandwich and check my phone.

There's a message from Willow's caretakers. My heart skips when I see they've attached a photo.

Willow grins at the camera, her cheeks streaked with blue paint and her small hands proudly holding up a pinecone covered in silver glitter. Her eyes are bright, her smile wide and uninhibited.

She looks happy.

Something warm and unfamiliar blooms in my chest—a fragile feeling I'm almost afraid to name. For the first time in so long, Willow doesn't look haunted or afraid. She looks like a normal seven-year-old, delighting in making a mess with arts and crafts.

I save the photo, then scroll through my messages. There's one from Eli, sent an hour ago:

Finishing up a meeting with Adrian. Want to have dinner tonight? Just us.

My pulse quickens as I remember our kiss from two nights ago. The way his hands cradled my face so gently, like I might shatter if he pressed too hard. The surprising softness of his lips against mine. The heat that had flared between us, so intense it scared me.

And then—nothing. No pressure. No expectation. He'd simply stepped back, wished me goodnight, and left me standing on the porch, breathless and confused.

I haven't known many men like Eli Greystone. Men who don't take what they want. Men who wait.

I type a response: Yes. I'd like that.

Three simple words that somehow feel monumental.

Leaning back against the rough bark of the pine tree, I let myself absorb the quiet moment. The sun filtering through branches. The distant sounds of a sanctuary being built. The lingering taste of my lunch. For the first time in years, I'm not scanning the horizon for threats. I'm not calculating escape routes. I'm just... existing.

No—more than existing. I'm building something. A routine. A job. Relationships.

The thought should terrify me. Instead, I find myself wondering if staying might not be the mistake I've always assumed it would be. If maybe, instead of surviving day-to-day, I could build something real—for Willow, and maybe even for myself.

But doubt creeps in, as familiar as an old scar. What if I let my guard down and danger finds us again? What if I grow roots and lose everything? What if I trust Eli, trust this place, and it all falls apart?

I think about Eli's quiet strength. How he didn't tell me to stop being afraid—he just stood beside me, letting me figure things out at my own pace. How he gives Willow space to be herself, to ask questions about her shifter nature without making her feel different or strange.

I want to move forward, even if it scares me. And maybe the next step is to stop



pretending I'm only here temporarily.

An idea forms, something I've been considering since I learned more about shifters. If Willow is going to grow up in this world, I need to understand it better. And maybe... maybe I need to see Eli as he truly is, too.

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I finish my lunch, brush crumbs from my jeans, and head back to the office with a new sense of purpose.

???

By four o'clock, I've finished updating the patrol schedules for the next week and organized the incident reports from the weekend. The office is quiet, with Theo out on a site visit and most of the security team either on patrol or in training.

I pull out my phone and scroll to Jenna's contact. We met a few days ago at the Whispering Pines pack community center, and she'd given me her number "just in case." I hadn't planned on using it so soon, but here I am. My finger hovers over her name for a long moment before I finally press call.

The phone rings twice before her cheerful voice answers. "Hello?"

"Hi, Jenna." I clear my throat. "This is Grace Connelly. We met at the community center the other day."

"Grace! It's so nice to hear from you. How are you settling in?"

Her warmth catches me off guard. "Fine, thanks. I'm actually calling because..." I take a deep breath. "I'd like to enroll my sister in the elementary school. Willow."

The words hang in the air for a moment—a commitment I can't take back.

"That's wonderful!" Jenna's enthusiasm is genuine. "We'd love to have her join us."

She's seven, right? Why don't we schedule a time for you and Willow to come tour the school? You can meet the teachers, see the classrooms, and we can talk about any specific needs she might have."

"I'd like that." My voice only trembles slightly.

We set up an appointment for tomorrow afternoon, and as I hang up the phone, I exhale slowly. My hands are shaking, but I feel... strong. Like I've just crossed an invisible line I've been afraid to approach for months.

I look around the office, at the maps and monitors and filing cabinets. At the space I've already made my own in just four days. And I realize something that stops me in my tracks:

I'm not just existing anymore. I'm building a life.

And I can't wait to tell Eli.

## Chapter 7

Grace

The scent of melted cheese and buttery bread wraps around me the moment I push open the front door. For a second, I pause in the entryway, letting the domesticity of it wash over me—Willow's excited chatter, the soft sizzle of something on the stove, the golden light spilling from the kitchen.

It feels like a movie scene. Like someone else's life.

"Grace!" Willow spots me and comes barreling across the living room, a piece of paper clutched in her hand. "Look what I drew! It's the Sanctuary when it's all done,

and maybe we can have a garden and—"

"Whoa, slow down, squirrel." I laugh, kneeling to her level as she thrusts the crayon drawing into my hands. It's a colorful mess of buildings and stick figures. "This is beautiful."

"Dinner's almost ready," Eli calls from the kitchen.

When I look up, my breath catches slightly. He's standing at the stove, flipping what appears to be the most perfect grilled cheese sandwich I've ever seen. His sleeves are rolled up, revealing tanned forearms dusted with dark hair, the muscles flexing as he works. The faded jeans he's wearing sit low on his hips, and there's something about the casual way he fills the space that makes my mouth go dry. He looks... at home. Comfortable. Like a man who knows exactly who he is and what he wants.

"Hope you're hungry," he adds, glancing over his shoulder with a crooked grin that sends a flutter of warmth from my chest to my belly.

My stomach growls in response, and Willow giggles.

"I'll take that as a yes," Eli says, his eyes crinkling at the corners in a way that makes him look both boyish and impossibly masculine at once.

I hang up my jacket and follow Willow to the kitchen, where she climbs onto her chair—the one with the booster seat Eli found in town yesterday. The domesticity of this moment feels both wonderful and terrifying. I've spent so long running that the stillness makes me twitchy.

"So," I say as Eli sets plates in front of us, the scent of his cologne—something woody and clean—briefly enveloping me as he leans close, "I talked to Jenna today about school."

Willow freezes mid-bite, her eyes going wide. "School? Like, real school?"

I nod, smiling at her excitement. "You start Monday. Jenna says there's a spot in her class—she teaches second grade."

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"Will there be other kids like me?" Willow asks, looking between Eli and me. "You know... wolf kids?"

Eli sits down across from us, his own sandwich steaming. The table isn't large, and his knee accidentally brushes mine beneath it. I resist the urge to pull away, surprised by how much I want to lean into the contact instead.

"There are a few shifter children in town," he says gently, his deep voice rumbling in a way that seems to vibrate through me. "But remember what we talked about—"

"No shifting at school," Willow recites solemnly. Then her face brightens again. "Can I bring lunch? In a lunchbox? With a thermos?"

I laugh, the sound surprising me with its lightness. "Yes to all of that. We'll go shopping this weekend to get your supplies."

"And can I have a backpack with wolves on it? Or maybe butterflies? Or both?"

"We'll see what they have," I promise, watching as she practically vibrates with excitement.

For the rest of dinner, Willow peppers us with questions about school—Will she have homework? Can she join the soccer team? What if she gets mad and her eyes change color? Eli answers each one patiently, his deep voice reassuring as he explains that yes, there are protocols for young shifters, and no, she won't be the only one learning to control her abilities.

I watch them together, something aching in my chest. This is what normal feels like. This is what Willow deserves—stability, safety, someone who understands what she's going through in a way I never can. The thought brings both relief and a strange, hollow feeling I can't quite name.

I catch myself studying Eli's face as he talks—the strong line of his jaw shadowed with stubble, the way his lips curve when he smiles at something Willow says, the tiny scar above his right eyebrow. In another life, I might have reached across the table to trace it with my finger, to ask him how he got it. In this one, I curl my fingers around my water glass instead, trying to ignore the pull I feel toward him.

After dinner, Willow helps clear the table, carefully carrying her plastic cup to the sink before dashing off to add more details to her Sanctuary drawing. I stay to help Eli with the dishes, our movements falling into an easy rhythm—he washes, I dry.

"Thank you," I say quietly. "For everything you're doing for her. For us."

His hands pause in the soapy water. "You don't have to thank me, Grace."

"I do, though." I set down the dish towel. "I'm not... good at accepting help. But what you're doing for Willow—teaching her about being a shifter, making her feel normal—I couldn't give her that on my own."

Eli's eyes, when they meet mine, are soft with something I'm afraid to name. Water drips from his hands, leaving dark spots on his shirt that cling to the contours of his chest. I force myself to look away.

"You've done an incredible job with her," he says, his voice lower now, intimate in the quiet kitchen. "Most humans would've run the other way after what you've been through."

"She's my sister," I say simply, as if that explains everything. And maybe it does.

???

Later, after Willow is tucked into bed with her new lavender blanket, I find myself restless. The house is quiet, but my mind isn't. I wander through the living room, straightening things that don't need straightening, until I notice the back door is cracked open.

