

Chapter 22

THREE MONTHS LATER

"Dammit!" I shouted, kicking the edge of the stupid bed frame as hard as I could without breaking a toe.

I had been at this for fifteen minutes—fteen long, sweaty minutes of trying to move the ridiculously oversized bed across the room.

So far, I'd managed to drag it all of three feet, and now I was dripping with sweat, my muscles trembling like I'd just run a marathon.

It had been three months since I ran from Ace. After leaving him in that horrible basement cell, I'd driven several hours north and ended up in the tiny town of Pinewood.

I'd found a small lake cabin, nestled deep in the woods, on the grid and, I hoped, far enough away from any werewolves who would tell Ace where I was.

The cabin belonged to an older couple, Lacy and Ottis, who lived about a twenty-minute walk down a trail through the woods.

They were farmers—wheat and dairy, they'd told me with pride—and some of the kindest people I'd ever met.

They told me the cabin had been built for their farmhands to stay in, but it had been left mostly unused after everything slowed down in their old age, so they fixed it up to rent it out.

I was only their fourth tenant, and when I told them I planned to stay indefinitely, they were overjoyed.

I was alone for the most part, but Lacy and Ottis checked in on me once in a while, sometimes for chats, and others to leave fresh vegetables or eggs at my door with a simple note that read, *Enjoy!*

I didn't mind their visits. In fact, I looked forward to them. It was nice to have company. It reminded me that, even in my isolation, I wasn't completely alone.

As time went on, I began helping on their farm once or twice a week.

Being apart from Ace wasn't easy at first, but with time, I learned to push through the pain and exhaustion that came with a starving mate bond so I could actually get stuff done.

Ottis taught me how to drive a tractor and milk the cows, and Lacy taught me how to bottle-feed the calves and help in her garden.

They even insisted on knocking money off my rent as payment.

I was pretty sure Lacy and Ottis could tell how weak I was, so they always made sure the jobs were easy and quick to complete. Nothing I couldn't do while sitting.

I never stayed longer than an hour—maybe two if I was having a good day—and by the time I returned to the cabin, I was so exhausted, I found sleep easily, even without Ace next to me. A blessing.

It wasn't much, but working for Lacy and Ottis made me feel like I was doing something useful with my time. I felt independent and...free.

Besides working or the occasional trip into town for groceries, I spent most of my time by myself in the cabin.

Pinewood was tiny, with little more than a grocery store, a diner, and a hardware shop, but that suited me fine. I chose my cabin for its isolation.

It was perfect. Quiet. Peaceful. It had a small kitchen, an even smaller living room, a bathroom, and one bedroom.

It wasn't much, but it was the ideal place to nurse my shattered heart and figure out what the hell I was going to do with my life.

But the bed... The bed was about to be my undoing.

With an exasperated huff, I gave up on the futile task of moving the heavy bed and collapsed onto the mattress. Sweat clung to me, and my muscles felt like jelly.

All I wanted was to rearrange the room—to move the bed to the opposite wall so I could see the beautiful floor-to-ceiling windows when I woke up.

The room had so much potential. It was a cozy space with warm, log-cabin walls and an incredible domed skylight that allowed me a view of the Milky Way at night.

It was magical, proof of all the love and hard work Lacy and Ottis had put into creating a special place for their guests.

Except the goddamn oversized bed blocked half the view of the windows, completely ruining the flow of the space.

This shouldn't be this difficult. Under normal circumstances, I was certain I could have dragged the bed and put it against the opposite wall.

But I was just so *weak*, and I hadn't gotten more than a few hours of sleep the night before.

My muscles ached constantly. My hands shook. My limbs were weighed down by an exhaustion that no amount of rest could fix.

Even standing still felt like it took too much effort at times—my knees buckling under the pressure of simply staying upright.

And what made me madder was that I knew the reason: I was wasting away without Ace.

I spent most days curled into a ball, conserving what little energy I had, but moving this damn bed was the last thing I needed to do to make this room perfect. It was driving me crazy.

Since the start of my stay, I had made small changes to make the space feel a little bit more like home.

First, I went into town and picked up new sheets and blankets since the old ones felt like sandpaper against the skin.

After that, I took the large lamp with the fluorescent light bulb out of the corner and moved it into the living room, replacing it with strings of fairy lights that I hung along the walls.

I rolled onto my back and let out a low groan. *Why is it so freaking hot in this room?* I had set the air conditioning at sixty-five, and yet, I felt like my flesh was melting off my body.

Stupid heat. Stupid suppressants. Stupid secret-keeping, memory-stealing boyfriend.

At least the frigidness had passed. My body was especially accustomed to the suppressants, so I no longer felt the freezing sensation of the drugs actively keeping my heat at bay.

Now, I just felt an underlying, constant fire. A need. An *ache*. And not the same sort of ache that affected my muscles and bones. It was deeper. An ache between my legs. An ache for my mate.

It had been easier to ignore my arousal when I was stuck at home, with my little brothers running up and down the hallway outside my bedroom.

But now I was alone, with nothing else to do other than miss my mate and think about how fucking good his hands felt on my body; I found myself with my fingers down my panties almost every night.

Before I could think better of it, my hand wandered down my stomach and under the band of my pajama shorts. Unsurprisingly, I was already soaked, and it only got worse the more I touched myself.

I let out a needy moan as my finger circled my swollen clit. It throbbed under my touch, and I spread my legs wider.

My thoughts revolved around Ace. I imagined his hands, tongue, muscular shoulders, and chest.

It helped to think about him at the start, the tingling, pleasurable ball in my core winding tighter, but just like always, I soon found myself distracted that my touch felt nothing like Ace's.

My fingers weren't as rough, my nails were too long, and the air around me lacked his heady, musky scent.

After another minute, I finally collapsed against the pile of pillows behind me in defeat. I wasn't sure why I even tried.

Ace was the only one who had ever given me an orgasm. I'd never even tried getting myself off because he had always been around to take care of my every need.

He ruined me—I was sure of it. I was never going to be able to climax ever again, not without his help. And it wasn't as if I would crave anyone else other than him.

But whether it was due to my nearing heat or my starving mate bond pushing me to return to Ace, I was in a constant, torturous state of arousal that was only getting stronger every day.

Something had to give. There had to be some way that I could achieve relief without Ace being here.

What if...?

I thumbed the silver bangle bracelets on my wrist thoughtfully. I'd found them in the car the day I arrived in Pinewood, buried under a mountain of suppressants in the glove compartment.

At first, I didn't understand what they were there for—it seemed like a strange gift for my father to leave me—but their purpose became clear as soon as I picked them up.

The bracelets were made of pure silver—a werewolf's kryptonite.

The moment the metal touched my skin, my connection to Ace was cut off, and my mind went completely silent.

Just like with the chains in Robert's basement.

I realized my dad had given me the bracelets to keep Ace out of my head.

I didn't wear them at first. I had gotten good at creating a mental wall that kept Ace's voice at bay.

And I liked having the option to take down that wall whenever I wished. Whenever I wanted to feel our connection or let Ace know that I was okay.

But as time went on, I found it to be far too mentally taxing. Plus, with the bracelets, I didn't have to worry about him breaking into my mind while I slept.

I had been wearing them nonstop for about three weeks now—which meant I'd had absolutely zero contact with my mate for three. Whole. Weeks.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I yanked the bracelets off my wrist and tossed them across the room.

Instantly, he was there...