

Chapter 3

It took everything in me not to y across the room and pull my distressed mate into my arms.

This was my worst nightmare come to life.

Everything about the last several days was like something out of a horror Im curated especially for me. I had never felt such fear, such panic, such all-encompassing rage.

Looking at Doe now, broken and bruised in the hospital bed, I was beyond the point of livid.

The animal in me was turning rabid, searching for any reason to attack and kill.

Through the mate bond, I could feel everything Doe was experiencing—the pain, the fear, the crushing, all-consuming sorrow.

I didn't know what to do, how to act, or how to make it better. I always knew telling her the truth would be hard, but *this*...

This was going to end me.

I failed her. I left her defenseless when she needed me. I put her in the position to be hurt and to su er.

She almost died, and it was all my fault.

She had every right to be afraid of me. She should hate me for what I did. / hated me for what I did.

"Ace," Doe's stepfather said.

Joe and Susan looked at me expectantly. The two of them had settled into chairs at Doe's bedside, getting ready for what was sure to be one of the hardest conversations we'd ever have.

"Grab a chair and sit down."

Right. I hadn't realized I had just been standing there, staring at my battered mate until they broke me out of my stupor.

It was painful to pull my eyes away from her, but I forced myself to turn and grab the armchair behind me.

I pulled it to the side of the bed, being sure to give her enough space to feel comfortable.

Doe tracked every movement I made as if worried I would shift and eat her at any given moment.

It killed me.

It killed my wolf even more. All he ever wanted was to love and protect her.

"Well?" Doe abruptly demanded, glaring. "Is someone going to explain what the hell is going on?"

The fury in her tone was surprising and out of character. Gone was the terri ed girl who had just awoken in a hospital and was sure I was a monster. In her place was a woman demanding answers.

As an omega, Doe was naturally reserved.

She rarely acted out or expressed anger unless something was genuinely wrecking her emotionally. Her ability to think and act logically was one of her best qualities. It was the quality of a luna.

The unexpected bitterness in her tone was evidence of just how betrayed she felt.

Before any of us could reply, Doe spoke once again: "Ace isn't the only werewolf in my life. Is he?" The question was directed at her stepfather, Joe.

"No." Joe's tone rang with regret. "I'm a werewolf too."

Doe's raw devastation attacked me through the mate bond. It su ocated me—set re to my soul.

Her eyes pooled with tears, and she sucked her lips into her mouth, trying so hard not to cry.

My wolf whimpered in my head.

Doe's tortured gaze slid to her mother. "Y—you too?" Her voice was barely above a whisper.

"No," Susan answered. "I'm human, just like you."

"But you still knew," Doe accused, not missing a beat. "You knew about werewolves and didn't tell me."

It wasn't a question. She was clearly putting all the pieces together and realizing everything she had missed over the years.

"Does that mean that the boys are wolves too? Thomas and Elliot and W-Wes...are they all werewolves?"

"They're too young to shift. They won't meet their wolves until puberty," Joe responded. "But, yes. Your younger brothers are werewolves too."

He hesitated for a moment. "All of Embermoon is. You and your mother are two of the very few humans who live in our pack."

"Like Marta," Susan added. "Marta and her parents are humans. They don't know anything. She never lied to you."

That small fact didn't seem to comfort Doe in the way Susan was probably hoping.

Doe's teary eyes were wide as she listened. Through our bond, I felt her thoughts racing, probably ri ing through her memories, going over all the signs she had missed.

Her breathing picked up as the panic, pain, and confusion started to settle in, overwhelming her.

"Years," Doe rasped, pinning her angry gaze on Joe. "I've lived with you for *years*, considered you my father since I was six, and you never told me who—*what*—you really are? None of you did.

"I thought I was going crazy. I...I kept seeing things, noticing the strange habits of everyone in our town, watching people's conversations halt and change subjects the moment I walked into a room.

"And you all made me think there was something wrong with me. You gaslit me. Why? Why would you keep something like that from me?"

"We thought we were doing what was best for you at rst," her mother tried to explain.

"You have to understand, when you and Ace met, Mitchell and I saw the way Ace clung to you and how you clung to him in return, and it terri ed us.

"You couldn't sleep without him, couldn't concentrate if he wasn't nearby, you grasped onto his every word as if it were the gospel. He was becoming your whole life, and I didn't know how to handle it.

"Ace's parents tried to explain that he was your mate and that it was normal for you two to need each other and want to spend every waking moment together, especially so early in the bond.

"But I just couldn't wrap my head around it. Not until we moved to Colorado.

