

Chapter 20

When I awoke, the small cell was lit up with the midday sun. I realized with shock that it was the time I had slept through the entire night since getting home from the hospital.

I was fully rested, and my mind was clear. My never-ending headache had cleared, and my stomach wasn't roiling with its usual debilitating nausea.

I was warm—not hot or boiling in my own sweat as my suppressant would have me, but warm, content. My skin buzzed, and my muscles were soft and relaxed.

I felt the best I had in weeks.

And that could only mean one thing: I was home; I was with Ace.

My last memory from the previous night was of Ace's wolf barking at me and tugging on my sweatshirt to let him lead me to the corner. Once I was on the ground, he'd settled next to me.

For a while, he'd simply licked me. Some instinct in me knew that he'd been both marking me with his scent and bringing relief to my sore and tired muscles.

Werewolf mates can heal each other with their saliva, I'd read, so it didn't surprise me when he paid extra close attention to my inamed mate gland and the spot on my thigh where I'd been shot.

Eventually, he snuggled up next to me so I was squeezed between him and the wall with my face against his furry chest, my head tucked safely under his chin. Then he'd started to purr.

I must have drifted o after that.

It was such an Ace move. He loved making me go to sleep when I was distressed.

I thought he had been upset with me when my eyes accidentally uttered shut outside of his cell, but now I realized he just wanted me next to him so I would nally feel safe enough to rest.

But it wasn't a wolf next to me now. There were arms wrapped around me—warm, thick, human arms.

Ace.

I kept my face tucked into his chest, too afraid to move or breathe in case this was all just another dream and I woke up.

I didn't want to return to being sick in my pathetic excuse for a nest, without my mate by my side—heartbroken and miserable.

Please be real. Please, please, please.

"Shh, Doe," Ace whispered in my ear with his deep, soothing voice.

He pulled me tighter to him, gripping the back of my neck like he was afraid I would disappear. "Please don't panic. I need to hold you for a little longer—just a little longer."

I was the furthest thing from panicking. I felt like a drug addict getting my rst hit after years of being sober.

"You're real," I murmured against his skin. "You're not a dream."

He sighed with relief. "I'm real, Doe."

"And you're human again?"

"Yes. I hope you're not disappointed. You seemed to be enjoying my wolf's company last night. Made his entire life."

He curled his huge body around my much smaller one, cocooning me completely in his embrace. With my back to the wall and my chest pressed to his, Ace's body protected me from the rest of the world.

There was a soft, twin-size mattress beneath us and a blanket draped over our bodies. Madoc must have brought them to us at some point last night.

I was grateful. It was much better than sleeping on the hard oor.

I hummed and curled my ngers into Ace's hair. It was getting so long.

"I missed him."

As if his wolf could hear me, a low buzz started up in Ace's chest. I pressed my face close to the sound, letting it vibrate down to my toes.

"He missed you too. A lot. You nearly made his heart burst with joy when you said you knew him.

"He only gave me back control after I reminded him that you came here to talk to me and that you might decide to leave if you were forced to hang out with his mute, furry ass any longer."

I giggled. I liked that Ace was joking with me. Everything had felt so somber lately.

"Well, I don't know about that," I responded with a small smile.

I leaned back and placed a hand on his cheek, feeling the scriness of his overgrown beard. "He's you, isn't he? And I love you. I love every part of you."

"I love you, too, Doe. Goddess, I love you so fucking much."

He pushed his forehead against mine, and we simply breathed each other in.

Several moments later, I broke the silence. "Ace?"

"Yeah, baby?"

"Are you naked?"

His answering chuckle came out in a single breath. "Yes. I can't exactly shift back with clothes on." A tense beat passed. "Does that bother you?"

"It should," I whispered.

I broke up with him, after all. We weren't in a relationship anymore. I probably shouldn't be lying around naked with him.

"But it doesn't?" Ace pushed. "I can ask Madoc to bring me some clothes."

"No. It doesn't." I sighed, snuggling closer. "I like the skin-to-skin contact."

I liked it a lot. *A lot* a lot.

"Good. I'll get naked for you anytime you want."

"I forgive you." The words came out of my mouth on their own. I hadn't planned to say them but quickly realized I meant them.

Ace stined against me. "What?"

"I forgive you."

Ace's breath caught. "Don't say that unless you mean it."

"I mean it. It took me some time to understand why you did what you did, but I think I get it now. I was too busy mourning my birth father to wrap my head around the fault he had in all of this.

"You were right: Mitchell would have taken me from you and everyone I love if you hadn't erased my memories. It doesn't make it suck any less but..."

"I...I've been reading up on omegas. My mom gave me some books. I've learned a lot. Answered a lot of questions I've had about myself.

"I—I did a lot of research on something called 'omega dependency.' Have you heard of it?"

Ace nodded slowly. "It's when a person becomes obsessed with an omega. They become dependent on their pheromones like drug addicts." He hesitated. "I've done my own research on the topic."

I sat up on my elbow so I could look at him. "That's what happened with Mitchell, isn't it? It's what you were telling me about in the hospital.

"He became obsessed with my mother and me. He had no interest in being a family with us until we were taken out of his life. That's why he went crazy. He was going through withdrawals, wasn't he?"

"He was going through withdrawals, yes, but it's not an excuse for what he did to you. Many have been able to overcome their omega dependency.