I step onto the porch and find Eli leaning against the railing, barefoot and contemplative under a canopy of stars. The night is cool but not cold, the scent of pine heavy in the air. For a moment, I just watch him—the strong line of his back beneath his thin t-shirt, the breadth of his shoulders, the way the moonlight catches in his hair, turning the rich brown to silver at the edges. My fingers itch with the sudden, unwelcome urge to touch him, to see if his hair is as soft as it looks.

"Can't sleep?" he asks without turning around.

I move to stand beside him, wrapping my arms around myself. "Too much on my mind, I guess."

He nods, understanding in his silence. We stand there for a long moment, looking out at the clearing behind the cabin, the forest beyond dark and mysterious. His presence beside me is solid, reassuring. Heat radiates from him, even with the space between us, as if his body runs hotter than a human's. I wonder if that's a shifter thing, or just an Eli thing.

"I want to meet your wolf," I say suddenly, the words surprising even me.

Eli turns, searching my face. This close, I can see the flecks of gold in his hazel eyes, the way his pupils dilate slightly in the dim light. "You don't have to—"



"I want to," I interrupt, more certain now. "I'm going to raise a shifter. I want to understand. And I trust you."

Something flickers in his eyes—surprise, maybe, or pleasure. He nods slowly. "Alright."

Without another word, he steps off the porch into the clearing. The moonlight bathes him in silver as he pulls his shirt over his head in one fluid motion, revealing the broad planes of his chest, the definition of muscle beneath tanned skin. My breath catches at the sight of him—the taper of his waist, the trail of dark hair disappearing beneath his waistband, the scattered scars that speak of battles I know nothing about.

I've seen attractive men before. But there's something about Eli that's different—a raw power contained in the graceful way he moves, a confidence that has nothing to do with vanity and everything to do with knowing his own strength. My heart pounds harder, a flush of heat spreading across my skin that has nothing to do with embarrassment.

He meets my eyes as his hands move to the waistband of his flannel pants, and I realize I should probably look away, give him privacy. But I can't seem to tear my gaze from him as he strips down, his body a study in masculine beauty. I swallow hard, my mouth suddenly dry, a pulse of want beating low in my belly.

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Then comes the shift—not violent or bone-breaking as I'd imagined, but fluid, like water changing form. Where Eli stood a moment before, there's now a large wolf with snow white fur and familiar hazel-gold eyes.

My breath catches. He's magnificent—powerful and wild in a way that makes my heart stutter. I freeze on the porch steps, suddenly aware of how small I am in comparison. The wolf is massive, his shoulders coming nearly to my waist, his presence commanding in a way that should frighten me but instead leaves me in awe.

The wolf—Eli—pads forward slowly, his movements deliberate, non-threatening. He stops a few feet away, watching me with intelligent eyes that are somehow still his, despite the changed form. I see Eli in the tilt of the wolf's head, in the patient way he waits for me to adjust.

I force myself to move, to kneel on the soft grass. My heart pounds, but not from fear—from wonder, from the intimacy of this moment. This is a gift, I realize. A sacred trust. He's showing me a part of himself that few humans ever see, and the vulnerability of it makes my throat tight.

I reach out a trembling hand.

"Can I?" I whisper.

The wolf moves closer in answer, ducking his head beneath my outstretched fingers. His fur is thick and soft, warmer than I expected. I sink my fingers into it, marveling at the texture, the heat of the living creature beneath. My hands look small against the massive breadth of his neck, a reminder of his power.

"You're beautiful," I breathe, the words barely audible.

Eli makes a low, rumbling sound—not a growl, but something gentler. He leans into my touch, and I grow bolder, running my hands along his neck, feeling the powerful muscle beneath his coat. There's something freeing about this, about accepting this part of him that's so different from anything I've known.

I'm struck by the trust he's placing in me. He could tear me apart in seconds if he wanted to, yet he stands here, letting me touch him, letting me see this wild part of his soul. It's the most intimate moment I've shared with anyone in years, and we're not even speaking.

After a few minutes, I sit back on my heels. "Can you... change back now?"

The wolf dips his head in what looks remarkably like a nod, then trots over to a cluster of trees. I turn away, giving him privacy for the shift. When I hear footsteps again, I look up to find Eli approaching, now wearing just his sweatpants, his chest still bare in the moonlight.

The sight of him steals my breath all over again. Moonlight silvers the contours of his body, highlighting the defined muscles of his chest and abdomen, the broadness of his shoulders. A thin scar runs along his left side, and I find myself wondering what battle left that mark. His hair is tousled from the shift, giving him a wild, untamed look that makes my pulse quicken.

"Thank you," I say quietly. "For showing me."

"Thank you for asking." His voice is a low rumble that sends a shiver down my spine, raising goosebumps on my arms that have nothing to do with the cool night air. "Most humans don't want to see that side of us."

I rise to my feet, drawn to him like a magnet. "You're not what I expected," I admit, stepping closer, close enough that I can feel the heat radiating from his skin. "Any of this. I didn't think I could ever feel safe again."

"You are safe," he says, his voice dropping lower, rougher. "With me."

My hand lifts of its own accord, tracing the contours of his chest, feeling the steady thump of his heart beneath my palm. His skin is hot to the touch, as if the wolf's heat lingers just beneath the surface. The contrast between his hardness and the softness of his gaze makes something ache deep inside me.

"I believe you," I whisper, and I realize with a start that it's true.

Eli's hand comes up to cup my cheek, his thumb brushing across my lower lip. The touch sends electricity racing through me, awakening parts I thought had gone dormant from disuse. When his mouth lowers to mine, I rise to meet him.

The kiss starts soft, a question more than a demand. But when I press closer, my body flush against his, something shifts. His arms wrap around me, lifting me easily, and I gasp against his mouth. No man has ever made me feel so delicate, so cherished, even as desire pools hot and insistent in my core.

He tastes like wilderness and safety all at once—like the promise of shelter after a storm. His hands are large against my back, spanning my ribs, and I'm struck by the gentleness in his touch, the careful way he holds me, as if I might break or run.

He carries me inside without breaking the kiss, his steps sure in the dim light. The house is quiet save for our breathing, growing more ragged with each passing second. When he lays me on the couch, he hovers above me, his weight supported on his forearms.

"Grace," he murmurs, my name a prayer on his lips. His eyes are dark, pupils blown wide with desire, but there's a question there too. "Tell me if you want to stop."

In answer, I pull him down to me, my kiss hungry now, demanding. His hands slide beneath my shirt, mapping the curve of my waist, the ladder of my ribs. Each touch is reverent, as if he's memorizing me by feel alone. The calluses on his palms catch slightly against my skin, a delicious friction that makes me arch closer.

When he tugs at the hem of my shirt, I lift my arms, letting him pull it over my head. The cool air pebbles my skin, but his hands are warm as they trace the edge of my bra, his eyes darkening as he takes me in.

"You're so beautiful," he whispers, and the naked awe in his voice makes me believe him.

I've never felt beautiful before—not like this, not with a man looking at me as if I'm something precious. The men in my past saw my body as something to use, to take. Eli looks at me like I'm a gift he's afraid to unwrap.

His mouth follows the path of his hands, pressing kisses along my collarbone, the swell of my breasts, the sensitive skin beneath. I arch into his touch, a soft sound escaping me when his teeth graze my nipple through the thin fabric of my bra.

"Is this okay?" he asks, his fingers tracing the clasp at my back.

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"Yes," I breathe, lifting slightly so he can unhook it. The garment falls away, and I resist the urge to cover myself. The way Eli looks at me—like I'm something precious, something to be savored—makes me feel powerful rather than exposed.

His hands and mouth worship me, drawing sighs and gasps as he learns what makes me tremble, what makes me moan. The scratch of his stubble against my sensitive skin creates a delicious contrast to the softness of his lips. Every touch is deliberate, patient, as if we have all the time in the world—as if I'm not just another conquest, but someone worth savoring.

When his fingers slip beneath the waistband of my jeans, I lift my hips in silent permission, my body humming with a need I've never felt before. This isn't just desire—it's something deeper, more terrifying.

He undresses me slowly, his eyes holding mine as each piece falls away. I should feel vulnerable, laid bare beneath him while he's still half-clothed, but instead I feel desired, cherished. The weight of his gaze is like a physical touch, warming me from the inside out.

"Tell me what you need," he says, his voice a low rumble against my skin.

"Just you," I whisper, reaching for him. "Just this."

His fingers find me then, exploring with exquisite patience, discovering the places that make me gasp and arch. His mouth never leaves mine as he touches me, swallowing my moans as pleasure builds, coiling tight at the base of my spine.

"You're safe," he murmurs against my neck, his fingers moving in slow, deliberate circles. "You're strong. You're not alone anymore."

