

## Chapter 15

Madoc's voice was worried, maybe even a little panicked. He wasn't expecting my call and probably assumed I was in danger.

"I...I, um..." The weight of the last few days pressed down on me, and it took a great deal of effort not to burst into tears. I could barely get my words out.

"You're freaking me out here, Doe," Madoc urged. "Do you need me to come get you?"

"No!" I sucked in a breath and swallowed my emotions. "No, I'm fine. I'm fine. I just... You're not with Ace, are you?"

That made him pause. "Yes. He's just downstairs. Do you need him?"

I nodded, despite knowing he couldn't see me. "Yes. I tried calling him, but he didn't answer. Can you give him the phone, please?"

"Of course," Madoc answered immediately.

Then came the sound of shuffling and quick footsteps.

"He's a little, um, occupied at the moment. I mean, he's busy, but it might take me a second to get through to him. Don't go anywhere, okay?"

Occupied? I didn't like the sound of that.

"Okay," I breathed out. "Thanks, Madoc."

"I'll be right back," he said.

So, apparently, Madoc wasn't watching over Ace like I thought. At least he was in the same house as him.

It was several seconds before I heard anything else, and I tried not to let it worry me.

Finally, Madoc spoke again. "The luna wants to talk to you. She sounds upset."

The sound of a growl met my ears through the phone, immediately tugging on my heart.

Ace. He was there.

"Your mate needs you, Alpha," Madoc said with a little more emphasis. "You need to shift so you can take the phone."

A few beats of silence followed, and then finally, *nally*...

"Doe?" Ace's deep voice rang through the speaker. "Are you okay?"

That was all it took. Those few words from my mate made me break. One sob escaped my mouth. Then another, and another until I was a weeping mess.

I couldn't help it. I just missed him so much, and I was so glad to hear he was okay.

"No, baby, no. Don't cry. Please don't cry," Ace begged. "What is it? Tell me what happened."

I tried to follow his orders, but it was hard. I had been deprived of my mate for too long. Instead of words, more sobs poured from my mouth.

Ace snarled. "Let me the fuck out of here, Madoc!" he shouted, obviously not talking to me anymore. "Now!"

Uh-oh, didn't want that.

I took a few gasping breaths and, with great difficulty, forced my sobs down. "No, I'm okay. I'm okay, Ace."

Ace let out a relieved sigh. "Okay, I need you to talk to me. What's wrong? What's going on?"

I sniffed, wiping my nose with the sleeve of his sweatshirt. It smelled like him. "Are you okay?"

There was a pause. "Am I okay?"

"M-my dad told me you locked yourself up. He said your wolf is out of control."

"Oh, Doe... Is that what's had you so worried? I felt your emotions shift a few days ago after our bond was almost cut off. It's been driving my wolf up the wall."

It was strange to hear him talk about his wolf so casually after years of him avoiding the topic like the plague. It felt good, refreshing even, to know he wasn't keeping secrets from me anymore.

"I had a nightmare," I explained. "Well, not really a nightmare. It was a memory but in dream form. I've been having them a lot lately. Every time I go to sleep."

I pushed my messy hair out of my face. "It was my fifteenth birthday, and we were at our lake. You were in wolf form...a—and... Did Mitchell stab you the day he found out you took the lock off me?"

There was a tense pause before he finally replied. "You remember that, huh?"

"He t-ried to kill you," I continued, not caring that I was starting to spiral again. "Right in front of me. I—I didn't know. You didn't tell me. Why...why didn't you tell me?"

"Oh, baby girl...", Ace murmured. "Mitchell had just died. You were grieving, and in pain, and so, so scared. I was trying not to speak ill of the dead."

"But you almost died! Mitchell almost killed you, and you didn't think that was worth mentioning?"

"Doe—"

"And on top of that, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you and *worrying*."

"Picturing you locked up in a tiny cell in your basement, unable to control your wolf, all because of me and my decision to break up with you—"

"Absolutely not," Ace said, his hard voice like the bite of a poison whip. "You will not blame yourself for any of this."

"My inability to keep my animal side under control is *not* your fault. I'm okay. You don't have to worry about me."

I pressed my face into my bent knees, more tears pouring down my cheeks.

"I do have to worry about you! You locked yourself up. You haven't gone outside since I got home from the hospital. I don't know if you're eating or drinking or taking care of yourself—"

"I'm okay, Doe," Ace stated. "Do you hear me? I'm okay. I made the decision to be here—"

"But why? It doesn't make any sense! You—"

"To stay away from you! I wouldn't have been able to give you the space you needed if I hadn't locked myself up. My wolf is desperate to comfort you. This was the only way I could let you heal alone."

Was that really the only way for him to stay away from me? To lock himself up?

