

## Chapter 11

"Dorothy!" someone's voice called to me. I could barely hear them over the blood pumping in my ears.

All I knew was that it wasn't Ace. I wanted it to be Ace.

The person grabbed my shoulders with gentle hands and wrapped an arm around my chest so they could pull me back against them, away from the toilet that I was still gripping onto for dear life.

"I'm here," the voice continued as she rocked my sobbing form against her. My mom. It was my mom. "I'm here, sweetheart."

My father appeared in the doorway. "What the hell is going on?"

I fought against my mom's hold, her touch feeling like sandpaper burning. The pain was getting worse. My eyesight blurred, and I screamed again, panic exploding in my veins.

It was as if my lungs were filled with broken glass. My body was throbbing, aching for my mate.

"You need to calm down, Dorothy. Breathe," my mom said to me. She kept her tone even and assertive. "Ace loves you. He has always loved you."

I shook my head, sobbing too hard to respond.

"Yes, he does," she insisted. "Ace is your mate, and he loves you. Nothing is ever going to change that."

"H-how do you know?" I sputtered. My hiccupping breaths made it hard to speak. "He's not here. What if he doesn't w-want me anymore?"

I sounded pathetic, even to my own ears. I couldn't stand that I felt this way. But the feeling didn't cease; it only grew.

"He's not here *because* he loves you so much. He's giving you space to process everything. If you allowed it, he would be here in an instant. He's missing you just as much as you're missing him."

The sound of a phone ringing caught my attention. My eyes flew to my father, who was still standing in the bathroom doorway.

With a contrite look, my father reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell. "It's Madoc," he stated. "I'm sure this is about Ace. Madoc's with him right now."

My breath caught at the mention of Ace, and I sat up, my pain fading the slightest bit.

I was suddenly intensely aware of Ace trying to break into my mind.

I hadn't noticed before; too consumed was I by the agony overtaking every inch of my body, but I was now stunned by the pounding of Ace's insistent presence in my mind.

I'd let my walls down. He probably felt the pain I was in and was worried. Hence Madoc's phone call.

Little by little, I started to calm down. My shoulders released some tension, and I slumped against my mom, finally feeling like I could breathe again.

Maybe Ace still cared about me after all.

I shook my head. *Of course* he did. How could I have ever thought any differently?

"Do you want me to ignore it?" my dad asked. He gave me a hopeful, sympathetic look. "Or do you want to answer it, maybe?"

"N-no," I croaked. "You can answer it."

If I answered it and it ended up being Ace on the other end of the line, my resolve would definitely break. I would go running to him in an instant.

Dad nodded and raised the phone to his ear. "Hello?"

I could barely hear the voice on the other side of the phone, but I could tell it wasn't Ace. So, it didn't bother me when my father stepped out of the room.

I wiped my tears away and curled up against my mom. I was exhausted. My muscles ached, and every inch of me was covered in sweat.

My mom gently brushed a piece of hair out of my face while she studied me with concern. "You scared me. I've never heard you scream like that."

"I'm sorry," I whispered. I had scared myself too.

"I don't think it was your fault, honey. Are you feeling better now?"

I nodded. I was feeling much better, especially now that I knew Ace was thinking about me. It was good to be reminded of our connection.

I just hoped I hadn't worried him too much. I wouldn't be able to handle his wolf storming through my house if he thought I was in danger.

"I don't know what happened. I've never experienced anything like that before." I frowned, blinking up at her. "How did you know I was thinking about Ace?"

It wasn't abnormal for my mom to know just what to say to make me feel better, but reassuring me that Ace still loved me after I had convinced myself he didn't want me was a little too on the money.

I hadn't said it out loud, so unless she could read my mind...

My dad appeared once again, his eyes landing mine with urgency. "Did you try to break your mate bond with Ace?" He kept his hand over the microphone of his phone.

"What? No!"

My feelings toward Ace might have been complicated at the moment, but I would never consider breaking our bond.

*Wait, you can break the bond?*

"Madoc just told me that Ace is freaking out because he felt you trying to reject him," he continued.