Something about his words, coupled with the skilled pressure of his touch, sends me over the edge. I come with a broken cry, my body arching beneath his, pleasure washing through me in waves. It's not just physical release—it's something more profound, as if some tightly wound part of me is finally unraveling.

As I float back to myself, I feel Eli gathering me into his arms, tucking my head beneath his chin. Our hearts beat in tandem, gradually slowing as he strokes my hair, my back, murmuring words too soft to catch. His body is a warm fortress around mine, and for the first time in years, I let myself be held without planning an escape route.

The scent of him—pine and earth and something uniquely male—fills my lungs with each breath. His chest rises and falls steadily beneath my cheek, the crisp hair there tickling my skin. I trace idle patterns across his ribs, marveling at the contrast between us—his size, his strength, the roughness of his skin against my softer touch.

"What is this?" I ask finally, my voice barely audible in the quiet room.

His arms tighten around me, one large hand coming up to cradle the back of my head. The gesture is so tender it makes my throat ache.

"Something real," he says, pressing a kiss to my temple. His voice vibrates through his chest, rumbling against my ear.

I let out a shaky breath, fear and hope warring within me. The men in my past made promises too—pretty words that dissolved like sugar in rain the moment things got difficult. But none of them looked at me the way Eli does, like he sees past my defenses to the woman beneath.

"I need to go slowly," I whisper, hating the tremor in my voice. "I don't know how to do this. How to stay. How to trust that it won't all disappear."

"Then we go slow," Eli says without hesitation, his hand still tracing soothing patterns on my skin. "I'm not going anywhere, Grace. Neither are you, unless you choose to."

## Chapter 8

Eli

"How much glitter is too much glitter?" I ask, staring at the display of school supplies that Willow is currently raiding. She's already filled her arms with at least three notebooks covered in sparkly unicorns and rainbows.

"There's no such thing as too much glitter," Willow informs me solemnly, reaching for yet another glitter-encrusted folder.

Grace laughs softly beside me, the sound warming something deep in my chest. My wolf perks up, alert and pleased. I've noticed he does that whenever she laughs—a sound still rare enough to feel like a victory. The curve of her smile sends heat coursing through me, and I have to force myself to look away before she catches me staring.

My wolf paces restlessly beneath my skin, eager to claim what we both know is ours. Mine, he growls. Mate. The instinct grows stronger every day, but I keep him leashed. Grace doesn't need a possessive shifter marking his territory. She needs patience, safety—someone who understands that trust has to be earned, not demanded.

That doesn't stop the wanting, though. The way her scent wraps around me when she



walks by. The flash of skin when she reaches for something on a high shelf. The soft sighs she makes in her sleep when I check on her and Willow at night.

I want her. We want her. But we'll wait until she's ready.

"Maybe just one glitter notebook, Willow," Grace says, consulting the list in her hand. "The rest can be regular."

Willow's face falls momentarily before she brightens again. "Can I get the unicorn one? Please?"

"Of course," Grace says, her eyes softening as she watches her sister. There's something in that look—a mixture of love and worry that makes my chest ache.

I've seen that look before. It's the look of someone who's had to be both parent and sibling, who's had to make hard choices to keep someone safe. I recognize it because I've worn it myself, back when the pack was forming, when Adrian was still finding his way.

We're standing in Whispering Pines' general store, which is currently packed with families doing last-minute school shopping. The school year starts Monday, and Grace was adamant about getting Willow properly equipped. When I offered to drive them into town this morning, Grace hesitated only briefly before accepting.

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Progress. Slow, but steady.

My wolf rumbles with satisfaction. He's been invested in Grace's comfort level around us, tracking her tiny concessions like precious territory gained.

"What about a lunchbox?" I ask, pointing toward another aisle. "Every kid needs a good lunchbox."

Willow's eyes widen with excitement, and she practically skips toward the display of colorful lunch containers. Grace follows, consulting her list again with a slight furrow between her brows.

I notice the way she lingers over the prices, mentally calculating. Her shoulders tense slightly when she sees the cost of the backpack Willow is admiring. It's purple with silver stars and a reinforced bottom—good quality, but not cheap.

"We should probably look at the other options," she says gently to Willow.

Before I can stop myself, I reach for the backpack. "This one seems sturdy. It'll last the whole year."

Grace gives me a look—part warning, part resignation. "Eli..."

"Let me get this for her," I say quietly, making sure Willow is distracted by the lunch boxes. "First day of school is special."

"I can't keep letting you pay for things," she whispers, her voice tight. "I need to do

this myself."

I study her face, seeing the pride there, the fierce independence that's kept her and Willow going all this time. It's not about the money—it's about proving to herself that she can provide, that she doesn't need anyone else.

My wolf growls in frustration. He doesn't understand her hesitation to accept what we offer. To him, providing is instinct.

"How about this," I suggest, keeping my tone casual. "I'll cover everything today, and you can pay me back after your first paycheck from Theo. No interest, no timeline."

She narrows her eyes, clearly suspicious of my easy capitulation. "You're not going to argue with me about it?"

I shrug. "Would it help if I did?"

A reluctant smile tugs at her lips. "No."

"Then what's the point?" I grin, and her smile widens just a fraction before she schools her expression.

"Fine. But I'm keeping track of every penny."

"I'd expect nothing less."

Willow bounces back over, clutching a holographic lunch box. "This one changes colors when you move it! Can I get it? Please?"

Grace hesitates, and I can see her doing the mental math again. Before she can answer, I grab the lunch box and add it to our growing pile.

"Excellent choice," I tell Willow. "Very practical."

Grace rolls her eyes at me, but there's no real irritation there. Just resignation tinged with something that might, if I'm lucky, be affection.

As she turns to help Willow find pencils, I catch a hint of her scent—warm vanilla with something uniquely her, like wildflowers after rain. My wolf inhales deeply, committing it to memory. There's something about her scent that feels like home, though I'm not ready to examine why too closely.

???

An hour later, we've hit three stores and accumulated a small mountain of supplies. The truck is loaded with bags, and Willow is proudly wearing her new purple backpack, even though it's empty.

"Can we go to one more store?" Willow asks as we're walking down Main Street. "I need clothes too."

Grace checks her watch. "We should have time for one more stop."

I lead them to Pines & Needles, a small boutique owned by a fox shifter named Marlene. The bell chimes as we enter, and Marlene looks up from behind the counter.

"Eli Greystone," she says warmly. "Haven't seen you in here before. Finally decided to upgrade your wardrobe?"

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I laugh. "Not today. We're looking for some school clothes for Willow."

Marlene's eyes light up when she spots Willow. "Well, aren't you just the cutest thing! The children's section is in the back corner. We just got some new fall items in."

As Marlene leads them toward the children's section, she gives me a knowing look over her shoulder. My jaw tightens. I recognize that look—it's the same one Maya gives me whenever Grace's name comes up. Apparently, I'm more transparent than I thought.

Willow is already holding up shirt after shirt, seeking Grace's approval for each one. I hang back, content to watch as they move through the racks together. Grace's dark hair falls forward as she bends to help Willow with a button, and my fingers itch with the sudden, unexpected urge to brush it back from her face.

My wolf paces restlessly beneath my skin. The protective instinct that's always been part of me—the need to guard, to shelter—finds its focus in them. Not because they're weak, but because they matter. Because somehow, in the span of just a few weeks, they've become important to me in a way I didn't expect.

My wolf knows it. Has known it since they first stepped into our territory.

Mine to protect. Mine to care for.

This—quiet moments, laughter in colorful aisles, a child excited about new clothes—this is what we're building at the Sanctuary. Not just walls and wards and

security systems. A life worth protecting. A future where families like Grace and Willow can simply exist without looking over their shoulders.

"What do you think?" Grace's voice pulls me from my thoughts, and I look up to see Willow twirling in a sparkly purple skirt that matches her backpack.

"Stunning," I say, and Willow beams. "You'll be the best-dressed kid in school."

"Can I get it?" she asks Grace, who nods with a soft smile.

"Yes, but only one skirt. We need practical things too."

As Grace helps Willow pick out a few more items, I wander through the store, stopping when something catches my eye. It's a soft, forest-green sweater that would complement Grace's warm brown eyes perfectly. Without overthinking it, I grab it in what I hope is her size, along with a few other small items I've noticed her eyeing or mentioning—a bottle of lavender lotion, a patterned scarf, and a paperback book I saw her looking at in the window of the bookstore earlier.

I'm at the register, paying for my purchases, when I feel Grace's presence behind me. Even before she speaks, I know it's her—her scent reaches me first, followed by the quiet sound of her breathing.

"What are you doing?" she asks, her voice low.

I turn, holding the bag. "Just picking up a few things."