A shudder racked me, and I was suddenly finding it very hard to swallow.

I hated this. I hated everything about it.

Ace made a whimpering noise that I somehow knew came from his wolf.

"What can I do, Doe?" he pleaded through the phone, sounding just as pained as I felt. "What do you need? How can I make you feel better?"

I sniffed. "I...I guess I just wanted to hear your voice."

It was such a relief to talk to him again after all our time apart. Just this short conversation had taken such a weight off my shoulders. I felt like I could breathe again. I didn't want it to end.

"Okay. Okay, then let's talk. You've got me for as long as you want. What do you want to talk about?"

I pushed down the gnawing ache in my chest. My misery would not get in the way of me speaking to my mate for the first time in almost a month. "Were you okay after Mitchell stabbed you?"

"It was barely even a scratch. I was able to restrain him before he caused any real damage to either of us. Besides, werewolves heal fast. I don't even have a scar anymore."

I believed him. If Mitchell had left a mark on him, I would have found it a long time ago. I knew Ace's body better than I knew my own.

"What is it like there? Is someone taking care of you?" I asked.

"Madoc brings me food every day and checks in on me. He's the only one who I trust to handle my wolf. I think my animal side would kill anyone else who came near us."

He paused. "Anyone besides you, that is."

As if I would go anywhere near his wolf right now. I may have dreamed that he was a nice, loving puppy, but I knew the truth now. I'd seen what that monster was capable of.

"You're not a wolf right now," I pointed out.

"That's because I'm talking to you. My wolf knows you need my human side right now."

"But this is the first time I've been human for a couple of weeks now. My wolf knows you're aware of his existence again and has decided he is done hiding from you."

There was another moment of quiet before Ace continued. "He would do anything to be by your side right now. Especially since you're in pain."

As if to prove his point, a low growl came from Ace, ringing through the phone's speaker and piercing my chest.

"I would do anything to be by your side, too, you know," Ace continued in a gentle, quiet tone. "I'm so relieved you called. I miss you like hell, Doe. I've never been so miserable in all my life."

Guilt gnawed at my gut. "I'm not going to apologize. I wish you didn't have to be locked up in there, but I...I won't take the blame." Even though it felt like it was all my fault.

"You shouldn't apologize." Ace's response was immediate. "That's not what I want."

"I didn't tell you I'm miserable to make you feel bad. I know that you need time to process and heal. I just want you to know you're not alone in your pain. I'm right there with you."

As if that was supposed to make me feel any better. I never wanted Ace to be in pain.

Even if he wiped my memories, messed with my brain, forced my family to lie to me, and murdered a man right in front of me...his suffering would never make me feel better.

I picked at the sleeve of his sweatshirt, feeling incredibly vulnerable. And guilty. Which was ridiculous. I hadn't done anything wrong. And yet...

"Do you ever wish you had someone else as a mate?" I asked quietly. "Someone who was also a werewolf instead of a human? Then none of this would be happening."

"Fuck that," Ace spat. "I don't ever want to hear you questioning my love for you again, you hear me? You're *it* for me. You are everything I have ever wanted in a mate and more."

"You're perfect. Absolutely fucking perfect. I have never wished to change a single thing about you."

We sat in silence for a second as I let his words sink in.

"Doe, baby, give me some sort of indication that you're hearing me. I need to know you understand how much you mean to me before I go fucking insane."

"I hear you," I whispered.

"And you understand? You know how much I need you in my life?"

I chewed on my bottom lip. "Do you need me though? You're an alpha. I'm just a human. What exactly do I bring to the table in our relationship?"

"Those are the suppressants talking, Doe."

He was probably right. It wasn't like me to question my self-worth or compare myself so heavily to others, but the suppressants had been making me think some nasty—and, honestly, pathetic—things.

Now they seemed to be convincing me that I wasn't worthy of him. How lovely.

"Maybe," I responded meekly. "But does that make the concern any less valid? I already felt inadequate and weak before I found out you were one of the most powerful beings in the whole world."

"And now...I don't know. We're not equal, you and me. And I don't see how we ever can be. What if the power imbalance is too great? What if...it makes it too hard to be together?"

The only sound coming from the other end of the phone was heavy breathing and low snarls.

*Shit. I probably shouldn't have said anything.*

Ace was already having such a hard time controlling his wolf, and then I went and blurted out something sure to make him lose his mind even more.

"Ace?" I asked. "Are you okay?"

More snarls, even louder than before. "Y-yeah." It sounded like he was speaking through his teeth, his voice laced with gravel. "I just... Fuck!"

The most intense growl yet came from him, causing my phone to vibrate against my ear.

His phone hit the floor.

I was losing him to his wolf.