

## Chapter 4

My heart seized for a moment, refusing to beat. The hatred in her eyes as she stared at me, the vitriol in her voice.

Did Doe...*hate* me?

Susan shifted in her chair. "No, Doe, no, it's not that simple. Sweetheart, you have to understand, Mitchell was also... Well, he..."

Sensing his mate's struggle, Joe took over: "Mitchell was obsessed with you and your mother. After Susan asked him for a divorce, he couldn't leave her alone.

"He showed up at our house at random times, often in the middle of the night, banging on our doors and windows, demanding to talk.

"He followed her around town and showed up at your school and your mother's bakery. He refused to sign the divorce papers and would even come to my work and threaten me.

"He was often violent and erratic. He essentially became a stalker."

"I never wanted to take you from your father," Susan said. "Mitchell may not have been the best husband or dad, and I may not have loved him like I once did.

"But I never wanted him out of our lives completely. I wanted you to have a relationship with him.

"I even suggested he move nearby so that you could still see him, and when he refused to live in a town full of werewolves, I offered to pay to have you out and stay with him in Massachusetts."

I swallowed down my wolf's growl of disapproval.

My wolf and I had never liked that option. I never would have allowed my mate to travel across the country to spend time with a man who hated me. Not unless I could have been at her side the entire time.

"But Mitchell was obsessed with us being a family again," Susan explained.

"He thought that if he could get full custody of you, I would have no choice but to follow and fall in love with him again. He knew I would never give you up, even if a court forced me to."

"But he lost the custody battle," Joe explained, his voice tense.

It must've been hard for him to talk about another man trying to take his mate from him.

"And we made the very hard decision to limit your exposure to Mitchell. He was no longer allowed on pack grounds."

Susan squeezed Doe's hand. "For your own good. Mitchell wasn't well. He didn't care if you got hurt in the course of our arguments so long as he got to keep you. *Us*."

"He hated that I adapted to the werewolf way of living so easily and decided he wanted you to remain human just like him. It was selfish and wrong."

"But I'm *not* completely human...am I? I'm a-an..." Doe frowned. "An omega. That's right. I've heard people call me that. For years, I think."

The wheels visibly turned in her head as she attempted to call to mind all the occasions when she had been called an omega.

It wasn't easy for her, I could tell. A crease appeared in her brow, and she let out a frustrated breath. The lock Gullius put on her mind was doing its job, even if it was starting to wear on her.

"Yes," I replied in a soft tone. I scooted to the edge of my chair, wanting to be as close to her as possible. "You're an omega."

"And that means I'll have powerful children, right?"

I veered back in surprise. I had no idea who had told her that.

It was true, though. Omegas were known for their ability to birth particularly powerful children when they mated with werewolves.

Many of the greatest and most notable alphas and lunas in the world had been born of omegas.

But it was also a very special and somewhat problematic way to describe an omega. Many believed that was an omega's only purpose—my father, for example.

I would never let Doe think that, and it unnerved me that that was how she chose to describe herself now.

"Yes, among other things. But...where did you hear that?"

I looked at Joe accusingly, but he shrugged and shook his head.

"Waylen, the, um...alpha that Robert tried to sell me to, told me. He said that he wanted me in his... um..."—she searched for the word—"...in his pack because it would bring him power.

"He wanted me to mate with one of his pack members so that I would have strong children with them." She lowered her gaze to her lap and grumbled, "As if all I'm good for is making babies."

My muscles tensed involuntarily, my hands curling into fists at my sides.

Before that moment, I had been grateful to Waylen Marshall—a well-known alpha of one of the larger packs in Montana—for helping me find my mate when she was missing.

While I'd been able to use the mind-link to get a basic idea of where Doe was being held, it was Waylen who had provided me with an exact address.

"I trust that you will remember how I have aided you during this time when you are deciding where to place the blame for the abuse conducted against your mate," Waylen told me over the phone.

"We would never purposefully cause an omega harm. I want to see her safely home."

I didn't ask how he knew where Doe was because I assumed he could smell her. His pack was near her location. But I now knew he had been working with the hunters who tried to take Doe from me.

Not only that, but it seemed he'd also explained to her what it meant to be an omega, despite knowing that I should've been the one to do that as her mate.

To top it all off, he made it seem as though the only reason a wolf would want to mate with an omega was due to their ability to give them strong pups.

My wolf was already plotting all the ways he could murder Waylen.

Ripping out their throat was his favorite and the most effective method, but perhaps he would choose an approach with a little more creativity this time.

Slice open his belly and watch his insides spill out, or—

"Waylen did you, and all other omegas, a disservice by describing you that way," Joe snapped, bringing my attention back from my inner beast's gruesome thoughts.

I was grateful to him for responding to Doe while I once again reigned in my wolf. As the mate of an omega himself, he also took personal offense to the claim that omegas were only good for breeding.

"Having powerful children isn't the only reason omegas are so important to the werewolf community.

"They're also natural caretakers and peacemakers. They're known as the mothers of a pack, even if they're not mated to the alpha.

"They bring balance and help calm the wolves around them—creatures who are so naturally ruled by their instincts rather than logic."

I felt Doe's emotions grow through our bond until she was once again on the verge of tears. We were overwhelming her. She needed time to process.

"Maybe we should take a break—" I started to say.

