

Chapter 6

"Yes." She crossed her arms over her chest. "I want to hear what was so important that you had to ask my parents to leave."

Damn, but she was cute when she was mad at me.

"Okay." I took a deep inhale. "You asked why it took me so long to remove the lock. I think the obvious answer is that I was finally old enough to understand how wrong it was."

"I became so *pissed* that no one tried to help you. The OPS didn't have to know the lock was removed. And if we did it right, it wouldn't cause you any harm. I would make sure of it."

"But that's not the only reason." I approached this next part with caution. "We, well, we started to develop feelings for each other. Real, *intense* feelings. We were falling in love with each other."

"And I..." I let out a frustrated sigh. "I knew if we were going to be together, I couldn't lie to you anymore. You had the right to know everything about me. I *needed* you to know everything about me."

To my absolute horror, Doe's eyes once again started to turn glossy with her tears. "We...we were in a relationship before?" Her voice was barely above a whisper. "And I *forgot*?"

The way she was looking at me—like she didn't even know me—made me ache with the need to rock her against me until she remembered exactly who I was and how much she meant to me.

"Yes," I answered softly. "But it only lasted a few days. Nothing significant happened between us."

"Did we kiss?"

"Kiss?"

"Did we have our first kiss when we were fifteen?"

"Well...yes. We kissed." Many times, actually. The moment we started, we couldn't keep our lips off each other. "But that was as far as it went, I promise."

Doe's breathing stalled, and her bottom lip just barely started to tremble.

She tried to hide how devastating that information was to her by covering her face with her hands, forgetting that I could feel her strongest emotions through the bond.

"I can't remember our first kiss?" she murmured miserably into her palms.

That was the last straw. I shot out of my seat, no longer able to hold myself back from touching her—comforting her. She was my mate, and she needed me.

Gently, I grabbed her wrists and pulled her hands away so I could see her beautiful face—bruised, red, and stained with tears.

To my great relief, she allowed me to touch her without fighting, seemingly just as desperate to accept my comfort as I was to provide it for her.

She didn't even struggle when I placed my forehead against hers, being careful of her injuries, and shushed her distressed whimpers. My wolf purred for her, and she melted the tiniest bit.

"Doe..." I pleaded. She wouldn't even meet my gaze. Every one of her tears was like a dagger to my midsection. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, baby."

A small sob escaped her mouth, and I knew she wasn't just mourning our past relationship. She was mourning *everything*. Her lost memories, the death of her birth father—all of it.

I held her through it all, letting the mate bond do its job to calm her down.

After a few minutes, I continued with the story, knowing there was more she needed to know.

"I performed the dark magic ritual to break the lock and set you free the day before your fifteenth birthday.

"I introduced you to my wolf. I told you all about our pack and the history of werewolves and you being an omega. We spent days talking, holed up in your room, getting to know each other again."

My wolf hummed lovingly at the memories. It was truly one of the best times of our lives.

"And we were happy, Doe. Really fucking happy. I mean, you were upset and confused, but you were just glad to know the truth."

Doe didn't respond, taking in everything I was telling her with a glazed expression. I knew she was listening, though. I could feel how each word was wrecking her emotionally.

I hated that I was doing it to her, but I tried to take comfort in the fact that she wouldn't have to endure it for much longer. We were almost at the end of the horrible tale.

"We didn't tell anyone that the lock was gone. We couldn't. Not without risking the OPS finding out and trying to take you away. Not even your parents knew."

In hindsight, that had been a really fucking stupid decision. "And then, Mitchell showed up."

Doe nodded glumly. "I knew he was going to come up again."

I leaned back and carefully perched on the edge of her bed. I held back my joy when she clutched my hand like she was afraid I was leaving. I wasn't sure she was even aware of her grip.

"Mitchell used to come to all your birthdays. I'm sure you remember. That was the only time your parents would allow him to see you after what he did to you—once a year on your birthday.

"He showed up early and saw us. We were in the woods behind your house, and I was in my wolf form. You were laughing, messing around with me while I chased after you.

"Mitchell...lost it. He attacked me even though I was still in wolf form, and when you tried to get between us—"

"That's how I got the concussion," Doe gasped. "Isn't it?"

My eyes strayed to the scar on her forehead, which was covered by bandages. She would have two matching scars now—one for each time I failed her.

I wouldn't fail her again. Never. Again.

"Yes. We told you it was from a car accident, but it was your birth father. He almost killed you. And he didn't even care. He said you would be better off dead than as my mate."

Doe's emotions raged, feeling everything all at once: sadness, fear, betrayal, denial. She didn't know how to feel. She didn't know what to believe.