Her eyes narrow. "For who?"

Before I can answer, Willow appears at her side, eyes widening as she spots the green sweater peeking out of the bag. "Is that for Grace? That would look so pretty on

you!" She turns to Grace with a gleeful grin. "Please say yes?"

I lift a brow and murmur, "You heard the boss."

Grace rolls her eyes, but her cheeks flush a delicate pink. The color spreads down her neck, and my wolf watches with fascination. I wonder how far that blush extends.

She gives a reluctant nod. "Fine. But this doesn't count toward the loan."

"Wouldn't dream of it," I say, trying not to look too pleased with myself.

Our fingers brush as I hand her the bag, and the brief contact sends a jolt through my system. My wolf surges forward, hungry for more contact, and I have to consciously pull back.

We finish our shopping, and as we head back to the truck, I can't help but notice how different Grace looks compared to when we arrived. There's a lightness to her steps, a softness around her eyes that wasn't there before. She's still cautious—still scanning the street, still keeping Willow close—but she's also allowing herself small moments of joy.

"Thank you," she says quietly as we walk, the words so soft I almost miss them. "For today."

I glance at her, surprised. "You don't need to thank me."

"I know. That's...that's why I am." She doesn't meet my eyes, but the admission hangs between us, weighted with everything she's not saying.

My wolf preens at her acknowledgment, and I have to bite back a smile. "You're welcome."

Willow skips ahead of us, her new backpack bouncing against her shoulders, then glances back with a mischievous grin that immediately puts me on alert. That look reminds me of Maya when she's about to say something outrageous.

"You two should kiss," she announces with the blunt honesty only a child can muster.  
"You like each other."



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Grace freezes beside me. I choke on a surprised laugh, even as my wolf perks up with enthusiastic agreement.

"Willow!" Grace hisses, her face flushing a deep crimson.

I shrug, unable to suppress my grin. "She's not wrong."

Grace glares at me, but her lips twitch with the beginning of a smile. She shakes her head and mutters, "You're both impossible," before marching ahead to catch up with Willow.

I follow, still smiling. Because impossible or not, I'm exactly where I want to be.

And my wolf—who's been restless for years, searching for something I couldn't name—seems to agree.

### Chapter 9

Grace

I smooth down Willow's hair for the fifth time this morning, tucking a stray strand behind her ear. She squirms under my touch, impatient.

"Grace, you already fixed my hair," she whines, bouncing on her toes. "Can we go now? Please?"

I take a deep breath, my hands hovering uncertainly before dropping to my sides.

"Let me check your backpack one more time."

"You already checked it three times!" Willow protests, but she shrugs off her backpack anyway, handing it to me with an exaggerated sigh.

I unzip it, cataloging the contents again: notebook, pencil case, lunch box, water bottle, the small stuffed wolf Eli gave her, and the emergency contact card with my number, Eli's number, and the address of the cabin. Everything is exactly where it should be, just like it was five minutes ago.

"Okay," I say, zipping it back up. "I think we're good."

Willow snatches the backpack from my hands, her eyes bright with excitement. "Finally!"

I hear a soft chuckle from the doorway and turn to see Eli leaning against the frame, arms crossed over his chest, watching us with amusement dancing in his eyes.

"All set for the big day?" he asks, his gaze warm as it settles on Willow.

She nods enthusiastically. "Grace keeps checking everything over and over. She's being silly."

"Not silly," I correct her, smoothing down her hoodie. "Just thorough."

Eli's smile softens. "I thought I'd drive you both, if that's okay."

The offer hangs in the air between us. A month ago, I would have refused out of habit, clinging to my independence like a shield. Now, I find myself nodding.

"That would be nice," I say. "Thank you."

The drive to Whispering Pines Elementary is short but beautiful. The road winds through forest that's just beginning to show hints of autumn, a few early leaves turning gold and red among the green. Willow chatters the entire way, her excitement bubbling over, while I sit quietly in the passenger seat, my stomach tied in knots.

When we pull into the parking lot, I'm struck by how normal it all looks. The school building is small and charming, with colorful murals decorating the exterior walls. Children of various ages stream toward the entrance, backpacks bouncing, voices raised in laughter and conversation. A playground sits to one side, already filled with kids chasing each other across the equipment.

It looks safe. Peaceful. Ordinary.

So why does my heart feel like it's about to pound out of my chest?

Eli parks the truck, and Willow unbuckles her seatbelt so fast I barely have time to register the movement. I reach for her hand as we walk toward the entrance, holding on a little too tight.

Jenna Cooper waves to us from the school entrance, her warm smile immediately putting some of my anxiety at ease. After our phone call last week to arrange Willow's enrollment, I'm relieved to see a familiar face.

"Good morning!" she calls, walking over to greet us. "All ready for your first day, Willow?"

Willow nods enthusiastically, though I notice her grip on my hand tightens slightly.

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Jenna crouches down to Willow's level. "I've got your classroom all set up, and there are several other shifter children excited to meet you."

Willow's eyes widen. "Really? Can I meet them now?"

"Of course. See that group over by the swings? Why don't you go introduce yourself? We'll be starting class in about ten minutes."

Willow looks up at me, seeking permission. The moment stretches between us, heavy with meaning. My fingers tighten around hers reflexively.

"Go ahead," I manage to say, forcing my grip to loosen. "Have fun. I'll pick you up after school."

Willow throws her arms around my waist, squeezing tight. "Love you, Grace."

"Love you too, kiddo." My voice catches.

Then, to my surprise, she turns and hugs Eli with the same enthusiasm. "Bye, Eli! I'll tell you all about school later!"

His face softens as he pats her back. "Looking forward to it, squirt."

And just like that, she's off, racing across the playground toward the group of children, her backpack bouncing against her small frame. I watch her go, my heart in my throat, unable to move as she disappears into the crowd of children.

Jenna gives my arm a gentle squeeze. "She'll be just fine. I promise we take security very seriously here. No one gets in or out without proper clearance."

I nod, not trusting myself to speak.

"I should go round up the troops," Jenna says with a smile. "It was lovely seeing you both. See you at pickup!"

As she walks away, I stand rooted to the spot, my eyes fixed on the last place I saw Willow. Eli moves to stand beside me, close enough that his arm brushes against mine. The contact is subtle but grounding.

"She's going to be fine," he says gently, his gaze following mine to where Willow is now playing tag with a group of children, her laughter carrying across the yard.

"I know." My hands are clenched at my sides.

Eli doesn't rush me. He just stands there with me, a quiet, steady presence beside me. "Letting go is the hardest part," he says after a moment. "But it's also the bravest."

I exhale slowly, my shoulders dropping an inch. "I'm scared," I admit, the words barely audible.

"That's okay," Eli says, his voice gentle but firm. "You're still here. That's what counts."

The bell rings, and I watch as the children line up at the door. Willow falls into place, chatting animatedly with a girl beside her. She doesn't look back, doesn't search for me in the crowd of parents. She's already moving forward, embracing this new chapter with the fearlessness of childhood.

Maybe I could learn something from her.

"We should go," I say finally, tearing my eyes away. "I need to get to work."

We walk back to the truck in silence, my thoughts a tangled mess. As we reach the vehicle, I glance at Eli. "I never thought a school drop-off would feel like walking a tightrope without a net."

He chuckles softly. "Well, you didn't fall."

"Not yet," I say, my voice tight. Then, quieter, "But maybe I don't have to fall alone anymore."

Eli stops walking. He turns to me, his expression serious, eyes searching mine. "You never did. You just didn't know someone would catch you."

Something shifts in my chest, a tight knot loosening ever so slightly. I don't have words to respond, but as we continue walking, my fingers brush against his. And for once, I don't pull away.

## Chapter 10

### Grace

The office at Theo's security company is quiet this afternoon, just the soft clicking of keyboards and occasional murmur of conversation. I adjust my chair, focusing on the patrol schedule spreadsheet in front of me. My fingers move steadily across the keyboard as I update route assignments, trying to ignore the lingering anxiety from this morning's school drop-off.

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It's been five hours since I left Willow at the elementary school. Five hours, seventeen minutes. Not that I'm counting.

I reach for my coffee mug, grimacing when I find it empty. The job keeps me busy enough that I can almost—almost—stop worrying about Willow for minutes at a time. Working for Theo has been surprisingly good for me. The administrative side of supernatural security means I'm contributing to the safety of Whispering Pines without putting myself in danger, and the steady paycheck means I can finally provide for Willow without constantly looking over my shoulder.

Or at least, that's what I keep telling myself.

I'm reviewing supply requests for the northern patrol teams when a sharp electronic tone cuts through the office. My head snaps up, along with everyone else's, as the overhead monitors flash with a red alert banner.

