

Chapter 5

"It's all my fault," I said. "I tried to save you."

"You tried to save me?" Doe asked. "Save me from what?"

"From the lock. From what Mitchell did to you," I told her, her birth father's name tasting like vinegar in my mouth.

"I got so sick of lying to you, Doe. You would come to me with holes in your memory, terrified because you saw a wolf or because someone growled at you, but you couldn't remember what happened.

"Sometimes you were even scared of *me*. And that almost killed me. It wasn't fair that we were forced to keep such a massive secret from you. You had a right to know—*have* a right to know.

"So, a few days before your fifteenth birthday, I decided to take matters into my own hands. I decided to remove the lock and give you your memories back."

Doe's lips parted. "There's a way to remove the lock?" Her displeasure trickled down the bond. "Why would you wait until I was fifteen to do it? Why would you wait at all?"

"Because it's dangerous," Joe stated. "It involves dark magic. There was no way of knowing how you would react to it or if it would hurt you, maybe even kill you. And, well, we weren't allowed."

"We wanted to remove the lock, Dorothy," Susan said. "We all felt the same way. Joe and I spent countless hours discussing whether giving you your memories back was worth the risk of hurting you."

"But then the OPS got involved," I grumbled. Just saying those words made my chest ache.

Doe looked far away for a moment. "The OPS," she muttered. "The...the Omega Protective Services." She lifted her head, constricted brown eyes meeting mine once again. "Right?"

My eyebrows shot up. Hope flooded my lungs. "You remember?"

Doe shook her head. "No. I had a dream that a man came to visit me at the hospital after the car accident. He said he was with the OPS and asked me a bunch of questions about the crash."

Huh. These dreams Doe had been having were quite informative.

It gave me hope that maybe her memories weren't lost after all. Maybe I could find a way to give them all back to her in addition to allowing her to make new ones.

"You had a dream about Greg?" Susan asked, shocked.

Doe frowned. "Greg?"

"Gregory Mintz became your caseworker after Mitchell suppressed your memories," Joe explained.

"The OPS investigates reports of omega abuse and neglect. Omegas are easily taken advantage of, especially those mated to alphas and more powerful wolves—which is usually the case.

"Greg has been checking in on you from time to time ever since the OPS found out about the lock. They called it abuse."

"They almost took you away from us," Susan said, wringing her hands. It was a bad memory for all of us. "They thought you were in danger with us."

"But they knew it wasn't your fault, right?" Doe asked.

"They didn't know whose fault it was," her father replied. "Mitchell denied having anything to do with the lock, and we couldn't prove he was guilty. We couldn't prove we weren't guilty either."

He sighed. "They ultimately decided that you could stay with us so long as your memories weren't tampered with again."

"The OPS is the other reason we didn't take the lock off earlier," I told her. "Not only could the process have killed you, but if the OPS found out, we risked having you taken away from us."

Doe stared straight ahead, unseeing. Her face was blank, but her emotions were out of control. I could hear her heart thundering from where I was sitting, telling me just how terrified she was.

She finally lifted her head and looked at me. "So, what changed? What made you want to break the lock when we were fifteen?"

The pain in her eyes sucked the air out of my lungs. I could sense the real question behind the one she asked: What made you finally decide to fight for me?

I wished I could pull her against me right now. It would be so much easier to walk her through this if I could touch her. My touch always calmed her down. It calmed me down too.

As I thought over the best way to explain, I realized this wasn't a conversation we should be having in front of her parents.

I turned to Susan and Joe. "It might be best if Doe and I have the room for this part."

"You want us to leave you two alone?" Susan obviously wasn't keen on the idea.

Doe shifted anxiously on the bed only to wince in pain. She whimpered and put her hand on her leg, over the spot where she was shot. Tears pooled in her eyes.

I nearly shot out of my seat to help her, but Susan put a hand on my wrist, stopping me.

"Do you really think that's necessary?" she asked me with a pointed look.

Susan's gentle grip on me was a reminder not to move too fast when Doe was still healing—to keep my wolf in check.

Susan's instincts to protect her daughter were almost as strong as my instincts to protect my mate.

I gritted my teeth and forced myself to settle back in my chair. "I just think it might be better for everyone if Doe and I were alone when I explain this part," I urged.

"*What are you up to?*" Joe's voice said, suddenly invading my mind.

I cursed myself for not thinking of communicating via mind-link earlier. I spent so much time around my little human mate that I often disregarded the ability.

