

## Chapter 16

I could imagine Ace hunched over right now, pulling at his hair, his muscles bulging as the beast inside of him tried to take over. My heart lurched with despair.

I hated that he was so obviously controlled by this rabid monster inside of him. I hated even more that I was one of the main reasons that monster acted out so much.

"Ace. Ace, listen to me."

I knew he could hear me even if the phone was no longer pressed to his ear. His hearing was incredible.

"If you shift right now, we won't be able to keep talking. I'll be forced to hang up, and I don't know when I'll call again. I need you to remain human. Please."

Ace's growls quieted and then were slowly replaced by his deep breathing. Seconds later, I heard the phone being picked up on the ground.

"Ace?" I whispered. "Are you there?"

"I'm here," he finally spoke on the other end of the line. "I'm here, Doe."

Relief cascaded through my tense muscles. I slumped back against my pillows.

"You're the only one who can do that, you know?" Ace said, his voice much gentler than before.

"Do what?"

"Calm my wolf. Calm me. You're the only person who helps. If it weren't for you, my whole life would be controlled by the animal inside me. I...I would be helpless to him."

"Is he really that hard to control?"

"I shifted into my wolf for the first time when I was only two years old. Shifting that early is basically unheard of. You're not supposed to receive your wolf until puberty."

"Why'd you get yours so early?"

"Because he's more powerful than normal. Stronger than me. And smart. Once he figured out how to push through my consciousness and force me to shift, it was suddenly all he ever wanted to do.

"From the ages of two until six, I spent nearly all my time in wolf form, fighting him. It was hell. Exhausting.

"Everyone was so impressed by my ability to shift when I was so young because they figured it meant I would grow up to become a great and powerful alpha.

"But they didn't realize how much of myself I was losing to my animal side. I didn't feel strong; I felt powerless."

He took a steadying breath. "Then I met you, and everything changed. You were like my own personal angel, glorious and perfect, come to rescue me from the pits of hell.

"You calmed me down and gave me something to live for. You became as necessary to me as breathing, as a beating heart. I couldn't exist without you, and neither could my wolf.

"My wolf wanted to be with you all the time, but he also understood your need for my human side. He was finally willing to compromise, especially when you asked him to. He listened to you.

"Do you see what I'm getting at, Doe? You saved me. You say you're worried you're weaker than me, but it's not true. I'm the one who's weak.

"Without you, I would be nothing more than a rabid animal, a slave to my instincts. You control me. That's why I would do anything for you, to keep you safe and happy.

"Even if that means locking my miserable self up for the rest of eternity because you don't want to be around me anymore."

His words somehow filled me with warm hope and cold dread all at the same time.

When I managed to speak, my voice rang with emotion. "Would you really do that? Stay locked up forever just to stay away from me?"

"Yes." His voice held no hesitation. "It would hurt like hell, but I'm taking responsibility for the pain I caused you, and desperately hoping you'll eventually make your way back to me.

"Not because I forced you, but because you want me despite my flaws."

"I don't want you locked up forever, Ace," I said. "Especially when I was considering running away from him and not seeing him for God knows how long."

"It doesn't comfort me to hear that you're miserable, even if you're miserable for me. I don't want your suffering on my conscience."

"Fuck, I wish we weren't having this conversation over the phone," Ace groaned. "No, Doe. That's not what I want either. My wolf is my burden to carry. No one else's—and especially not yours."

"I should know how to manage my wolf by now. I'm working on figuring out how to self-regulate. It's not your responsibility to worry about me. It's not your fault. It's mine. All of this is my fault."

His words hit me straight in the chest.

I decided then and there that his uncontrollable wolf might not be my burden to bear, but it shouldn't be his alone either.

It wasn't his fault he was born with such a rebellious animal, and it made me ache to know he was struggling.

"Baby?" Ace asked when I was quiet for a while. "Are you feeling better now?"

I took in a steadying breath. "Yes. I feel much better." I felt better than I had in the last three weeks—all from hearing his voice. Hearing that he was okay.

"Shit, you have no idea how relieved I am to hear that. It almost killed me to hear you cry and not be there for you."

Yeah, it almost killed me too.

My next words came out of my mouth without thinking. "Can I come see you?"

I was pretty sure Ace stopped breathing. "You already know the answer to that, baby."

"R-right now?"

