

Chapter 13

My father turned my hand over and dropped the necklace into my palm. The longer I looked at it, the more I realized I had some sort of familiarity with the object.

"I recognize this," I murmured. My gaze traveled back to him. "Why do I feel like I've seen this before?"

"Tracking devices are common in the werewolf community. We often have pups who are entering puberty wear them so they can notify their parents if they start to shift.

"Thomas and Elliot started wearing theirs about a year ago, although they haven't had to use them yet. Your mom also wears one in case she unexpectedly goes into heat.

"They keep them under their clothes, but I'm sure there have been times when you've caught a glimpse. The lock on your mind may have erased the memories, but it's probably why you recognize it."

"Couldn't they just use mind-link?"

"Not until after they shift for the first time. They need to be in touch with their wolves first.

"And as for your mother, she is often in too much pain to mind-link if she goes into heat and we're not near to each other."

I nodded slowly, my gut twisting. "What if I"—I bit back my cringe—"go into heat?"

Barf. Barf ng.

This wasn't a topic I wanted to be discussing with my father, but it had to be done.

"If the suppressants stop working and I'm not near Ace..." My voice trailed off as I imagined all the horrible scenarios that could take place.

An omega in heat, especially an unclaimed one like me, is nearly impossible for unmated male werewolves to resist, or so I'd been led to believe by the books and everyone else.

It wouldn't matter how far away Ace was or how quickly he could get to me. All it would take is one male to get to me before Ace and...

I shook the thought from my head. I didn't want to think about it.

"As long as you keep taking suppressants, that won't happen," Dad said. "It's rare for suppressants not to work for omegas, but even so, we'd have known within the first few days of you taking them.

"And there are enough suppressants in your new car to get you through the next year or so. But if that's not enough, I've also left instructions on how to get more."

"A year?" I exclaimed. "You expect me to go away for a whole year?"

I wasn't even sure if I wanted to run away yet, but if I did, I'd been thinking about going for a few weeks at the most.

But going away for an entire year was a completely different story. That was enough time to build a whole new life. I could get an apartment, start a new job, go to college, travel the world...

The possibilities were endless.

My future had never felt so...open.

"I don't want you to go at all," my dad reiterated. "But if you do decide to leave, it can be for as long as you want. A year, a month, even just a long weekend.

"Nothing is stopping you. I'm giving you everything you need. If you don't go, it will be because *you* made that choice."

Silence hung between us while I thought it all over. He really was providing me with everything I needed to escape Embermoon, and I couldn't think of any other excuses that might hold me back.

Well, except for Ace. I would miss Ace a lot. And my family. And Marta.

But my dad was right. If I wanted to do this without Ace immediately dragging me back, I needed to cut off all contact with the people I love.

Otherwise, Ace would force them to give me up if he knew I was still in touch with anyone in this town.

But that meant I would be completely alone. Like, *alone* alone. The most alone I had ever been.

I had never even been to a sleepaway camp or an overnight school trip without Ace by my side. Was I really ready to *live* on my own?

"Could you come with me?" I asked my dad. At least I would have some sort of support system to count on.

His eyes softened. "I would love to. But I need to stay here with your mother and brothers. They need me. And someone needs to run the pack in Ace's absence."

Right. My father was technically the acting alpha of the pack right now.

I considered asking if Mom could come, but I knew better than that. With two of my brothers so close to shifting for the first time, it would have been selfish to take her away.

"So, I would be completely on my own," I murmured.

"I know this is scary, Doe. I wish there was another way to do this. But you deserve the same opportunity for independence as any other young person your age.

"Eighteen is when you should be experiencing the world, not lying in bed with a broken heart. You are capable of so much more than that. You are *worth* so much more than that."

My eyes pricked with unexpected tears. He was right. I had been thinking the same thing even before he suggested it.

I had been behaving like a weak little girl these past few weeks. Maybe even my entire life.

No more.

"And who knows," Dad continued, "maybe some distance is exactly what you need in order to be able to forgive Ace."

I picked at my blankets. "And if I'm never able to forgive him?"

"Then you're going to need that distance even more."

My stomach rolled with nerves. Was I actually considering this? No. No, absolutely not. Getting space from Ace was not worth losing my family, even if it was only temporary.

And I'd surely find a way to mess it all up. I'd lose the suppressants my dad gave me, or get in an accident and total my car, or get mugged and killed somewhere where no one would ever find my body.

I couldn't be on my own. I just... couldn't.

"Do you remember the last conversation we had before you were taken?"

I blinked, confused about the relevance of his question. "You mean when you were trying to get a hold of Madoc? When you asked me to babysit the boys?"

Of course I remembered that conversation. He called me immature. Actually, I think his exact words were "fucking immature."

Dad said I wasn't capable of taking care of my younger brothers on my own and that I needed Madoc with me in case anything happened.

"Yes," he answered. "When I yelled at you. I said some pretty nasty things. I should never have spoken to you like that. I've been meaning to apologize to you, but I've been trying to give you space."

His eyes shone with unshed tears. "I am so, so sorry, Dorothy."

My forehead puckered. I had no idea that this had been weighing so heavily on his mind.

"It's okay. I'm not going to say it didn't hurt to hear, but it's not as if you were wrong. You didn't want me alone that night because you knew I shouldn't be without protection.

"And maybe, if I would've just listened to you and trusted you when you said I needed someone with me, Robert wouldn't have taken me or hurt the boys."

He shook his head. "No, Doe. Nothing that happened that night was your fault. You had every right to question why I wouldn't let you be on your own. You are just as capable as anyone else."

I lowered my eyes. Was I though? I was pretty sure there was no way that night could have gone more poorly.

My brothers ended up poisoned and unconscious, and I woke up chained to a chair in a basement in Montana while my biological father and his psycho-werewolf-hunter friend held me at gunpoint.

"But I *wasn't* capable that night—"

"By no fault of your own. You didn't know about the danger you were in. But *had* you known—had you had the proper information—I know it would've been different."

I supposed he was right. Instead of trying to prove everyone wrong about not being able to handle being on my own, I would've called Ace and told him I couldn't find Madoc.

And I would've been much more worried about going into heat without Ace by my side.

"We never should've left you alone when you knew so little. We put you in that position. *We* failed you, Doe." He paused, tension filling the air around us. "*I* failed you."

My chest tightened. "Dad..."

"Never again. *Never* again." He grabbed the car key from the bed and dropped it in my palm, closing my fingers over it. "You know everything now. Your future is in your own hands."