

## Chapter 9

THREE WEEKS LATER

Hell. I was in hell.

There was no other way to describe it.

It had been three weeks since I got home from the hospital.

Three weeks since I started taking suppressants.

Three weeks since I last saw Ace.

It was fair to say that they were the worst three weeks of my life.

I spent most of my time in bed, writhing in pain, swallowing my sobs, fighting the urge to tear o all my skin. Ace hadn't been kidding when he said going on suppressants would be hard.

My whole body ached like it was being submerged in freezing cold water. It was as if someone was sticking needles into my arms and legs, reminding me of frostbite.

But I wasn't cold. I was hot. So, so hot.

There was a fire inside of me, blazing in my belly, just barely contained, waiting for the opportunity to spread and consume me, to burn me alive. My heat—my *estrus*—was so very strange.

The discomfort I was in was both a relief and an incredible burden.

I could feel the suppressants doing their job—cooling my body and keeping my oncoming heat at bay.

But at the same time, every second I spent neglecting my true nature was another second I spent in a different kind of agony.

It reminded me of exercising in the cold. It was as if I had just spent hours shoveling snow during a blizzard. I was hot, covered in sweat, my muscles aching, and my chest heaving from exertion.

But I was also *freezing*, the sort of freezing that makes your eyelashes freeze, could give you frostbite in seconds, and made your fingers and toes feel like they were about to fall o .

And as if all of that wasn't enough, I was sick too. I couldn't keep any food down, and I was fighting a never-ending fever that kept me bedridden and exhausted.

Plus, I had a consistent headache, courtesy of Ace trying to check in on me through our bond and me pushing him out of my mind.

I was exercising in a snowstorm with the stomach flu and a debilitating concussion, while my body struggled to heal from the injuries I sustained during the time I spent in Robert's basement.

Did I mention I was in hell?

At least I wasn't in heat. I had to keep reminding myself of that merciful fact.

But worse than everything else, Ace wasn't here. I didn't know where he was. I hadn't seen him since I told him I never wanted to see him again.

It was the longest we'd ever been apart. It felt like there was a gaping hole in my chest, the other half of my soul missing.

When I told him I wanted to break up with him at the hospital, it hadn't gone well. I might as well have declared war.

There was a lot of screaming. A lot of arguing. I would be shocked if either of us were ever allowed back in that hospital after what we put the sta through.

It nally came down to my tears. My genuine tears were what broke him. If it weren't for that, I'm not sure he would have ever agreed to leave me.

And once he left, he didn't come back. That was the most shocking part of all of this. He was actually staying away this time.

At least once a day, I dragged my lifeless body out of my bed and across my room to my window, half hoping to see Ace, arms crossed over his chest while he leaned against his car.

I hoped to see him staring up at me with those piercing blue eyes of his, just like he did the last time I asked him for space.

But he was never there, and every time, I was both relieved and devastated at once.

I missed him desperately but didn't want him anywhere near me. I hated every second he stayed away but knew that distance was what was needed to allow healing to ensue.

Things weren't *actually* finished between us, were they? I know I said that was what I wanted but...I never thought Ace would let that happen.

We were mates after all. Wasn't he the one who was always saying we couldn't survive without one another?

So, why did it seem so easy for him to stay away this time around? Had he nally decided that I was more trouble than I was worth?

Maybe he didn't want to be with me anymore. Maybe he was relieved to have space from me.

Jesus. I didn't remember buying myself a ticket on the self-pity train.

I shook my head, ridding my mind of those nasty thoughts. It was pointless to think that way when I had no way of knowing the truth.

"I need to give her time to hate me," I remembered Ace telling Madoc the night I overheard them talking in Ace's kitchen.

Ace wasn't done with me. He knew I was going to react this way and that I would need time to process everything.

I should be grateful. He was just respecting my wishes and giving me space.

Well, space from *him* at least. Although Ace kept his distance, I was never actually alone. That was the only condition Ace gave before he left me at the hospital.

There had to be at least one person nearby, watching me at all times.

I tried to argue—I was so sick of being treated like a child who needed babysitting—but it was ultimately my parents who convinced me that it was for the best.

