

## Chapter 17

A little while later, I pulled into Ace's driveway in the car my father had packed for me.

Dad had thought of everything. The black SUV was stocked with suppressants, cash, and medical supplies; the tank was full of gas, and all my personal records I might need were in the glove box.

I could disappear if I wanted to.

Madoc was waiting for me at the end of Ace's driveway, dressed in casual gray sweatpants and a blue shirt.

He watched me park and then jogged barefoot to the side of my car to open my door for me like a valet in a fancy restaurant. "Hey, Dorothy," he said with a small smile.

"Hi, Madoc." I did my best to return his friendly expression as he helped me out of the car.

I didn't necessarily need his help, but it was appreciated. I had only just started walking without crutches and was still unstable on my feet.

Madoc checked me over and then let his eyes slide over my car. "This is the car that's been parked outside of your house for the last few days."

Of course he noticed that. Like my car, he had also been parked outside my house for the last few days, watching over me when my parents weren't home.

"Is it yours?" he asked.

"Oh, um, yeah. My dad got it for me."

Madoc frowned. "Your dad bought you a car? What for?"

*To run away and possibly never see anyone from Embermoon ever again.*

"I don't know. You'll have to ask him." Looking to change the subject, I glanced at Ace's house. It looked so dark and empty, with only the front porch light on.

"Where's Ace?"

"Inside." Madoc hesitated for a moment. "And I know you're probably eager to see him, but I...I wanted to take a moment to apologize to you. I failed you the day you were taken by those hunters.

"If I hadn't left you alone while we were at school, none of that would have happened." He bowed his head, submitting to me. "I'm truly sorry."

"Oh," I whispered.

I hadn't expected an apology from Madoc. He was now the third man to claim fault for my kidnapping after Ace and my father. And just like them, I didn't blame him in the slightest.

"It wasn't your fault, Madoc. I never thought that." I shifted, my bad leg starting to ache from standing for so long. "I heard you met your mate."

That was the reason he left me that day. He'd smelled his mate nearby, even though, at that point, he hadn't even met her yet.

He'd also sensed she was in danger, so it was no wonder he left me.

Before that day, he had already planned on temporarily stepping down from his role as Ace's beta to go in search of his mate.

That was why Clara moved to Embermoon. She was going to wait in for Madoc until he was able to return to the pack with his mate at his side.

Madoc rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. "Yeah. I did."

"Was she okay?"

He didn't respond for a few seconds, letting my words hang in the air between us. "It's complicated. She will be, though. I'm going to make sure of it."

His determination reminded me a whole lot of Ace.

"She's lucky to have you. I would love to meet her one day."

The corner of Madoc's mouth lifted. "I'm sure she would love to meet you too. Now, come on. I'll take you to see your mate. He's probably about ready to bite my head off for keeping you so long."

Madoc led me through Ace's massive house, through the foyer, past Mr. Stoll's office and the main kitchen, until we reached a back hallway that I didn't recognize.

My brow furrowed.

*I have been to Ace's house hundreds of times. I spent half of my childhood here. How had I never been back here?*

It was just off the side of the kitchen, not even well hidden.

"Has this always been back here?" I asked Madoc, looking around the poorly lit hall.

Its walls were made of brick but had been painted over with a strange reddish-brown color that didn't match the rest of the house in any way. The only lights were the two ceiling bulbs.

Madoc stopped in front of the arched door at the far end of the hall. It was made of dark, thick wood and had a large, rusted padlock on the outside.

"Yes. This house has been Embermoon's packhouse for nearly two hundred years. Every alpha has lived here," he said, pulling a key out of his pocket and putting it into the lock.

"It's been updated several times, but I think this is the only part of it that hasn't been touched. You'll see why."

"Huh," I murmured. Another stolen memory, I suppose.

Madoc unlocked the door. He pushed it open to reveal a set of very old, slightly dilapidated wooden steps leading down to a dark basement.

*This was where my mate had been staying? It was like the set of a horror movie.*

A loud banging noise made me jump back. A growl shook the house.

My eyes widened as my body responded to the noise and urged me forward. I recognized it.

"That's not Ace, is it?" I asked Madoc. My stomach churned with unexpected nerves. "It sounds like he's angry."

Madoc licked his lips as he glanced down the steps. "You don't have to be afraid. Ace would never hurt you. Not in a million years."

But that wasn't Ace down there. It was the rabid beast inside of him.

"Is he a wolf right now?" I asked.

Madoc hesitated. "Well...yes. He tried to keep control of his animal side until you got here, but his wolf was too anxious to see you."

I'd assumed his wolf wouldn't force Ace to shift since he knew I was coming. Apparently, I was wrong.

This wasn't what I wanted. I didn't want to see the monster that murdered one of my kidnappers and had made my mate miserable all his life.

I took several steps back, shaking my head. "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. Maybe we should wait for him to calm down."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you. He can smell you. He won't be able to calm down now that he knows you're nearby. It'll only get worse if you don't go down there."

"I don't think I can do it. That's the same wolf who...who...."

I looked down at my sandals, images of my birth father's blood pooling beneath my bare feet flashing through my mind. Elias's limp body dropped to the ground after Ace tore his throat out.

Madoc grabbed me by my shoulders in a gentle hold, snapping me out of my trance.

He turned me to face him. "Ace was protecting you. He's only like this because he loves you. He wants to care for you so badly that he's literally going insane."

I stared at the beta. I wished I could trust what he was telling me. I was just so scared.

I shook my head. I needed to stop thinking that way. I wasn't the weak omega everyone claimed I was. It was time I started acting like it.

"He'll still be in his...cage, though, right?"

"Yes. Here." He reached into his pocket and took out a key, different from the one he used to unlock the door, and handed it to me. "This is the key to his cell."

"You can decide to let him out or keep him locked up. He won't be able to get to you unless *you* allow it. Sound good?"

I studied the old key, slipping it over in my hand.

More insistent clanging came from down the stairs, like someone repeatedly banging metal against metal. It made the lights above us shake and cast long shadows along the walls.

Ace's wolf howled. He was clearly getting to the end of his rope.

Nonetheless, I squared my shoulders and nodded my head. "Okay. Let's go."