"But... What...? No! I would never do that! I don't even know *how* to reject him!"

"Then why—?"

"It's the suppressants," my mom said. "They can play tricks on your mind if you take them for too long. You're denying your body your heat. It can feel like you're being rejected by your mate."

"She convinced her body it was being rejected?" my father asked, sounding appalled. "Is that even possible?"

"Of course it is," my mother continued. "I would probably have done the same thing when I was on suppressants if I didn't have you by my side, constantly reassuring me."

"It's easy to assume your mate must hate you when you're telling your body it can't go into heat because you have no one there to help you through it."

She looked down at me. "That's how I knew you were thinking about Ace. I thought you might need a reminder that he still loves you, even though he's not here."

Of course. Everything my mom said made so much sense.

I had been fighting doubts surrounding Ace and my relationship for weeks now. None of them were grounded in reality; I knew that.

But as certain as I was that my thoughts were irrational, I still couldn't shake them. No matter how hard I fought, they pulled me down into a miserable little hole of doubt and insecurity.

I think my dad was right. I think I *had* almost accidentally rejected Ace. It would explain the soul-crushing pain I'd just felt.

"You're never going on suppressants ever again," my father declared to my mother. His tone was final. I'm sure he would have said it to me, too, if he thought he had any say in the matter.

I forced myself to sit up, my heart suddenly racing at the thought of causing Ace to feel any of the same pain I had just experienced. "Is Ace okay?"

"I'll ask," my father replied. "It might take a second. I need to give them an update on you too. I guess Ace is freaking out."

My father disappeared, and after what felt like the longest few minutes of my life, he returned with his phone no longer in sight and an unreadable expression on his face.

"Ace is okay," he told me. "He's very worried about you, but he's okay."

I let out a long breath. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure. You don't have to worry about him. He's strong."

I was so relieved—I had to fight back tears.

"He wants to see you," my father added in a soft tone. "He was pretty adamant that I relay that part."

My heart lodged itself in my throat, making it hard to swallow. I wanted to see him too. Desperately. But was I ready for that? Was I ready to be under his thumb again?

I suppose it didn't matter what I wanted. If Ace wanted to see me, there was nothing I would be able to do to stop him.

"Don't worry," my dad reassured me. "I said you would reach out to him if you wanted to see him."

"As if that would stop him from coming." I leaned back against my mom and closed my eyes. "Is the front door unlocked? You should probably check. Actually, Ace would probably tear it out its hinges."

"Ace isn't coming here unless you ask him to. He promised to give you space," my dad said.

"But can we really expect him to keep that promise?" I pointed out. "He tends to do whatever he wants."

Like when he erased my memories without asking me just to keep me by his side.

"He's kept his promise so far, hasn't he?" My mom rubbed her hand up and down my arm while she spoke. "I'm not trying to defend Ace. I'm always on your side."

"But this is the longest two of you have ever been apart. It's clearly eating away at both of you, yet Ace is still keeping his distance. He wants to earn your trust back. This is how he is doing it."

My dad crouched down in front of me, the look on his face telling me I wasn't going to like what he was about to say.

"There's another reason he's been able to stay away for so long. Ace sort of, well, he locked himself up."

I gasped. "He what?"

"There are cells in Ace's basement. They're laced with silver to hold werewolves. Our pack hasn't had much use for them in the last hundred years. Ace has been in one since he got back from Montana."

"Why?" I asked. "Why would he do that?"

"Because he knew it was the only way he would be able to stay away from you."

My throat felt raw. "He's been there this whole time? For three whole weeks?"

My father nodded slowly.

"Let him out! Someone has to let him out of there!"

"It's okay, Doe," Mom said. "He chose this. His wolf has been out of control, his human side too weak to suppress him right now."

She paused, her eyes filled with concern. "It's safer for you and everyone else in the pack if he stays there. The last thing he wants is to have his wolf hunt you down and scare you."

"And he *would* hunt you down. He's desperate to be with you."

My body deated. I wasn't sure what to do with this news.

No wonder Ace had been able to stay away. He gave himself no other choice.