"That was when I met your stepfather." She smiled at Joe, who grabbed her hand and brought it to his lips. "And I knew we were mates."

"Mates," Doe repeated.

Her glassy, brown eyes landed on me. My heart pumped rapidly. I would do anything to keep her gaze on me, to keep that connection with her.

"Like you and me?"

"Yes. Just like you and me," I con rmed, leaning forward. "You're my mate."

Fuck, it felt good to say that nally. To say that and have her understand.

"And that means we're meant to be together?" Doe asked.

"Exactly. It means our souls are bonded, that we can't live without one another."

I feared that she might be overwhelmed by the news that we were destined to be together, but I was relieved when I only felt curiosity through our bond.

She was scared and uncertain, but not about being my mate.

And that gave me hope.

"Is that how you always know what I'm feeling?" she questioned quietly.

I nodded. "Our connection is strong. Stronger than most. It means I can feel your emotions when they're particularly intense."

She looked at her stepfather. "Can you feel that with Mom?"

"Yes," Joe con rmed. "Not to the same extent that Ace can feel your emotions, but I have a very similar connection with your mother."

"Meeting Joe helped me understand your relationship with Ace," Susan added. "The moment Joe walked into my life, I knew I couldn't live without him.

"And if what you felt for Ace was even a tenth as intense as what I felt for my own mate, I knew I couldn't take you away from him."

"And that was why M-Mitchell left? Because you met your mate?"

It was the rst time Doe had brought up her biological father on her own. She'd barely had time to process the grief surrounding the death of her birth father.

Her heartbreak was so clear, so devastating, that I felt an echo of it inside my chest.

And here I was throwing more at her. I could only imagine what was going on inside her head right now. My poor girl.

I would have to make sure she had time to come to terms with Mitchell's death later. Even if her relationship with Mitchell was complicated—very complicated—she still deserved to mourn.

Susan let out a long sigh. "Mitchell and I...weren't doing well. I met Joe. I was just relieved when I only felt curiosity through our bond.

"I didn't love Mitchell the way I love Joe. My feelings for Joe are like the feelings you have for Ace—irrevocable and all-consuming.

"I wanted to tell you everything. I no longer saw the harm in allowing you to grow up in the werewolf community.

"In fact, I only saw the harm in *keeping* the secret from you. I wanted you to have a normal childhood, yes, but if you'd known about werewolves sooner, they would have seemed normal to you."

"So, why didn't you tell me?" Doe demanded. "Why did you keep it from me?"

"We didn't keep it from you," Joe said. "You were much too smart. Within the rst few months of us living together, you had already gured out that something was di erent about Embermoon.

"And then there was Ace, who couldn't keep a damn secret to save his life..." He sent a pointed look in my direction.

I shrugged, feeling absolutely no remorse. "My wolf refused to be kept from you. He still takes issue with it."

As if to prove my point, my wolf growled from my chest, communicating his aggravation. Doe's eyes widened.

"Do you remember that dream you had of us when we were little at the lake cabin?" I asked her. "The one where we built a fort in the backyard, and then you slept outside with a wolf?"

Her head bobbed up and down.

"That wasn't a dream. It was a suppressed memory from your childhood. You knew I was a werewolf. You used to demand to sleep with my wolf every night. You liked how soft and warm his fur was."

I didn't recall the exact memory she had brought up all those nights ago, but my wolf slept with her often enough when we were younger to know that she was telling the truth.

When she told me she had dreamed about my wolf, I was so shocked, I hadn't known how to respond.

My wolf, on the other hand, had been elated—so elated, it had taken a great e ort to keep him from howling with joy. He missed his mate. A lot.

"A s-suppressed memory?" Doe mumbled. "What does that mean?"

I hesitated, trying to come up with the best way to explain without freaking her out more.

Susan stepped in. "Mitchell...Mitchell didn't want you to know about wolves. He thought they would take advantage of you because you're human and, therefore, weaker."

Her nervous eyes darted to me. "Especially Ace. He hated that you were mates, believing it was just an excuse for Ace to control you.

"When we refused to keep the secret from you any longer, he decided to ght for sole custody of you."

My poor Doe looked so confused—panicked even.

She didn't remember the custody battle. Another blocked memory. She knew Joe and Susan had custody of her but not how it happened—or why.

"Mitchell...fought for me?" Doe asked in a soft tone that threatened to rip my heart out of my chest.

Susan grabbed Doe's hand and squeezed. "Yes. Of course he did. Mitchell cared very much about you. He was heartbroken when we moved away."

Doe's eyes widened with anger, and her frown hardened. "My father loved me—fought for me." She snapped her gaze to me. "And you murdered him."