

## Chapter 2

My stomach turned, dropped.

"Where's Ace?" I demanded. Fear twisted in my gut like a knife.

My eyes flew to the door. I remembered my mother telling my stepfather to go get him.

*No, no, no.*

I wanted Ace *nowhere* near me. There was no telling what he would do now that I knew his secret. Would he hurt me? Oh, God, would he hurt my mom?

My mom covered my hand with hers. "Ace is on his way. Don't worry. I only just convinced him to shower after he spent the last several days refusing to leave your side.

"But of course, you decide to wake up minutes after he leaves. Your body probably recognized that he was gone."

"No, Mom, that's not what I... Ace... Ace, he's a..."

I didn't know how to explain everything to her in a way that would make sense. No sane person would believe me if I told them I saw my boyfriend turn into a wolf and rip out a man's jugular.

My attention was stolen by the sound of heavy footsteps running down the hall, and dread swooped in, knowing what was coming.

It was too late.

Ace burst through the door of my hospital room, and my guts turned to water the moment my eyes met those of the boy I loved.

Ace looked...*horrible*. During the twelve years I had known him, I had never seen him look so completely broken.

His dark brown hair was wild and soaking wet, dripping onto the fabric of his white T-shirt and slightly damp sweatpants. His beard was longer than normal, and there were massive bags under his eyes.

He'd lost weight. His cheeks were hollow. He looked sick.

Every protective instinct flared to life inside of me. How long had it been since he'd slept or eaten a decent meal? Wasn't anyone looking out for him? He looked on the verge of collapsing.

Without thinking, I sat forward, wanting to demand that he lie down next to me and rest. Maybe I could even convince my parents to get him some food and—

I yanked myself out of that headspace, shocked by my thoughts. What was wrong with me? What did it say about me that I was willing to forget everything he had done just because he was hurting?

I forced myself to replace my concern with fear, which proved to be very easy when I noticed the color of his eyes. They were pitch black—a stark contrast to his usual dark blue.

This wasn't the first time I had witnessed Ace's irises a different color, but it was the first time I knew what it meant.

The animal side of him was hiding somewhere behind his pupils, watching me and fighting Ace for control.

Images of the last time I saw Ace raced through my mind, of his wolf's massive canines tearing into the kidnapper Elias's throat. Blood dripped from the corners of his mouth as he prowled toward me.

I remembered seeing his bones break and reform, mutilating his body as he shifted from his wolf and back into his human form right in front of me.

I didn't even realize I was cowering away from Ace until I nearly fell off the bed. I regained my balance, but not before causing hot agony in my leg once again. A yelp of pain escaped my mouth.

With panic on his face, Ace lunged forward a few steps, arms outstretched.

"No!" I yelled before he could reach me. "Don't you dare," I choked out, tears clogging my throat.

Ace halted, his face a mask of pure misery and desperation. He raised his hands in surrender, trying to communicate that he meant no harm.

"Doe, baby, it's okay." His tone was practically pleading. "I won't come near you if you don't want me to. You don't have to be scared of me. Please."

I shook my head. "You were a... You turned into...a-a..."

"A wolf," he finished for me. "You saw me shift from my wolf. I'm..."

He sucked in a breath. "I'm a werewolf. But you have nothing to fear from me. This doesn't change anything. I'm still me. We're still *us*."

I inched when he took another step toward me. My balance wavered once again, causing me to grip the rails on the side of the bed so I didn't topple over the edge.

If it weren't for my leg, I would have been on the opposite side of the room, calculating ways to get my parents and myself out of there without Ace stopping us.

Ace froze once again. "I'm staying away from you. I won't come near you if that's what you want." It looked like it caused him physical pain to say that.

His frantic gaze traveled to my mother, who was still standing next to me.

"Will you go stand behind her, please?" he asked her gently. "I don't want her to fall off the bed and hurt herself."

My mother did as he asked, and I immediately felt better. I preferred to be between her and the monster in front of me in case he did anything.