"Any time you want."

"Okay." I nodded, my mind made up. "I'm on my way."

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Fifteen minutes later, I made my way down the stairs to my front door with a dupe bag in my arms and a backpack slung over my shoulder.

My pulse in my neck was tapping like the wings of an erratic bird.

I packed more than I needed to spend a night at Ace's house. Much more.

I'd meant to grab just a different sweatshirt that wasn't covered in my snot and tears, but somehow ended up with two bags full of clothes and toiletries—and the keys to the car my father bought me.

I also found myself standing in the doorway of each of my brothers' bedrooms, watching them sleep for a minute and wishing I could give them each a kiss without their werewolf hearing waking them up.

I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't have a plan. I still wanted to go to Ace's house. I still wanted to see him and make sure he was okay.

After that, though, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do.

I had been too hard on Ace when I blamed him for the lock on my mind. The dream confirmed that. He hadn't been trying to control me. He truly believed he was doing what was best for me.

And I believed that now, too. Speaking with him over the phone had assured me that his goal was always to care for me, even at his own expense.

I was ready to forgive him. I was ready to put all that crap with the lock and my birth father behind me and move on with my life.

Then why did I pack a bag as if I was going to take my dad up on his offer to help me escape?

Why was I still thinking of all the opportunities I would have if I wasn't stuck in this town?

Why was I still questioning if I was fit to be Ace's mate?

I paused when I reached the front door of my house, my hand gripping the doorknob but refusing to turn it.

I was lost.

I loved Ace. I was pretty sure I forgave him for everything that had happened.

But part of me still wondered if I was returning to him because I was scared of how weak I felt without him in my life.

I didn't know who I was without Ace. And I was scared I never would.

"Forget how to use a door?" someone asked.

I gasped and whirled around.

I was so caught up in my thoughts that I hadn't noticed my father sitting in the armchair in the corner of the living room.

His face was lit by the soft glow of the lamp on the coffee table next to him. There was a historical fiction novel in his lap.

He regarded me with soft eyes, his posture relaxed and casual despite having just caught me in the act of sneaking out.

"Oh. Hi," I squeaked. "I didn't know you were awake."

"Couldn't sleep. Just like you, it would seem," he said. He eyed the pajamas I was wearing and then the bags in my hands. "Going somewhere?"

I swallowed and dropped my gaze, suddenly feeling guilty. "Ace's house."

When I looked up, I expected to see shock or confusion on his face. But Dad's eyes were tender. Maybe even a little pleased.

He glanced once more at my bags but didn't say anything else. He didn't push me to explain or demand answers—which was good. I wasn't sure I had any for him. I didn't know what I was doing.

Setting his book down on the table next to him, he slowly stood and approached me. Once he was in front of me, he gently pulled me into his arms.

The hug was unexpected but comforting. I didn't realize how much I needed it. I dropped my bags on the floor and sunk into my dad's embrace the way I had a thousand times throughout my life.

"You know I love you, right?" he said after a minute.

I nodded against his chest, my throat thick. "I love you too, Dad."

He placed a firm kiss on the crown of my head and then leaned back. He used his thumb to wipe a runaway tear from my cheek. I was surprised to find that his eyes were glossy as well.

"You've got your tracker?"

I let out the breath I had been holding. So, he knew. It made me feel better that I wouldn't be disappearing without at least one person knowing why.

I pulled the device from under my shirt. It had been the last thing I grabbed before I left my room.

"Good," Dad said. He took a step back. His mouth opened like he wanted to say something else meaningful. Instead, he opted for, "I think I'll go back to bed now."

I almost laughed. He obviously didn't want to say goodbye. Good. I didn't want to say goodbye either.

I watched him walk up the stairs, fighting the urge to follow him.

I wished I could crawl into bed between him and my mom just like I used to do when I was little and scared. I could spend the rest of eternity there—safe, warm, protected.

But I had to leave, I realized. Here, I was trapped.

Stuck.

Miserable.

Lost.

I had to get out of Embermoon. I *had* to.

"Dad?" I called out.

My father paused on the top step and looked back at me.

"Thank you," I said. "For taking care of me and Mom. I couldn't have asked for a better father."

His lips turned up. "I couldn't have asked for a better daughter. You're going to do great things, Dorothy. And I can't wait for the day when you come back here and tell me all about it."