"It's one reason your mom wanted him to move nearby and see you on a regular basis. If he had taken the oer, it could have avoided all the trouble. But he needed you and your mother all to himself.

"He shouldn't have erased your memories. He had no right to do that, no matter what he was going through." He paused. "But the same goes for me. I never should have messed with your memories."

"You were young, Ace—"

"It was only three years ago. I was old enough to know better."

"Okay, but you were probably dealing with your version of omega dependency—"

"Your pheromones don't ect me the same way because I'm your mate. Your scent balances my hormones. It stabilizes me and my wolf instead of causing my emotions to be o-killer.

"Put simply, I can't experience omega dependency."

I hu ed and rolled my eyes. "I'm trying to forgive you here!" I shoved his shoulder. "Why are you making it so difficult?"

His remorseful expression made the smile melt from my face. "I will forever carry the guilt of what I did to you. I will work to make it up to you—to be worthy of you—for the rest of my life."

He brushed my hair out of my face and gripped either side of my head, looking deep into my eyes. His were their natural dark blue color, telling me he was in full control of his words and actions.

"I'm so, so sorry, Doe. It was not my place to tamper with your thoughts. It was a level of control I never should have had over you. I'll understand if you feel like you can never trust me again."

"Ace..." I sighed. "You're right. What you did wasn't okay. And maybe under different circumstances, this would be the end for us.

"But I know you. I know how good your heart is, even if you are a grump most of the time and have done some very stupid things." I smiled.

"I understand your motives, Ace, and know that, at the end of the day, everything you did was for me. Because you love me and thought you were keeping me safe."

Ace pressed his forehead to mine and squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. "You're too good for me. I don't know what I did to deserve you."

How many times have I caught myself wondering the same thing about him? "Just don't do any more stupid things, okay? No more lying."

He kissed the corner of my mouth. "You have my word." His lips moved down to my jaw, licking between the words. "I'll never lie to you again."

His sinful lips nally landed on the mating gland on my neck, and he sucked it into his mouth.

I gasped as my body unexpectedly burst into ames.

"Doe..." Ace said my name in a low and tortured growl.

My stomach dipped with concern for my distressed mate, while at the same time, witness ooded between my thighs.

"I...I'm sorry." I gripped his hard shoulders in an attempt to make the room stop spinning.

Ace shook his head. "Never apologize for perfuming."

I'd read about that during my research on omegas. It's the scent omegas produce when they're signaling their arousal to their mate.

I squeezed my eyes shut and shifted anxiously. "I'm perfuming?"

"Fuck, yeah, you are." He shoved his nose against my gland. "You smell so fucking good. I want to drown in your scent."

He lapped at my skin while groaning. "I want to bury my face between your legs and lick up all of that sweet sick I can smell leaking down there."

Holy. Fuck. My books weren't kidding about perfume driving males wild with lust.

The previously cold, humid air of the basement suddenly felt electrically charged.

Goosebumps erupted across my skin, and my breasts peaked, my nipples as hard as stones against the fabric of Ace's sweatshirt.

"Doe, you're still on suppressants, right?" Ace's rough voice took on an edge of urgency.

"Y-yes." The word ended on a moan as I stretched my neck to lick his jaw, right next to his ear.

A bitter taste lled my mouth. I suddenly hated the suppressants. Hated, hated, hated them. I never wanted to taste them again. Not when they made me feel so bad and Ace made me feel so good.

Ace grunted, and I realized I had perfumed again. This time, even I could smell the thick scent of my desire in the air.

"When was the last time you took a suppressant, baby?"

My mind felt muddled, but I forced myself to focus. "Last night. Before I came here." I rubbed my head back. "Am I going into heat?"

"No, hey, there's no need to panic." He led my face back to his neck, pressing my nose to the spot where his scent was strongest.

My body calmed instantly.

"You're not going into heat. I would have smelled it last night if that were the case." He pressed a hand to the back of my sweaty neck. "But you are burning up.

"And you smell like..."—he inhaled deeply—"fucking heaven. I think you're having another one of your mini-heats."

"Oh. Oh. Should I take more suppressants? I have some in my car."

The thought of leaving Ace, even if it was just for a few minutes to run out to my car, made my gut roll violently. But I would do it if I had to.

"The suppressants won't do anything at this point. They should've prevented this from happening in the rst place."

"So, why didn't they?"

"Our bond is too strong, and we spent too much time apart. That's my best guess at least. It's trying to push us together."

I gasped as a sudden cramp hit me and dug my nails into his skin. "A—Ace, it hurts."

"Fuck, okay, Doe, look at me." He grabbed me by the back of my neck and forced my head back. "I need you to listen before this heat spike pulls you under, all right? Are you still with me?"

I nodded. I was in pain, but I was still cognizant. "Yeah. I'm still with you."

"Good. We...we don't have to do anything. You can go. This heat spike won't be pleasant without me to help you through it, but it shouldn't last long. I want to give you that option."

I could feel the tension rolling o him, his eyes switching colors as his wolf pushed at his consciousness. He hadn't liked what he'd said any more than I had.

But he'd oered me space anyway.

"And if I don't want to go?"

Ace's jaw clenched. "Then I can give you relief. If you want me to." He hesitated. "If you want *me*."

I nodded. "I want you, Ace. I'll always want you."

"Thank fuck for that."

He slammed his lips onto mine.