"Hunter Activity Confirmed: Peripheral Movement, Northern Ridge Trail. Contained. Security Mobilized."

The air punches out of my lungs. My vision narrows to pinpricks of light against encroaching darkness. I can't breathe. I can't think. I'm back there—blood on the floor, Willow screaming, glass shattering as hunters break through windows—before I even realize I'm standing.

The coffee mug slips from my suddenly numb fingers, clattering against the desk but miraculously not breaking. The sound seems distant, underwater, like I'm hearing it through layers of cotton.

Hunters.

I thought we were safe here. For seven days, I've let myself believe the lie. Seven days of routine, of Willow laughing and playing, of me coming to work without constantly checking over my shoulder. Seven days of lowering my guard, inch by excruciating inch. And now this—proof that nowhere is truly safe. That the moment I dare to breathe, hunters show up again.

My chest constricts painfully, each heartbeat slamming against my ribs with such force I'm certain they'll crack. Sweat breaks out across my forehead, cold and clammy. The fluorescent lights overhead suddenly seem too bright, too harsh.

They found us.

My chair scrapes back as I stand, hands already grabbing for my bag, movements automatic, programmed by years of running. I need to get to Willow. Now. I need to get her out, away, somewhere they can't find us. We were fools to think we could stay, could build something here. Safety is an illusion. It always has been.

"Grace?" Someone calls my name, but their voice seems to come from miles away, distorted and meaningless.

I'm already moving toward the door, my heartbeat a deafening roar in my ears. My vision tunnels, narrowing to a single point: get to Willow, get in the car, get out of Whispering Pines before—

The door swings open just as I reach for the handle, and suddenly Eli is there, filling the doorway. He's holding two paper bags, the logo of the local deli stamped on the side. His easy smile falters as he takes in my expression, the wild look in my eyes.

"Grace?" The bags lower to his side. "What's wrong?"



"I have to go," I choke out, already fumbling to push past him. "They found us. They found her. I can't—I have to get to Willow." My voice is too high, too thin. I'm not here. I'm somewhere else. Somewhere much darker.

His hands come up to gently grip my shoulders, steadying me. The warmth of his touch cuts through the fog, anchoring me to the present when everything in me wants to flee.

"Breathe, Grace," he says, his voice low and steady. "Just breathe for a second."

I try to pull away, panic clawing up my throat. "You don't understand," I say, my voice rising. "I have to get to her. They're back, Eli. Hunters. I can't—we can't—"

"Willow is safe," he says, his voice calm but firm. His hazel eyes lock with mine, refusing to let me look away. "I promise you. But let's talk to Theo first, okay? He'll have the details."

I want to argue, want to shove past him and run straight to the school, but something in his steady gaze anchors me. The rational part of my brain—the part not hijacked by fear and memory—knows he's right. But my body hasn't caught up yet. My hands still tremble. My heart still races. Every instinct screams at me to run, to grab Willow and disappear.

"Thirty seconds," I manage, the words coming out in short, staccato bursts. "Then I'm going to her."

Eli nods, setting the lunch bags on a nearby desk. His hand moves to the small of my back, not restraining, just guiding as we walk toward the operations room. The warmth of his palm seeps through my shirt, a steady point of contact that keeps me from spiraling completely. I'm hyper-aware of his touch, of how solid he feels beside me when everything else seems to be fragmenting.

The operations room is a hub of controlled activity. Monitors line the walls, displaying maps of Whispering Pines and the surrounding forests. Blue dots indicate patrol teams, moving in coordinated patterns. A single red marker pulses near the northern border.

Theo stands at the center console, his expression focused but not alarmed. He looks up as we enter, his eyes narrowing slightly when he sees my face—pale, drawn, pupils dilated with fear.

"Grace," he acknowledges with a nod. "I'm guessing you saw the alert."

"What's happening?" My voice sounds steadier than I feel, years of practice at hiding fear kicking in. "Are they attacking? How many are there?"

Theo gestures to the map. "One hunter, spotted on the ridge trail about twenty minutes ago. Likely a scout, not an attack force. We've already deployed a response team." He points to a cluster of blue dots moving toward the red marker. "They'll intercept in less than five minutes."

"Just one?" I ask, disbelief coloring my tone. My brain can't process the information. One hunter doesn't make sense. They always traveled in groups, coordinated, ruthless.

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"Just one," Theo confirms. "And they're already retreating. Our wards detected them before they got within three miles of town limits."

My hands are still trembling. I clench them into fists, nails biting into my palms. "But what if there are more? What if this is just a distraction?"

"It's possible," Theo concedes, "but unlikely. We've been systematically dismantling hunter cells in this region for the past year. What's left are mostly stragglers—dangerous, but disorganized."

I shake my head, unable to accept his assessment. For five years, hunters have been the monsters under the bed, the shadows in the corner, the reason I can't sleep through the night. They can't just be... diminished.

"But what if they come back?" The words escape before I can stop them, raw with fear. "What if they're watching, waiting for us to let our guard down?"

Theo's expression doesn't change. "They will," he says evenly. "But we're ready."

He gestures to another screen, this one showing a detailed layout of Whispering Pines Elementary. "The school has triple-layered protection. Magical wards, physical security, and shifter patrols. No one gets in or out without clearance. Ryan's pack has members stationed on the grounds at all times, and Jenna has direct access to our emergency protocols."

He walks me through the defensive measures, the evacuation plans, the response teams positioned throughout town. It's comprehensive, methodical, and clearly well-

established.

"We don't take chances," Theo says, meeting my gaze directly. "But they're not the threat they once were. The hunters who targeted you and Willow specifically? They're gone."

I want to believe him. I want it so badly it hurts. But three years of running doesn't disappear in a few weeks of relative safety.

"I need to see Willow," I whisper, the need to verify her safety with my own eyes overwhelming everything else.

Theo nods, his expression softening slightly. "Take the rest of the day. Be with your sister."

I turn to leave, then pause, looking back at him. "Thank you. For... everything."

He gives me a small, rare smile. "This is what we do, Grace. This is why we're here."

As we walk back through the main office, the adrenaline begins to fade, leaving me hollow and shaky. Embarrassment creeps in, hot and uncomfortable. I'd been ready to grab Willow and run—again. Ready to throw away everything we've built here over a single alert. Ready to uproot my sister from the first place she's started to feel at home.

"I almost ran," I whisper as we reach the parking lot, ashamed. "I didn't even think—I just felt it. That same burn in my chest, that need to move, to flee. Like the ground was breaking under me."

Eli walks beside me, close enough that our shoulders occasionally brush. "Yeah," he says, his voice gentle. "But this time, you didn't. You listened. You asked for help."

His eyes find mine, warm and free of judgment. "That's not weakness, Grace. That's strength."

I look away, unable to bear the weight of his understanding. "It doesn't feel like strength. It feels like I'm still broken."

"Broken doesn't mean weak," he says quietly. "It just means you've survived something that tried to destroy you."

The drive to the school is quiet. Eli doesn't push me to talk, doesn't try to fill the silence with reassurances. He just drives, one hand on the wheel, the other resting on the console between us. After a few minutes, I reach over and place my hand on top of his. His fingers immediately turn, intertwining with mine. The simple contact grounds me, reminding me that I'm here, now, not trapped in the past.

We arrive at the school just as the final bell rings. I watch as children pour out of the building, their voices rising in a cheerful cacophony. My eyes scan frantically for Willow, heart still not quite believing she's safe until I see her.

And then I spot her—Willow, bouncing down the steps, her backpack swinging, talking animatedly with another little girl. She looks happy. Normal. Safe. Nothing like the terrified child I spirited away in the middle of the night three years ago.

She spots us and breaks into a run, her face lighting up. "Grace! Eli! You're both here!"

I crouch down as she barrels into me, wrapping my arms around her small frame, breathing in the scent of her hair. She smells like crayons and playground dirt and the strawberry shampoo she insists on using. She smells like childhood. Like safety.

"How was your first day, kiddo?"

"It was amazing!" She pulls back, eyes bright with excitement. "I made three new friends, and Ms. Cooper says I'm really good at math, and we learned about shifter history, and did you know there's another half-shifter in my class? Her name is Lily and she can almost shift all the way but sometimes she gets stuck with just ears and a tail and—"

She breaks off, finally noticing my expression. "Are you okay, Grace? You look sad."

I smooth her hair back from her forehead, trying to hide the residual fear. "I'm not sad. I'm just really, really happy to see you."

This seems to satisfy her, and she turns to Eli, launching into another story about recess games and lunch trades. I stand, watching them together—the way he crouches to her level, the animated way she talks with her hands, the genuine interest in his eyes as he listens to every word.

They are my world. Both of them.