She shook her head. "That can't be true. I know Mitchell wasn't the best father, but you're making him sound insane. Certainable. He would never attempt to kill me just to get me away from you."

"Mitchell just gave you up to fucking hunters," I bit out, immediately ashamed for letting my anger get the better of me.

I took a deep breath. "There is no telling the lengths that man would have gone to take you away from me and the rest of your family.

"He didn't care when those hunters knocked you out and chained you up in a basement.

"He never cared that it could have killed you to be away from me for too long, or that they could have prevented you from ever mating with anyone when they messed with your mating gland.

"All he cared about was taking you and your mom back, whatever it did to you both in the process."

With a small whimper, Doe dropped my hand and went to clutch her chest as if what I had just said caused her real physical pain.

Christ, I've gotta be the most insensitive bastard alive.

"Could we stop talking about Mitchell like he was some sort of monster?" Doe struggled to speak around her tears. "He's d—dead."

Her delicate throat shifted as she swallowed. "Sure, he made mistakes, but he was still my dad. I still believe he loved me and thought he was doing what was best for me."

Fuck. What the hell is my problem? Doe's father just fucking died in front of her, and there I was shit-talking about him and claiming he didn't care about her.

Yeah, I wouldn't be winning the award for best mate any time soon.

Doe covered her mouth with her hand and turned her head to the side. Once again, she didn't want me to see her cry.

I hated that she felt like she needed to hide her emotions from me. I was her mate. If she was going to cry in front of anybody, it should be me.

I stood and quickly rounded her bed so that I could sit down on the side that wasn't by her injured leg. Once I had readjusted her so that I had enough room to settle down, I pulled my mate to me.

She let me wrap my arms around her and lead her head to rest against my chest. Her tears stained my T-shirt as she cried against me. She obviously didn't have it in her to deny my embrace right now.

"Shh, I'm sorry, Doe," I said, running my hand up and down her arm as she hiccupped and cried.

"Of course Mitchell loved you. Of course he wanted what was best for you. I'm sorry. I should be more sensitive when I talk about him."

I wasn't sure if she was hearing me. Her breathing had picked up significantly, rising in and out of her lungs much too fast. She was panicking.

This was about more than just her father. I was throwing too much at her.

"Hey, none of that. Breathe. I need you to breathe," I urged.

When she continued to hyperventilate, my instincts took over.

I readjusted her so her face was close to my neck. "Take in my scent. Come on, it'll help you calm down."

Doe took my instructions a little too seriously, and she threw her entire face into the crook of my neck, forgetting her face was covered in bruises and that her nose was broken.

"Your nose, baby," I said, gently moving her back a little. "Be careful. It's still healing."

A lot of Doe was healing. I didn't know where I could touch her without causing her pain. I was dealing with a cracking porcelain doll.

Doe laid her cheek on my chest instead as she still struggled to rein in her tears. But after a few moments, my touch and scent seemed to help her.

"Better." I pressed a kiss to her head, avoiding the bandage near her temple, and took in lungful after lungful of her decadent scent.

It was such a relief to hold her in my arms again, even in spite of the circumstances.

"Try to match your breathing to mine." I exaggerated the rise and fall of my chest so she could feel it.

Doe closed her eyes and slowed her breathing, although her pulse continued to thutter against me.

"There we go," I said. "Just take a second to calm down."

I tensed when I heard the door to her hospital room creak open. Joe peeked his head in through the crack, a worried expression on his face. Susan hovered behind him.

Joe must have heard Doe panicking and come to make sure everything was okay. Doe didn't seem to notice.

"She's fine," I assured him through the mind-link. "I've got her."

Joe didn't look convinced, but he didn't try to interfere. He had to know how hard this was for her. There were bound to be some tears.

"We're right outside," he reminded me in a stilted tone.

I nodded, and he stepped back and closed the door, leaving Doe and me alone once again.

Joe was a good dad. He always had been. He loved Doe as if she were his own child. He was exactly who she needed after her biological father abandoned her for reasons outside of her control.

So, although my wolf had been ready to end his life just a few days earlier for the way he'd spoken to Doe before she was kidnapped, I was grateful that he was in her life.

"My dream," Doe murmured into the fabric of my shirt. Her eyes were still squeezed shut, her cheeks flushed with emotion, but her tears had finally stopped, and her breathing was back to normal.

"Hm?"

"This is just like the dream I had the night before I was kidnapped," she clarified. "You and me, lying in bed after I was in danger, confused and scared. I even have the same pounding headache."

I hated that she was right.

She raised her deep brown eyes to meet mine. They were curious and glassy. And so fucking sad.

"What?" I asked her. "What is it?"

"You put the lock back on my mind," she croaked. "Didn't you?"

My guilt wrapped around my throat like a noose. "Yes. I did."