

Chapter 12

By the time my eighteenth birthday rolled around, my mood had only soured.

My little brothers had exploded into my room around seven in the morning, singing "Happy Birthday" at the top of their lungs.

They presented me with a tray of breakfast foods they'd made themselves, lined with bouquets of flowers they'd picked from Mom's garden.

My family showered me with gifts: handmade drawings, cards, and framed pictures from the younger kids; a computer; a cookbook by my favorite baker; a journal with fancy glitter pens; jewelry; clothes.

They gave me so much love that my heart should've been so full it was about to burst. And yet, I just felt empty.

I faked a smile and thanked them for everything. I gave them hugs and laughed when they sang to me off-pitch.

But all I wanted was Ace. He was supposed to be with me.

We had been talking about spending my eighteenth birthday together for months. We had plans. Today was supposed to be the day he told me everything—when everything changed.

I was secretly relieved when my brothers left for school. Misery may love company, but no one deserved to be around me right now.

So, you can imagine my disappointment when my father wandered into my room after everyone else had left and sat himself down on the end of the bed. He looked at me expectantly.

I groaned quietly. I'd known this was coming. "Do we have to talk about this right now?" I grumbled. "I didn't sleep last night."

I readjusted the countless pillows behind me, punching them into place. I huffed when I couldn't get them quite right.

Nesting was just one of the other lovely traits that came with being an omega. It is the overwhelming urge to prepare a safe space where an omega can feel comfortable and in control.

Some omegas prefer enclosed or compact spaces, like a closet where they can feel sheltered from the rest of the world, while others prefer to build cozy forts of blankets and string lights.

Apparently, in rare cases, some prefer the outdoors so they are surrounded by nature.

Considering I was both stressed and nearing my heat, it wasn't a surprise that my instincts were pushing me to nest. But until Ace was in it, I knew it wouldn't be perfect. He was the last touch.

I thought of all the times Ace had wrapped me in blankets and spent the night watching movies with me—or when he helped me build forts in the living room when we were little.

He knew. He knew what I needed even when I didn't and was always more than eager to provide.

My dad tilted his head. "What do you think I want to talk to you about?"

I sighed and pulled my blankets up to my chin. I wished they could hide me away from the world.

"You're going to tell me how worried you are about me and...that maybe it's time to forgive Ace so that nothing like that ever happens again."

My dad frowned. "Actually, that wasn't my plan at all. But it's good to know where your head's at."

I gave him a pointed look, not believing him for a single second. He'd seen how much pain I had been in, and the only way to put an end to that pain was to go back to my mate.

For certain, he was about to lecture me on how it was time to stop moping around and eventually give in to the mate bond.

Or maybe you're the one feeling that way, my extremely unhelpful inner voice said.

"Then what is your plan?" I asked.

He hesitated for a long moment before finally saying, "I have another gift for you." He reached into his pocket.

I looked at the object he held in his hand. My brow rose. "Car keys?"

"Yes. I got you a car. It's parked out front right now. It has a full tank of gas and a bag in the back seat filled with extra suppressants and enough cash to get you to wherever you want to go."

Was my brain broken? Why the hell would he buy me a car and fill it with suppressants and cash? I didn't need a car. Ace always insisted on driving me around everywhere.

Oh.

"I don't understand," I whispered.

My father's inhale was rocky. "I'm letting you go, Doe. If you want to go. I'm providing you with all the tools you need to get out of this town and just...escape for a while."

"I... I didn't know what to say. "Why?"

He leaned forward with a heavy sigh, resting his elbows on his knees. "What we did to you—lying to you for all those years—was awful, whatever our reasons.

"The last thing I want is for you to hate us for the rest of your life, but after everything you've been through, I wouldn't blame you if you did. So, I'm letting you go."

Yeah, my brain was definitely broken because none of this was making any sense.

"You're... you're sending me away because you're worried I hate you? Do you really think that's going to fix the problem?"

"I'm not sending you away. I would never do that. If it were up to me, you would live under my roof until you're old and wrinkly. I'm just giving you the option to decide for yourself."

He ran a hand down his face. "And it's only partially because I'm worried about you hating me.

"Your whole life has been decided for you, Dorothy. It's normal for werewolves to be protective over omegas, but I fear we've taken it too far with you and stripped you of your confidence in the meantime.

"Whatever your next chapter is—whether it's staying here or going away, getting back together with Ace or never seeing him again—I want it to be your choice.

"I'm giving you back the keys to your life. They never should have been taken from you in the first place."

I stared at him. "I... This..." I struggled to find the words.

"I know it's a lot to process. I'm not saying you have to go. Or even should go. I'm just giving you the option."

My eyebrows tugged together as I processed his words. "What if I want to go to college?"

"Then I'll help you with your applications," he stated, his tone firm. "I think you would really like college. You've always been such a great student."

Okay, he might actually be serious about this.

"What about Ace? He would go ballistic if I just disappeared. He'll never let me go."

"That's why I suggest you don't tell anyone where you go. Not even me. Ace will use his alpha tone to make me give up information if he thinks I know anything. Keep your location a secret."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small cell phone with a glossy black screen. "I got you a burner phone. It already has my number, your mother's, Madoc's, and Ace's in it.

"I would use this one over your normal phone if you need to make any calls. And if you pay for anything, use the cash I gave you so you can't be tracked."

"Jesus, Dad," I mumbled, taking the phone from him and turning it over in my hands. "Should I change my name too? You make it sound like I'm entering the witness protection program."

"You're mated to an alpha, Dorothy, a powerful one. If you run from him, he will go to the ends of the earth to find you. And he will find you."

"I just want to give you as much time as possible before that happens. As much time as you need to heal.

"I don't mean to make it sound so scary, but if this is something you want to do, we need to take it seriously."

"But what about my kidnappers? Ace said someone had to be watching me at all times because I could still be in danger. Aren't you worried about Robert finding me again if I'm on my own?"

"We have eyes on Robert. You don't have to worry about him."

"What about Mr. Callahan? Did you ever figure out what happened to him?" The last time I'd seen my old teacher was when he disappeared from Robert's basement after Alpha Waylen showed up.

"Cormac Callahan is a werewolf without a wolf. He's weaker than the rest of us and should know better than to ever come near any of us again, especially now that we know he tried to kill you.

"But in the event something bad does happen or you feel like you're in some sort of danger, I also got you this."

He pulled one final object from his pocket—a necklace.

It had a silver chain, long enough to fall well below my chest. And instead of a normal pendant hanging from the end of it, there was a small piece of white plastic with a button in the middle of it.

"This is a tracker," my father explained. "I set it up so that it'll send me and Ace your location, but only if you press the button. I suggest that you always wear it just in case something happens.

"I'll admit it's not a completely foolproof plan. Depending on how far away you go, we might not get to you in time if something happens. But it's better than nothing."

I must have had anxiety written all over my face because my dad put a comforting hand over mine and squeezed it lightly.

"This is only if the worst-case scenario occurs. The tracker is more for your peace of mind. And mine." He winked at me.

"It is very unlikely that anything will happen now that Robert and Mitchell are no longer credible threats."

When I didn't say anything in response for several long seconds—processing, *worrying*—he squeezed my hand again, bringing my eyes back to him.

"Look, it's true that as an omega, you'll never be completely safe.

"But nowhere is completely safe. It's part of being human. And I wouldn't let you go if I thought you were going to get attacked the minute you walked out the door.

"If you want to leave, this is a risk you'll have to take. You can't hide away forever. You need to live your life."