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The realization hits me with startling clarity. Somewhere along the way, Eli has become as essential to me as Willow. The thought should terrify me—I've spent years believing that attachments are dangerous, that loving someone means giving the world a weapon to use against you. But instead, it fills me with a warm certainty.

As we walk back to the truck, Willow skipping ahead of us, I turn to Eli. The words stick in my throat, almost impossible to say after years of keeping everyone at a distance.

"You were right," I finally manage, my voice barely above a whisper. "I don't have to run anymore."

His eyes meet mine, warm and steady. There's no triumph in his expression, just quiet understanding. I help Willow into the backseat, making sure she's buckled in before turning back to Eli.

For a moment, I hesitate. The old fear whispers that this is dangerous, that caring for someone means giving them the power to hurt you. But for once, I don't listen. Instead, I reach for his hand, my fingers trembling slightly as they find his.

"Come home with us?" The question is soft, vulnerable. A leap of faith.

His smile unfolds slowly, lighting his entire face. "Always," he says, squeezing my hand. "For as long as you want me there."

Eli

The morning sun filters through the trees as I pull my truck into the Whispering Pines community center parking lot. Beside me, Grace fidgets with the strap of Willow's overnight bag, her knuckles white with tension. In the back seat, Willow bounces with excitement, rattling off everything she plans to do at the sleepover.

"And Ms. Hannah said we're going to make s'mores, and tell ghost stories, but not too scary ones, and we get to sleep in sleeping bags in the big room with the stars on the ceiling!"

I catch Grace's eye and give her a reassuring smile. This is the first time she's letting Willow spend the night away from her since they arrived in Whispering Pines. It's a small step, but a significant one.

"Sounds like you're going to have the best time, kiddo," I say, turning to wink at Willow in the rearview mirror.

Grace takes a deep breath. "You have your toothbrush? And Mr. Flopsy?"

"Yes, Grace," Willow sighs with the exasperation only a seven-year-old can muster. "You already checked three times."

I stifle a laugh as we climb out of the truck. Hannah greets us at the door, her warm smile immediately putting Grace at ease. I watch as she kneels down to Willow's level, chatting animatedly about the weekend's activities.

"We've got six other kids joining us," Hannah tells Grace. "All from the pack families. Jenna's helping me supervise, and Ryan will be checking in throughout the night." She gives Grace a knowing look. "I promise, this place will be more secure than Fort Knox."



Willow barely waits for Grace to finish hugging her before she's racing inside to join the other children. Grace stands at the doorway, her hand raised in a frozen wave.

"She'll be okay," I murmur, squeezing her shoulder.

"I know," Grace says, but her voice wavers. "It's just... it's the first time since—"

"Since you started running," I finish for her. Her eyes meet mine, vulnerable and uncertain. "You're not running anymore, Grace. And neither is she."

She nods, inhaling deeply. "You're right."

As we walk back to the truck, I take her hand. Her fingers are cold despite the warm spring air, and I rub my thumb across her knuckles, feeling the slight tremor there.

"I have something to show you," I say casually as we climb into the cab.

Grace raises an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Trust me," I reply, starting the engine.

I drive us away from town, past the Whispering Pines pack territory and toward the expansive land Adrian purchased for the sanctuary. We pass the construction site where crews are installing security fencing, then continue beyond the temporary administration buildings where Sawyer runs daily patrols. The truck bounces over the uneven forest road, winding through stands of ancient pines until we reach the clearing we visited weeks ago. But I don't stop there. I continue driving along a narrower path that follows the edge of the pine forest.

"Where are we going?" Grace asks, curiosity replacing the anxiety in her voice.

"You'll see."

Finally, we emerge onto a rise overlooking a stream. The land stretches out before us, dappled with sunlight filtering through the tall pines. Wooden stakes with bright orange flags mark the perimeter of what looks like a construction site.

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I park the truck and come around to open Grace's door. She steps out, looking around with confusion.

"What is this place?"

My heart hammers against my ribs as I take her hand again. "This," I say, gesturing to the marked-out area, "is where I'm building my home."

Grace's eyes widen. "Your home?"

I nod, leading her toward the stakes. "Come on, I'll show you."

We step onto the soft earth, and I guide her through the imaginary layout. "This is the front porch—wide enough for a couple of rocking chairs. Living room here, with big windows looking out over the stream."

As we walk the perimeter, I watch her face carefully. She's quiet, taking it all in, her fingers tightening around mine.

"It's going to be beautiful," she says softly.

I take a deep breath. "Grace, I've been thinking a lot about what I want. What would make this place feel like home." I turn to face her, taking both her hands in mine. "And the truth is, I don't want to build this just for me. I want to build it for us—you, me, and Willow. If that's something you might want too."

Grace's breath catches, her eyes widening. "Eli..."

"I know it's a lot," I continue quickly. "And I'm not asking for an answer right now. But I wanted you to see it, to imagine what it could be."

She looks around again, and I can see her picturing it—a life here, with me.

"Would Willow have her own room?" she asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

Relief floods through me. She's considering it. "Yes," I say, pointing to a corner. "Right here, with a window seat so she can watch the stars at night."

A small smile tugs at her lips. "She'd love that."

"And right next to it," I add carefully, "a smaller room that could be... whatever we need it to be someday."

The implication hangs in the air between us. Grace's eyes search mine, a mixture of hope and fear flickering across her face.

"Kitchen here," I continue, my voice growing softer. "Dining area. A study for those nights I need to work late." I pause, gathering my courage. "And the master bedroom, back corner. Quiet. Private."

She stares at me, her lips parting slightly. "You're really serious about this?"

"I am," I confirm, squeezing her hands. "But before you say anything else, I need you to know something." I take a deep breath. This is it. The moment of truth. "You're my mate, Grace. I've known since the night we met."

Her eyes widen, and for a moment, I fear I've said too much, too soon. But I have to finish.

"I didn't say anything because I didn't want to pressure you. I wanted you to choose this life. Choose me. Not because of some shifter bond, but because it's what you wanted."

Silence stretches between us. The breeze rustles the pine needles overhead, and somewhere in the distance, a bird calls to its mate. Grace's eyes never leave mine, and I can practically see the thoughts racing behind them.

"You knew all this time?" she finally murmurs.

"Yeah," I admit. "But I needed you to feel safe first. I needed you to want this because it's what you wanted—not because you felt like you had to."

She pulls one hand free and places it against my chest, right over my heart. "That's why you never pushed. Why you gave me space, even when..." She trails off, and I can tell she's remembering all the moments I've held back, all the times I wanted to claim her but forced myself to wait.

"Even when it was killing me," I finish with a rueful smile. "You needed time. I had to respect that."

Grace takes a step back, turning to look at the staked-out area again. I let her process, fighting the urge to pull her close, to convince her with touch instead of words. This has to be her choice.

"All my life," she says quietly, "I've been running from something. My father's neglect. Bad relationships. The hunters." She wraps her arms around herself. "I never stayed anywhere long enough to call it home."

I remain silent, watching her profile as she stares out at the trees.

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"And then we came here, and you..." she turns back to me, her eyes bright with unshed tears. "You didn't just give us shelter. You gave us a future. You showed Willow what it means to be protected, not just hidden."

My throat tightens with emotion. "Grace—"

"I've been so afraid," she confesses, her voice gaining strength. "Not just of the hunters, but of wanting you—wanting this. Of believing I could be yours."

She steps toward me, closing the distance she created. "But you know what scares me more than staying?" Her hand reaches up to cup my cheek, her touch tentative yet determined. "The thought of walking away from this. From you."

A slow smile spreads across her face, transforming her features. She looks younger, lighter, as if some invisible weight has finally lifted from her shoulders.

"Then I guess it's a good thing I'm choosing you," she says softly.

Relief and joy surge through me, primal and possessive. I pull her to me, my hand firm on the back of her neck as I claim her mouth with mine. The kiss begins tender but swiftly turns fierce, a collision of need and months of pent-up desire. Her scent envelops me—sunshine and lavender and something uniquely Grace—and my wolf rumbles with satisfaction. Mine. Finally mine.

Her arms wind around my neck, her body pressing against mine as the kiss intensifies. I can feel every curve of her, soft where I'm hard, yielding where I'm unyielding. Heat rises between us, familiar and urgent, but I force myself to pull

back, breathing hard.

"Not here," I murmur, my forehead pressing against hers as I fight for control. "Not on dirt and sawdust. You deserve silk sheets and moonlight, a place where I can worship every inch of you."

Grace grins, her eyes dancing with mischief as she presses her hips against mine. "You're such a romantic."

"Don't tell anyone," I growl, already leading her back to the truck, my hand possessively splayed across her lower back. "I have a reputation to maintain."

