

Chapter 10

Thankfully, my mother came prepared.

She knocked on my door one evening and carried into my room a box of all the books she read when she discovered she was an omega nearly ten years ago, plus some with up-to-date information.

I spent hours upon hours devouring any information I could get my hands on about the werewolf world, the mate bond, and what it meant to be an omega.

And with my eighteenth birthday only a few days away, the lock on my mind was almost completely worn off. At last, I could absorb the information without it hurting and without forgetting it.

It was both maddening and incredibly validating to have access to so much knowledge about werewolves naturally.

Maddening because I could have known it all so long ago, and validating because it answered every single question I had ever asked about myself.

It explained why I was so passionate about having a family someday: it was in my DNA to want kids; it was why I got so horny around Ace.

And when I read about "mind-linking," I realized I hadn't been crazy when I heard Ace talking to me when I was trapped in Robert's basement, asking me where I was.

Even now, I could feel his presence in the back of my mind, like there was this invisible string tying us together, tugging on my subconscious.

Sometimes, I could hear Ace's deep voice murmuring soothing things in my ear while I slept. His voice chased away my nightmares and helped me sleep through the night.

I never said anything and was silently grateful to him for that. I had shared a bed with him since we were little, and my body still needed its mate to sleep well—one way or another.

I also discovered what that strange bump on my neck was. It was something called a "mating gland." But as an omega, its appearance also meant my body was fully mature and—*cringe*—ready to breed.

I thought back to when I noticed the gland. It was the same morning Ace gave me my first-ever orgasm. He'd nuzzled his face into my neck afterward, licking and kissing the spot where my gland was now.

Ace and I admitted we had feelings for each other only a week or so after that, and not long later, we had a very serious conversation about his possessiveness and confusing behavior.

Could it all be explained by the appearance of my mating gland? Was that what caused Ace and me to get together so suddenly?

An unwelcome thought entered my head: Was that the *only* reason Ace and I got together? Would he have still wanted me if it weren't for our biology pushing us together?

I knew Ace said that he had been in love with me since the moment we met, but I didn't know which of his words I should and shouldn't believe.

And if he *did* actually love me like he said he did, then why didn't we stay together after the first time we admitted that we liked each other when we were fifteen?

Why did Ace wait three years to admit he had feelings for me again?

I must have forgotten my own feelings for him due to the lock, but it wasn't as if we couldn't have still been together.

I had always been in love with him. But I had been so confused, my thoughts all jumbled and messed up, that I didn't realize my feelings for him until recently.

But had he told me he loved me at any point in the last three years, I was *positive* that was all it would have taken for me to realize I loved him too and instantly swoon at his feet.

He told me he loved me only after I developed my mating gland and he knew I was close to going into heat.

Was that the only reason Ace was attracted to me?

All the books I read about mates described this all-consuming, undeniable need to be together. And while I certainly felt that on my end, I was starting to question if Ace felt that way as well.

Maybe he was relieved I couldn't remember the beginning of our relationship. Maybe he didn't feel the same tug of the mate bond and only wanted to be friends.

Until my first heat forced us together anyway.

I knew my thoughts were irrational, but I couldn't stop them from snowballing to an even darker place, completely out of my control.

If Ace were only attracted to me when I was approaching my heat, what would happen *after* my heat passed? When my mating gland was old news and I was no longer giving off those pheromones?

Would he want to go back to being just friends?

Would he find another girl to warm his bed—one he was attracted to year-round—and make her his girlfriend, only coming back to me the next time I started smelling good?

Oh, God. I was going to be sick.

Slamming my hand over my mouth, I launched myself out of my bed and raced to my bathroom as quickly as my injured leg could manage, where I instantly knelt in front of the toilet and hurled.

Even as I vomited my guts out, my thoughts continued to race, proceeding down the miserable rabbit hole that I had created for myself.

What if Ace only wanted me because I was an omega? What if he had spent all these years making me depend on him, just so I'd give him "powerful children"?

What if Ace wasn't even my mate? He gained his wolf at such a young age that it was entirely possible that the animal in him simply recognized me as an omega.

Did Ace just tell me I was his mate to keep me around for the power it gave him and his family? Being an innocent, infatuated omega, I stood no chance of resisting the powerful, handsome alpha.

No. I forced myself to backtrack. None of that made sense. Ace wasn't that cruel. He cared about me, if only as a friend.

Why else would he have slept next to me every night and stuck by my side for all these years?

He probably just took pity on the little omega who clung onto him one day on a cruise ship and brought her back to his pack in the hope she would eventually find her mate and move on.

Or maybe he confused the pull of an alpha to an omega with the bond between soulmates.

And then, when we were fifteen, he realized he didn't want a romantic relationship with me and used the lock to put off us getting together.

It all made sense. Deep down, I had always known I wasn't good enough to be Ace's mate.

He was this Greek god of a man—beautiful, powerful, respected by everyone around him, and the alpha of one of the most powerful werewolf packs in the entire world.

And then there was me.

How could I ever measure up? The mate of an alpha was supposed to be strong; she was meant to lead by his side. I couldn't lead a pack of werewolves. I didn't know they existed until three weeks ago.

No, I was just a human. A small, human omega who would never be worthy of the love of someone like Ace.

So, there it was. In the span of ten minutes, I had somehow convinced myself of three totally nonsensical but also, at the time, seemingly undeniable facts:

Ace didn't actually love me. He only kept me around because I was an omega and wanted me for breeding. And we were never even mates to begin with.

The impact that these realizations had on my body was intense.

Agonizing.

Horrific.

Pain as I had never experienced it before consumed me, racing through my form. I screamed, the sound scaring even me with its bloodcurdling quality as it echoed off the tiles of my bathroom walls.

But this wasn't the sort of pain that came with heat. I had experienced enough on the suppressants to recognize the discomfort I would feel when I naturally went through estrus.

I could feel this pain deep in my soul. My heart was being torn in two.