The first time I had ever been able to mind-link Doe had been a few days earlier, while she was kidnapped, and it had barely worked. It was honestly a miracle we were able to talk at all.

And further proof of how strong our bond was.

"*We're moving into some sensitive subjects,*" I explained to Joe through our link. "*Doe has the right to privacy for what we're going to talk about next.*"

Joe narrowed his eyes. "*What exactly do you plan on telling her?*"

"*Our romantic relationship when we were fifteen. Her mating gland. Her heat. Do you really want to be here for that conversation?*"

The subject of her heat was becoming an urgent matter. I had started to notice Doe's heightened scent even before she was kidnapped. Now, however, it was even more potent.

Sweeter.

Fucking mouthwatering.

There was no doubt in my mind; her heat was approaching. Rapidly. I had thought we had months, but we probably only had a few days before she would be desperate for me to take care of her.

Most omegas didn't have their first *real* heat until they turned twenty-one or twenty-two.

But something was rushing Doe's process. Something was pushing us to complete the mating process so that our connection would be stronger.

Thankfully, it was still early enough that, as her mate, I was the only one who had sensed her changing scent.

I was attuned to everything about her: the rise and fall of her chest with each of her breaths, the faster-than-normal beating of her heart, the red hue staining her cheeks.

But I needed to get her back home to Colorado before things progressed any further. I had to get her somewhere safe and comfortable, where she could nest and prepare herself for what was to come.

But I needed to explain all of this to her first.

Joe's lips fell into a grimace. "Right. Fine. I don't know how close she is..." Another wince. "But we have some leftover suppressants if she needs them. They're in Susan's purse."

"Good to know." I nodded my thanks even as my wolf wanted to bite his head off for suggesting that I poison my mate.

Susan was an omega, just like Doe. She had unexpectedly gone into heat the same day Doe was kidnapped. It was why Joe and Susan hadn't been there to protect Doe when she'd needed us most.

Susan's heat had ended a few days earlier, but I was grateful to hear she still had her suppressants with her.

Taking suppressants wasn't a long-term solution for any omega, though. Most caused severe reactions, like vomiting, weight loss, exhaustion, overall irritability, and so forth.

I had hoped Doe would never have to use them, especially during her first-ever heat. The side effects were sure to be even harsher.

But ultimately, it wasn't up to me. It was Doe's body. And after everything she'd been through, she had the right to say what happened to her and her body and when.

Joe's gaze slid back to Doe. "Are you okay being in the room alone with him? We can stay if you want."

I had to work not to let his question infuriate my wolf. "*She has every right to be afraid of you right now,*" I reminded my inner animal. "*You fucking murdered someone in front of her, you idiot.*"

Doe eyed me. "Do you promise not to shift?"

Ooof. My wolf whimpered and retreated within my consciousness.

"Yes. I promise not to shift," I agreed. "But even if I did, my wolf would never hurt you. You have nothing to fear from me."

I was starting to feel like a broken record. But I would say those words as many times as she needed to hear them.

Doe took a few seconds to think about it. "Okay," she finally agreed.

She looked back at Joe, her fingers picking at the blanket beneath her. "I'll be nearby. I think. Just stay nearby, okay? And maybe keep the door open a bit?"

My shoulders loosened. It wasn't exactly a vote of confidence by any stretch, but agreeing to be in the room alone with me was definitely a step in the right direction.

I wanted to assume it was because she believed me when I said I would never hurt her, but the more logical part of me recognized that it was just the mate bond getting to her.

Her need to connect with me during her distressed state was starting to overshadow her fear of me.

And thank the goddess for that. I wasn't sure how much longer I could stand her looking at me with those terrified eyes.

Joe stood and offered his wife a hand. "We'll be right outside if you need anything," he said to Doe. "Just shout."

Doe's head bobbed up and down as she watched them stroll out of the room, leaving the door open a crack behind them.

"Can I pull my chair closer?" I asked her.

I had purposefully situated myself a few feet away from the bed to give her space, but that was when she'd been terrified of me. Now, I could feel her craving me, even if she wasn't ready to admit it.

She lifted her chin, nodding. "That's fine."

After moving my chair close enough that my knees touched her bed, I settled back down, moving slowly so I didn't scare her.

I leaned forward, putting my elbows against my knees. "Are you ready to hear more?"

The question—or rather, the thoughts it generated in her—seemed to cause her real physical pain. She bit her lip to stop it from quivering.

And then she nodded.