The drive back to my cabin feels endless, though it's only fifteen minutes. We sit in charged silence, her hand clasped in mine on the console, her thumb tracing maddening circles against my palm. Every few seconds, I steal a glance at her profile—the curve of her cheek, the fullness of her lower lip, the pulse beating visibly at the base of her throat. The scent of her arousal fills the cab, making my grip on the steering wheel tighten until the leather creaks.

"I can smell how much you want me," I tell her, my voice a low rumble. "It's driving me crazy."

A blush spreads across her cheeks, but instead of pulling away, she leans closer. "Good," she whispers, her breath hot against my ear. "I've been waiting long enough."

When we finally reach the cabin, I kill the engine and turn to her. "Last chance to back out, sweetheart. Because once we start, I'm not sure I'll be able to stop."

Grace's answer is to lean across the console and press her lips to mine, her tongue darting out to trace the seam of my mouth. "I don't want you to stop," she breathes against my lips. "I want all of you. The man and the wolf."

Something primal and possessive roars to life inside me. I'm out of the truck and around to her side in seconds, moving with inhuman speed. As soon as her feet hit the ground, I sweep her into my arms, cradling her against my chest as I carry her to the front door. She laughs, the sound bright and free, her head falling back to expose the delicate line of her throat.

"I like it when you laugh," I tell her, unable to resist pressing my lips to the pulse point at her neck. "I want to hear that sound every day for the rest of my life."

Her arms tighten around my neck as I fumble with the key, my coordination compromised by the feel of her body against mine and the intoxicating scent of her desire.

"Careful," she teases, her breath warm against my neck as she nips at my earlobe. "You might give a girl the wrong idea about how coordinated you are."

I growl, low and warning, as I finally get the door open. "I assure you, sweetheart, coordination won't be an issue once we're inside. I've imagined this moment too many times to mess it up now."

Her heartbeat quickens, and I smile, satisfied with the effect my words have on her. The door swings open, and I carry her over the threshold, kicking it shut behind us. Without breaking stride, I head straight for the bedroom, my need for her growing with each step.

The moment we cross the bedroom threshold, something snaps between us. The patience we've both maintained for weeks dissolves in an instant. I press her against the wall, my hands braced on either side of her head, my body flush against hers. Her eyes are wide, pupils dilated with desire, her chest rising and falling rapidly.

"I've wanted to touch you since the day you walked into my life," I murmur, my voice



rough with need. "Every night, I've lain awake thinking about what you'd feel like beneath me, around me, coming apart for me." I lean in, my lips brushing her ear. "But I waited—because you're worth every second of torture."

Grace doesn't hesitate. She grabs the front of my shirt and pulls me to her, our mouths crashing together in a kiss that's all teeth and tongue and pent-up longing. It's messy and impatient, our hands roaming, tugging at clothes, gasps and growls echoing in the quiet cabin.

I lift her effortlessly, and her legs wrap around my waist, the heat of her core pressing against my hardness, separated only by the fabric of our clothes. I groan into her mouth, my control slipping as I carry her to the bed without breaking the kiss. I set her down gently, hovering over her, struggling to maintain some semblance of restraint.

"You're so beautiful," I whisper, tracing the curve of her jaw with my thumb. "I want to see all of you."

Grace reaches for the hem of my shirt, tugging it upward. "Too many clothes," she murmurs against my lips. "I need to feel your skin against mine."

I pull back just long enough to strip off my shirt, revealing the chest she's seen before but never been free to touch. Her hands immediately explore the planes of my torso, fingers tracing old scars and the contours of muscle. When she reaches the waistband of my jeans, her touch grows hesitant.

"Don't stop now," I encourage, my voice a low rumble as I capture her wrist and guide her hand lower, letting her feel how hard I am for her. "Feel what you do to me."

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She smiles, that mix of shyness and determination that I find so endearing, and pulls her own shirt over her head. The sight of her—skin flushed with desire, hair tousled, clad in a simple black bra—nearly undoes me. I reach behind her to unclasp her bra, my movements deliberate, giving her time to stop me if she wants. But she arches into my touch, helping me remove the garment.

"Perfect," I breathe, taking in the sight of her bare breasts, the pink nipples tightening under my gaze. "Even better than I imagined."

I lower my head, taking one nipple into my mouth, swirling my tongue around the sensitive peak. Grace gasps, her back arching off the bed, her hands flying to my hair to hold me in place. I lavish attention on one breast, then the other, alternating between gentle suction and the scrape of teeth until she's writhing beneath me.

Our clothes come off slowly at first—each piece peeled away with reverence—but it quickly tips into urgency. I can't get enough of her skin, warm and soft beneath my hands. My mouth finds every inch of her, trailing from her collarbone to her breasts, down her stomach to the sensitive skin of her inner thighs, mapping her body like I'm memorizing every curve, every response.

When I reach the waistband of her jeans, I look up at her, seeking permission. Her eyes are heavy-lidded with desire, her lips parted and swollen from my kisses.

"Please," she whispers, lifting her hips in invitation.

I unbutton her jeans and slide them down her legs, taking her panties with them, leaving her completely bare to my gaze. For a moment, I just look at her, drinking in

the sight of her naked body laid out before me like a feast.

"You're staring," she says, a hint of self-consciousness in her voice.

I shake my head, my eyes never leaving her. "I'm appreciating. There's a difference." I run my hands up her legs, from ankle to thigh, watching goosebumps rise in the wake of my touch. "You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

Her scent fills my senses, driving my wolf wild with need. I can smell her arousal, sweet and heady, as I graze my teeth along the sensitive skin of her inner thigh. She gasps and arches beneath me, her fingers tangling in my hair.

"Eli, please," she breathes, her voice breaking on my name.

"Please what?" I ask, my breath hot against her center. "Tell me what you want, Grace. I need to hear you say it."

Her cheeks flush, but her eyes meet mine with determination. "I want your mouth on me," she says, the words rushing out. "I want to feel you inside me. I want everything."

A growl of approval rumbles through my chest. "Good girl," I murmur, before lowering my head and tasting her for the first time.

She cries out, her hips bucking against my mouth as I lick a long, slow stripe through her folds. She's wet and ready, her taste intoxicating on my tongue. I devour her with single-minded focus, alternating between broad strokes and precise flicks against the bundle of nerves that makes her gasp my name.

When I slide one finger inside her, then two, she moans, her inner walls clenching around the intrusion. I curl my fingers, finding the spot that makes her back bow off

the bed, while my mouth continues its relentless assault on her clit.

"Oh god, Eli," she pants, her thighs trembling on either side of my head. "I'm going to—"

"That's it," I encourage, my voice rough with desire. "Come for me, sweetheart. Let me feel it."

Her release hits her like a tidal wave, her body tensing and then shuddering as she cries out my name. I work her through it, gentling my touch as the aftershocks ripple through her, until she tugs weakly at my hair.

"Too much," she gasps, her body still quivering.

I press a final kiss to her inner thigh before moving up her body, shedding my jeans and boxers as I go. When I settle between her thighs, she looks up at me with wonder, her hands reaching to trace the contours of my face.

"You're so beautiful," she whispers, echoing my earlier words. Her hand drifts down, wrapping around my length, and it's my turn to gasp. "And so hard for me."

"Only for you," I assure her, my voice strained as her hand explores, learning what makes me groan and what makes my hips buck. "Grace, if you keep that up, this is going to be over embarrassingly fast."

She smiles, a wicked gleam in her eye as she strokes me from base to tip. "We have all night," she reminds me. "And I plan to take full advantage of that."

I capture her wrist, bringing her hand to my lips to press a kiss to her palm. "Later," I promise. "Right now, I need to be inside you."

I position myself at her entrance, the head of my cock sliding through her wetness. We both groan at the sensation, our eyes locked together.

"Look at me," I murmur, and her eyes flutter open, locking with mine. "I need you to know—this means something to me. You mean everything to me."

Grace cups my face in her hands, her expression softening. "I know," she whispers. "You mean everything to me too." Her eyes well with emotion, and she adds, "You're my home, Eli. The only one I've ever had."

Those words—so simple, yet so profound coming from a woman who's never had a home—break something open inside me. I enter her slowly, watching her face as I fill her inch by inch. The sensation is overwhelming—tight, hot, perfect. Her eyes widen, her lips parting on a silent gasp as I push deeper.

"Okay?" I ask, holding myself still with effort.

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She nods, her hands sliding down to grip my shoulders, nails digging into my skin. "More than okay," she breathes. "You feel... god, Eli, you feel incredible."

I begin to move, setting a rhythm that's slow and deliberate at first, savoring the feeling of her body accepting mine. But it doesn't stay gentle for long. Our need for each other is too great, too urgent. Soon, I'm driving into her with abandon, her legs locked around my waist, her nails raking down my back.

"You're mine," I growl against her neck, my wolf surging to the surface. "Say it, Grace. Tell me you're mine."

