

Chapter 1

While I slept, I dreamed of Ace.

I dreamed he held me close to his chest, his hands traveling over my body, massaging my sore muscles and caressing my bruised skin.

I dreamed he pressed his forehead against mine and brushed his nose against my cheek and jaw, his lips following soon after, tickling my skin and leaving comforting sparks in their wake.

I dreamed of his apologies, hearing him whisper the words "I'm sorry" and "I love you" repeatedly in my ear.

I dreamed of us as children, lying next to each other on the floor of his living room, under a canopy of blankets we'd built.

"Please, you have to remember," he pleaded. "My wolf needs you. Please remember."

"Remember what?" I asked, yawning.

He was obviously worried about something, and I hated that, but I was also so, so tired. We had played all day. All I wanted to do now was sleep, but he wouldn't stop talking to me.

Ace sniveled, and my eyes popped open, searching the darkness. Was he crying?

"You're my mate. My wolf misses you. He doesn't mean to scare you. Can't you remember him?"

"I'm your..." I blinked, trying to remember what he'd just said. Maybe he was sleep-talking? He wasn't making any sense. "What did you call me?"

Ace's pained whimper tugged at my heart. "No, please... I'll show you. Then you'll remember."

"Remember what?" I asked. I felt him move away from me, sitting up in our makeshift bed of blankets and throw pillows. "Ace, what are you doing? You're going to get us in trouble—"

Without warning, the top blanket of our fort was ripped back, and the room flooded with light.

"You two are supposed to be sleeping!" a deep voice boomed.

I shrieked and scrambled away until my back was against the bottom half of the couch. Mr. Stoll stood above us, wearing nothing but pajama bottoms and a massive glare on his face.

"You scared her!" Ace shouted. He jumped to his feet and marched up to his father, stopping only a foot away, and tilted his head back to look at him.

"If you two keep talking instead of sleeping, I'm not going to let you have any more sleepovers. Do you understand me, boy?"

Ace scowled and yipped as if he wasn't an eight-year-old squaring up against a terrifying giant. "She's my mate! You can't—"

Suddenly, Mr. Stoll's giant hand shot forward and grasped Ace's chin, squeezing it hard. "Have you been crying?"

Ace snarled and tried to pull back, but Mr. Stoll tightened his grip until Ace was forced to stop moving and whimpered slightly.

My lungs seized. I hated it when Ace's father got like this. Where was Esther? Ace's mom was usually the one to defuse a fight between these two.

"What did I tell you?" Mr. Stoll bit out. "What did I tell you about crying?"

Ace's chest heaved as he ground his teeth. "Alphas don't cry," he finally answered in a hard tone. His bottom lip wobbled. "But she doesn't remember my wolf! Even when I shift, it scares her—"

I jumped as Mr. Stoll slapped Ace hard across the cheek, throwing his head to the side with a loud clapping noise. "Are you a fucking omega, boy?"

Ace was still for several seconds, breathing heavily while he held his face. His entire body trembled. "No, sir."

"Then why are you whining and sniveling like one?" Mr. Stoll spat. Slowly, he bent down until he was level with his son.

When Ace refused to look at him, he grabbed him by the back of his hair and forced his head forward.

"It has been over a year since the lock was put on her mind. You have to stop this. This is not how an alpha behaves. Dorothy is making you weak. You are losing control of your wolf.

"If this continues, I will not hesitate to take her from you. Forever."

I wasn't sure how much time had passed when I finally started to regain consciousness. My body felt heavy from sleep, weak and exhausted, as if I had been out for a long while.

I felt confused and scared. For a moment, I thought I was still stuck in that basement and in danger.

But the floor beneath me felt too soft—warm. Not concrete. And there was a consistent, quiet beeping noise in my ear.

Something still felt off, though. It was all wrong. I wanted Ace. Where was Ace? I sensed him nearby the entire time I slept but couldn't feel him now.

Panic clawed up my throat, making it hard to breathe.

"A-Ace...?" I croaked. My voice was barely audible, groggy from sleep.

Still unable to open my eyes, I carefully reached my hand to the side, searching for him, only to find an empty bed. But it wasn't my bed. Ace wasn't there. Was he okay? Where was he?

"Dorothy?" The voice sounded far away. Someone squeezed my hand lightly.

This voice definitely didn't belong to Ace. It sounded like my mom.

"Joe," my mom continued, taking on an urgent tone. "Joe, I think she's waking up. Go get Ace. Hurry."

Determined footsteps followed my mother's demand, exiting the room.

Yeah, go get Ace, I thought. *Why isn't Ace here?*

"M-Mom?" I finally managed to force one of my eyes open, the other one still swollen shut and throbbing in my skull. Fluorescent lights shone above me. I blinked. "What...? What's going on?"

I was in a hospital room, lying in bed. A TV quietly played a rerun of *Seinfeld* in the corner, and midday light shone through the windows along the wall.

It was a big room, big enough to fit a couch and three armchairs, in addition to the bed I was in.

My mom was sitting in one of those armchairs, which she had pulled up to my bedside, and was looking down at me with a sweet smile.

"Hi, sweetie. Hi," she said to me. Despite the relieved smile on her face, there were also clear signs of exhaustion.

She looked different—older, somehow, like she had aged years since the last time I saw her.

Her eyes were red and puffy from crying, and her hair was messy, brown strands falling out of the loose bun she always wore.

"I'm so happy you're finally awake. You were out for almost two days."

Two days? No wonder I felt like I'd been run over by a truck.

"Where am I?" I tried to sit up, but a sharp pain in my leg made me stop. I winced. There was a large bandage wrapped around my thigh, keeping a good amount of gauze in place.

Oh, yeah. I was shot.

Well, that fucking sucks.

My mom rushed forward and put a steady hand on my shoulder to keep me still. "Try not to move too quickly. You're going to be hurting for a little while. Here, let's get you sitting up."

She propped my pillows behind my head and pressed a button on the side of my bed that made it tilt up.

"You're in a hospital in Montana," my mother explained in a soft tone. "You had a blood transfusion and surgery on your leg. You lost a lot of blood, so you'll probably feel weak for a little while."

She brushed a piece of loose hair out of my face. "You're going to be fine, though. You just need some time to heal and plenty of rest. How does your head feel?"

My skull felt heavy, like it was filled with lead. Even the slightest movement made the room spin slightly. A dull ache pounded through my head, and I realized that it was wrapped in bandages.

"It hurts," I mumbled, touching the edge of the bandages.

"You have a concussion." Mom studied me with concern. "Do you remember what happened?"

The events of the last several days were slowly coming back to me, but I still struggled to bring the exact memories forth—each one blurrier and more warped than the last.

I was safe now, that much I knew, but the terror I felt was still close and fierce.

Why? Why was I so scared?

Then it hit me.

Mitchell, my biological father, was dead.

Elias shot me.

Ace killed Elias.

Ace was a werewolf.