I had, after all, just been kidnapped, and Robert could still be looking for me. I could still be in danger.

Plus, someone needed to be watching me in case the suppressants didn't work and I unexpectedly went into heat. Someone needed to notify Ace.

*Stupid heat.*

My mom or dad was usually the one to stay with me, hanging out somewhere in the house, checking in on me throughout the day through the crack of my door.

Sometimes they would come in to change my bandages or deliver my medicine. I didn't speak to them. I wasn't ready to talk to anybody.

When neither of my parents could stay with me, however, there was an ever-rotating shift of pack members that I was sure Ace had assigned to stand outside my house.

And so, most of the time I crawled to the window; instead of seeing Ace, I'd nd Madoc by my front bushes, looking out toward the street, hands clasped in front of him like he was in the king's guard.

Sometimes Clara was there. On a handful of occasions, I spied someone I didn't recognize but knew Ace must have sent.

I tried not to pay attention to my babysitters. Ignoring them was the only way to get past the fact that they were most de nitely reporting my every move back to Ace.

Even when he wasn't here, he was still *here*. I would never be free of him.

Did that make me feel hopeless or relieved?

The only people I didn't mind being around me were my younger brothers. It was actually really sweet how worried they were about me.

I would often wake up in the middle of the night to nd one or more of them sleeping next to me.

Sometimes, they snuck into my room during the day to play board games quietly on the oor next to my bed or do their homework at my desk while I slept.

They didn't know what was wrong with me—thank goodness—only that I was sick. And maybe sad. They were innocent in all of this, so theirs was the only company I welcomed.

I heard my stepdad telling my mom that, as werewolves, primitive instinct drove my brothers to worry about a distraught omega. But I chose to believe they cared because they loved their sister.

I looked toward my bedroom window—the same one that Ace used to sneak through every night—and sighed. The curtains were drawn despite it being midday. I missed the sun. I missed being outside.

Not that I had the ability to go outside even if I wanted to. The bullet wound took longer than expected to heal.

I could hobble around with crutches all right, but I often ended up collapsing onto the oor before I even made it to the bathroom.

But while I tried to avoid my parents at home, I wanted to go to school.

It was the end of my senior year, and I was spending it alone, in my depressing room, nursing a broken heart, a bullet wound, and a starving mate bond.

I loved school. Like, really loved it. And I was missing my last days. And that sucked.

I was still going to graduate, of course. My parents were able to convince the school to allow me to o the year through something called "homebound instruction."

It was for students who couldn't attend school due to extenuating circumstances—like getting kidnapped, shot, and seeing your boyfriend turn into a giant, ravenous wolf.

I'd always been a good student, and my grades were strong, but even if they hadn't been, I suppose my school didn't have much of a choice about letting me graduate.

I was the alpha's mate and an omega. It's not as if they could fail me—not without facing severe consequences at the hands of my mate.

Marta brought my schoolwork over about three times a week, which I did as my body started to adapt to the drugs.

I loved her visits most of all. It was nice spending time with my friend. She made me feel normal again, like maybe the world wasn't collapsing around me.

She was, after all, the only person I knew who hadn't been forced to lie to me for the last decade. How depressing was that?

Which was why it was hard when I was forced to lie to her about what happened to me.

I told her as much of the truth as I could: that my birth father basically lost his mind, kidnapped me, and ended up shooting me.

But my parents said I couldn't tell her about werewolves or the hunters or everything else I had learned. They said it would get me in trouble with the pack elders.

And I couldn't bring myself to ll her in on why Ace wasn't around anymore.

I was sure she noticed the dried tears along my cheeks and crusted snot in my nose every time she came to visit, but thankfully, she was a good enough friend not to push me on the subject.

The schoolwork was hard to complete at rst on account of the suppressants making me so sick, but eventually, I started to feel normal again, at which point I powered through my assignments.

I was sad when I completed my last nal without even knowing it. Just like that, my education was over. I wouldn't even get to walk at graduation. I doubted I would be better in time.

Just another thing to mourn.