"Is that why you wanted me?" Doe asked me. "Is that why you kept me around for so long without telling me you had feelings for me? To have your kids but giving you until the last second to commit?"

That question nearly brought me to my knees. "No! No, of course not. Don't you dare think that. I love you, Doe. More than anything in this world."

"Not because you're an omega. Not even because you're my mate; although I'm forever grateful that our bond brought us together.

"I love you because you're *you*. You're my sweet, compassionate, beautiful Doe."

I reached forward to put a hand on her leg, but she inched back before I could touch her. I immediately retreated, my heart lodged deep in my throat. Fuck, this was hard.

"Then why did you wait so long to tell me that you're a werewolf?" Her bottom lip wobbled as she spoke. "Who cares what Mitchell thought? I had a right to know."

She wasn't understanding. I *didn't* tell her. There was a point when she knew everything.

But even though we tried to explain that to her now, the lock on her mind was confusing her, preventing her from fully processing the information.

"Ace didn't have a choice, Doe," her mom cut in, sounding just as desperate as I was to make Doe feel better. "None of us did."

"When you were seven years old," Joe explained, "Mitchell took you to a warlock behind our backs—"

"Hold on. A *warlock*?" Doe interrupted. "Like a—a...*warlock*? You're kidding me, right?"

"No, I'm not kidding," Joe said. "Your biological father took you to see a warlock—a man with magical abilities who can perform spells and create potions.

"It's against our laws for warlocks to use their powers on humans—not to mention extremely dangerous—but Mitchell found one who was willing to do it. He put what's known as a 'lock' on your mind."

Doe nodded and sat up just a bit. She had heard that word before.

"The lock blocked any memories that had to do with werewolves," Joe continued. "It also prevents you from remembering any new information about wolves.

"So, if anyone did try to talk to you, or if you overheard or saw something, you would simply forget everything within a few minutes. Or you wouldn't understand."

"So..." Doe started, her expression clouding as she processed, "that's why I don't know about werewolves anymore? I forgot everything because of the...the lock?"

"Yes," I confirmed. "It wasn't up to us. We wanted you to know everything. I wanted you to know everything. You have to know that."

Doe's eyes flitted over my face as if trying to determine whether I was telling the truth. If I was being genuine.

"You wanted to tell me?" she asked, her tone uneven. "You weren't trying to keep your wolf a secret from me?"

I hated that she even needed to ask that question.

"Of course not. You're the love of my life, Doe. I want you to know everything about me. I've wanted you to know since the moment I met you. It killed me to keep such a big part of my life from you."

"It's true," Susan said. "Ace has been fighting for you to know the truth since the beginning. He hated lying to you for all these years. We all did."

Confusion marred Doe's features. "But then...if the lock blocks all memories related to werewolves, why am I able to process all of this now?"

Her eyes widened. "Have we had this conversation before? Am I going to forget all of this in a few minutes?"

"No," I said. "No, you won't forget this. Your memory has been improving over the last few months. I'm sure you've noticed."

Doe relaxed back into the bed, crossing her arms over her chest. "I've noticed how confused I've been," she admitted. "I've noticed everyone keeping secrets from me."

"That's because you're starting to remember things. You're retaining the puzzle pieces."

I scooted to the edge of my chair, needing to be closer to her. "The lock is wearing off. And once you're eighteen, it'll stop working altogether."

"Eighteen..." Doe muttered. "That's why you said you couldn't tell me the truth until I was eighteen. Because I wouldn't be able to remember until after my birthday."

"Yes," I confirmed, feeling like a massive weight had been lifted off my shoulders. "I thought about trying sooner, but even with how much you were remembering, the lock was still blocking so much.

"You were so confused and upset and...I didn't want to add to it."

Doe squeezed her eyes shut and lifted a shaking hand to her temple, wincing slightly. Fuck, her head was killing her. Through our mate bond, her sharp discomfort felt like it was my own.

"That's another thing I wanted to avoid," I said with a deep frown. "I didn't want you to be in pain. Like you are right now. Do you want to take a break?"

"I think that might be a good idea," Susan agreed.

Doe dropped her hand from her temple and readjusted her body against the bed. "No, I'm fine. It's just one of my headaches. It's particularly unpleasant on top of the concussion, but I'll survive.

"I want to keep talking. I don't want to wait any longer to learn the truth."

Joe sighed and ran a hand down his face. "Well then, I suppose it's time you knew that your headaches aren't your typical headaches."

Doe's forehead puckered. "What do you mean?"

"It's the lock," I explained gently. "The pain you're in right now is actually the lock doing its job and clearing out your memories."

That gave Doe pause, and I could tell she was struggling to comprehend.

"Wait, so every single migraine I've gotten over the last few years—all the pain, the hours spent in the dark, all the ibuprofen I've taken—was because someone talked about werewolves around me?"

I exchanged nervous glances with her parents. "Pretty much, yeah. I'm sorry, Doe. I know this is hard to hear—"

Doe interrupted me, clearly not in the mood for my pity. "But I didn't start getting my headaches until I was fifteen. Not until after the car accident."

She narrowed her eyes at me. "But I'm starting to think there wasn't a car accident after all. Was there?"

"No. There wasn't," I answered.

"So, what really happened then?"

I let out a rocky exhale. This was the part I'd been dreading the most. "It's all my fault."