"I'm yours," she gasps, meeting my thrusts with equal fervor. "Only yours, Eli. Always."

The words send a surge of possessive pleasure through me. I slip a hand between us, finding the spot where she's most sensitive, circling it with my thumb as I continue to thrust into her.

"That's it," I encourage, feeling her tightening around me. "Come for me again, sweetheart. I want to feel you come on my cock."

Grace's back arches off the bed as she comes, a cry tearing from her throat. Her inner walls clamp down on me, pulsing rhythmically, and the sight of her—completely uninhibited, completely mine—pushes me to the brink. I hold back, wanting to savor this moment, wanting to watch her fall apart in my arms.

She pulls me down, her lips brushing my ear as she whispers, "Let go, Eli. I want to

feel you come inside me."

Those words shatter my control. I bury myself deep inside her, my release hitting me with stunning force. Wave after wave of pleasure crashes over me as I empty myself into her, her name a broken mantra on my lips. My wolf howls in triumph, satisfied in a way I've never known before. She's marked with my scent, claimed in the most primal way.

Afterward, we lie tangled together, our bodies slick with sweat, our breathing gradually slowing. I brush a kiss to her temple, inhaling the scent of her—now mingled with mine in a way that makes my wolf rumble with contentment.

"What are you thinking?" she asks, her fingers tracing idle patterns on my chest.

"That I've never been happier," I answer honestly, my hand spanning her waist possessively. "That I want to wake up like this every day for the rest of my life."

She props herself up on one elbow, studying my face. "Even though I'm not a shifter? Even though I don't understand half of what it means to be your mate?"

I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, my touch gentle despite the fierce protectiveness I feel. "You understand more than you think. And the rest? We'll figure it out together."

Grace smiles, but there's a shadow of uncertainty in her eyes. "What if I'm not good at it? At staying. At building a life."

"Then we'll practice," I tell her, pulling her closer until her head rests on my chest, right above my heart. "You and me and Willow. Every day. And some days will be harder than others. But we'll keep trying, because that's what it means to have a home. It's not about the place—it's about the choice to stay, to work through the hard

parts."

She's quiet for a moment, her fingers tracing the line of my collarbone. "I never thought I'd want this. A house. A future. Someone to trust. Someone to share it with."

"And now?"

"Now I can't imagine wanting anything else." She tilts her face up to mine, her eyes shining with emotion. "I love you, Eli. I think I have for a while now. I was just too scared to admit it."

My heart swells at her words, a fierce joy spreading through me. "I love you too, Grace. You and Willow. More than I thought possible." I cup her face in my hands, my gaze intense. "You're mine now. My mate, my heart, my home. And I'm yours, completely."

We kiss again, slow and deep, the urgency replaced by something more profound. When we break apart, she settles back against me, her body relaxed and trusting.

"You and Willow don't have to run anymore," I murmur against her hair. "You're home."

Grace doesn't reply with words—just a contented sigh as she presses her body closer, her fingers laced with mine. But I don't need words. The way she fits against me, the steady beat of her heart, the peaceful expression on her face—they tell me everything I need to know.

Epilogue

Grace



The sun hangs low in the sky, casting golden light across the newly constructed buildings of Whispering Pines. Music drifts through the air, mingling with laughter and conversation as I stand at the edge of the celebration, taking it all in. The large wooden pavilion—completed just yesterday—hosts dozens of tables laden with food, while children chase each other across the freshly laid grass.

I still can't believe this is real. That we're here. That we're safe.

"You're doing it again," a familiar voice says beside me.

I turn to find Eli, two plates balanced in his hands and that crooked smile I've come to love warming his features. His hazel eyes catch the sunlight, turning them almost golden.

"Doing what?" I ask, accepting the plate he offers.

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"That thing where you look like you're waiting for everything to disappear." He nudges my shoulder gently. "It's real, Grace. All of it."

I glance around at the gathering—at the packs and families that have become our community over these past months. Ryan Thorne and his mate Jenna are helping serve food, while Hannah entertains a group of children with stories. Across the pavilion, Adrian and Maya are deep in conversation with Theo and several members of the Howling Pines pack. Even Sawyer has emerged from his usual solitude, sitting at a table with Ethan as they discuss security rotations.

And there—my heart swells—is Willow, racing across the grass with three other shifter children, her laughter carrying on the breeze. Six months ago, she wouldn't leave my side. Now she belongs here as much as anyone.

"I know it's real," I say softly. "I just never thought we'd have this."

Eli's hand finds mine, warm and steady. "Believe it. The first phase of the Sanctuary is complete. We did it."

"You did it," I correct him. "You and Adrian and everyone else who's been working on this for years."

"We all did it," a deep voice interrupts. Adrian approaches with Maya at his side, her hand linked with his. "Including you, Grace."

I shake my head. "I just helped with logistics."

"You did more than that," Maya insists. "You showed up every day, even when you were scared. That's what building something means—showing up, even when it's hard."

Adrian nods, his normally stern expression softened by the celebration. "The administrative work you've done for Theo's security team has been invaluable. You've helped coordinate our defenses, track patterns, establish protocols. The Sanctuary isn't just buildings—it's systems, people, community."

I feel warmth spread through my chest at their words. It's still hard for me to accept praise, to believe I've contributed anything meaningful. But I'm learning.

"There's still so much to do," Adrian continues. "Phase two begins next month. More housing, expanded medical facilities, reinforced perimeter—"

"Adrian," Maya cuts him off with a laugh, "it's a celebration. Save the planning for tomorrow."

He looks momentarily abashed, then nods. "You're right. Tonight is for celebrating what we've accomplished."

As they move on to greet others, Eli squeezes my hand. "Come with me? I want to show you something."

Curious, I follow him away from the pavilion, through the winding paths that connect the Sanctuary's buildings. We pass the community center, the medical clinic, and several of the completed family homes before turning onto the path that leads to—

"Our house," I whisper.

It stands before us, bathed in golden sunset light. It's not large or fancy—a simple

two-story structure with a wide front porch and large windows—but it's ours. The home that Eli built for us, for Willow, for our future.

He leads me up the steps, across the porch, and through the front door. Inside, everything is finished now. The hardwood floors gleam, the walls are painted in soft colors, and furniture—a mix of new pieces and items we've collected over the months—makes the space feel lived-in, welcoming.

"I know we're not moving in until next week," Eli says, "but I wanted you to see it complete. Just us, before everyone else comes through."

I walk slowly through the living room, trailing my fingers along the back of the couch. "It's perfect."

"Come upstairs," he says, taking my hand again.

We climb the stairs together, and he leads me down the hall to Willow's room. The walls are painted a soft green, with glow-in-the-dark stars scattered across the ceiling. Bookshelves line one wall, already filled with the books she loves. A window seat looks out over the forest edge, perfect for reading or daydreaming.

"She's going to love it," I say, my throat tight with emotion.

Next, he shows me the guest room, the bathroom with its large tub, and finally, at the end of the hall, our bedroom. The space is large and airy, with windows on two walls and a door leading to a small balcony. The bed is made with the quilt Maya helped me select, and framed photos line the dresser—snapshots of our growing family.

"What do you think?" Eli asks, his voice soft.

I turn to face him, taking in the man who has become my partner, my protector, my

love. The man who never pushed me to trust him but showed me, day after day, that I could.

"I think I'm home," I whisper.

His smile is slow and beautiful. "That's all I've wanted, from the moment you and Willow arrived. For you to feel safe. For you to stay."

"I'm not running anymore," I promise him, stepping closer. "I don't need to."

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:21 am*

He reaches up, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. "No, you don't. The hunters are gone, Grace. They've been gone for a long time. And even if new threats come—and they will—we'll face them together. All of us."

I nod, blinking back tears. "I know that now. It just took me a while to believe it."

"You got there," he says. "That's what matters."

We stand there in the fading light, in the bedroom of the home we'll share, and I marvel at how far we've come. From the terrified woman who arrived with nothing but a backpack and a fierce need to protect her sister, to this—to belonging, to community, to love.

"I love you," I tell him, the words still new on my tongue but growing more natural each time. "I didn't think I could ever trust anyone enough to say that again, but I do. I love you, Eli."

His eyes soften, and he pulls me closer. "I love you too, Grace. More than I thought possible."

When his lips meet mine, it feels like coming home all over again. His kiss is tender yet certain, a promise of all the days to come. I lean into him, into the safety of his arms, into the future we're building together.

Outside, I can hear the distant sounds of the celebration continuing. Soon, we'll go back, join our friends, watch Willow play with the other children. Tomorrow, we'll continue working on the Sanctuary, expanding it, strengthening it, making it a true

haven for all who need it.

But for now, in this moment, it's just us. Eli and Grace, no longer alone, no longer running.

Finally home.

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