For the first time, I noticed my stepdad standing behind Ace, watching our interaction, ready to step in if he needed to.

I wanted him to stand behind me like my mom. Neither of my parents understood the danger they were in—the danger *I* put them in.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Ace continued. "I would never hurt you. You know that."

Actually, I didn't know that. I had no idea what he was capable of anymore.

My hand found my mother's behind me, and I squeezed it tightly. I could only imagine how confused she was. My dad, too. They probably heard the word werewolf and thought both Ace and I were insane.

"You hurt Elias," I pointed out. "You...you killed him. I saw you."

Ace's jaw hardened. "He was pointing a gun at you, Doe. He shot Mitchell. I was protecting you."

"By killing someone?!" I shot back. "That's not the kind of protection I want!"

Maybe it was my mounting hysteria talking, but I was convinced there had to have been another way to deal with Elias that didn't involve killing him.

Elias had been good deep down. He hadn't meant to hurt anyone. He was just scared. What he did to Mitchell wasn't right, but neither was killing him.

*No one* had needed to die. Murder should never be anybody's first instinct.

"You didn't even hesitate before you ripped his throat out." My voice wavered as I said, "You're...you're a monster."

A broken sound came from deep within Ace. My statement clearly devastated him. "I know that's what you think. And maybe you're right, but I'm going to do my damndest to prove you wrong."

"No. I won't let you."

"What do you mean?"

"You lied to me. The entire time we've known each other—twelve whole years—there wasn't a single day that you were honest with me.

"How can you expect me to want to be with you—to trust you ever again—now that I know that? How can you expect me to feel safe around you ever again now that I know what you're truly capable of?"

I thought Ace's eyes were as dark as they could get, but I was proved wrong when the blackness started to pool into the white around his irises.

His canines sprouted to twice their normal size, piercing into his bottom lip, and his muscles started to bulge beneath his skin.

He snarled, squeezing his eyes shut and rolling his hands into tight fists at his sides, thick black hair appearing along his arms.

My father stepped forward, making a beeline for Ace.

My heart nearly stopped. Dad didn't know what was happening. He didn't understand that Ace was about to shift into a rabid wolf and very likely kill all of us.

"Dad! No!" I called out, trying to warn him.

I wasn't fast enough. The moment my father put a hand on his shoulder, Ace whirled around and bared his teeth at him, growling loudly in his face.

My father somehow managed to remain calm, meeting Ace's hard glare without backing down.

"Calm your wolf," my father spoke in a firm tone. "The last thing Dorothy needs right now is to see you shift."

Each one of Ace's breaths was laced with his threatening growls, his massive shoulders heaving up and down. He shook his head as if trying to regain control.

"Ace," my father tried again, "I know what Dorothy said upset your wolf, but you must keep him in check."

He put both hands on Ace's shoulders and squeezed. "You're scaring your mate, Alpha. Look at her, she's terrified. She needs your human side right now."

That finally got Ace's attention. His head snapped up, and he whirled around to look at me.

His eyes softened. His muscles loosened and shrank. His canines retracted back into his gums, and his irises returned to their normal blue color.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "My wolf is stronger than me right now. I promise, he's just desperate to comfort and care for you. He just has a funny way of showing it."

*I'll say.*

"I'm sorry for scaring you," Ace apologized once more. I could tell he truly meant it. His regret was written all over his face.

Keeping my eyes on him, I relaxed back into the bed. My head pounded. It felt like my brain was swelling up within my skull and threatening to spill free.

Slowly, I turned to my father, the weight of his words settling in.

He knew.

Dad met my gaze, the guilt and shame clear on his face.

"You knew?" I whispered. "You knew that Ace was a werewolf?"

My dad glanced at my mom as he searched for something to say. I looked at her.

"You knew?" I croaked.

Their silence was answer enough for me.

Oh God, I was going to be sick.

"Did everyone know but me?"

"Why don't we all sit down?" Dad said. "I think it's time we had a chat."