

Chapter 7

"The man you saw in your dream," Ace explained quietly, "is Gullius Mallor. He's a warlock who I asked to put the lock back on your mind—for your own good."

My heart seized. "For my own good...?"

I had barely begun to process the fact that my birth father had messed with my mind. And now, to top that off—Ace—the person I trusted most in the world—had done the same.

"I had to, Doe," Ace rasped, unconsciously pulling me closer to him so there wasn't an inch of space between us.

Nowhere for me to go.

"After Mitchell found out I removed the lock, he went to the OPS. They were going to take you away. They were going to give you to Mitchell—the man who put the lock on you in the first place."

"Why?" I shook my head. "Why would they do that?"

"Mitchell told them I was the one who hurt you. He said I had been tampering with your memories for years and that I was using my alpha side to take advantage of your omega. I was going to lose you."

"So, you *took my memories*?" I seethed. "You're the reason why I'm so confused all the time? Why I get horrible, agonizing headaches?"

Ace's chest heaved. "I didn't know about the headaches. They were a side effect of using magic when you had a concussion. If I had known it was going to hurt you long term—"

"What? You wouldn't have done it? Are you serious? *That's* what would've stopped you? The pain?"

"Not the fact that you had absolutely no right? Not the fact that it was a complete and total invasion? Not the fact that it meant that you would have to lie to me for the rest of our lives?"

An agonized noise came from deep within Ace's throat. "Not the rest of our lives, Doe. That's what it *would've* been if I hadn't stepped in."

"I had a plan. I made sure the new lock would wear off by the time you're eighteen. That's why you're starting to remember everything now. The OPS can't take you from me when you're a legal adult."

"Even if they come now, you could make the decision to stay—"

I let out a humorless laugh. "You really thought I would want to be anywhere near you after I learned what you did to me?"

Ace tensed. The air around us grew taut and uncomfortable. "Doe, I couldn't just let you go. You've felt what happens when we're apart for too long."

He was right. I had felt what happens when we're apart for too long. And it wasn't anything good. My body started to malfunction without him.

I looked down at my hand wrapped around Ace's wrist in my lap. Despite everything he just told me, I was gripping him so tightly that I was surprised he wasn't complaining about a loss of blood flow.

His other arm was draped over my shoulders, and his fingers were running along the skin of my bicep in casual strokes that made tingles ignite along my spine.

I was leaning against his massive, vibrating chest, taking comfort in the feel of his skin against mine.

It was the mate bond. It had to be. It was the only explanation for why I was snuggling up to a monster when I should be screaming and running for the hills.

"You're my mate, Doe. My everything. And not only that, you're an omega."

"I know that doesn't mean much to you, but it plays a huge role in all of this. It's rare. It means our connection is stronger; our need to be around each other overtakes everything else."

"My wolf and I are more protective of you because our mate bond is different from most wolves."

"Not only because I'm an alpha, but also because you're more vulnerable as both a human and an omega. Easier to take advantage of."

Indignation crept under my skin. "You're making me sound like some pathetic child. I think if you gave me a chance, you would see I'm not as weak as you think I am."

"I know that. I know. That's not what I meant. You're not a pathetic child, and you're not weak. You're the strongest person I know."

"But, fuck, you're also fragile. So fucking fragile. Any werewolf in town could kill you without even trying. Your brothers are half your age, and they could easily break you like a toothpick."

He claimed I was the strongest person he knew, but then went ahead and said even my eleven-year-old brothers could kill me without even trying. Could he not see how pitiful that made me sound?

"Doe, baby, please don't look at me like that," Ace begged. "I'm not trying to make you feel bad. It's not your fault. It's just the way omegas are. You're a lover, not a fighter."

"But that doesn't make you weak. It makes you kind. You value peace and caring for others over winning in a fight."

I thought back to all the times I helplessly wondered why I lost my ability to speak whenever someone raised their voice at me and wished for Ace to come to my rescue.

I didn't feel strong during those moments, as Ace suggested. I didn't feel like I was trying to keep the peace or protect someone's emotions.

I felt scared.

I felt weak.

I felt like a fucking doormat.

And I felt like Ace enabled me to continue feeling that way by framing it in any other light.

Ace clearly had himself convinced that it was my "good heart" and "omega nature"—whatever that meant—that prevented me from standing up for myself. But that wasn't true.

It was my lack of courage.

"There's another thing. Another reason why I couldn't let you go with your father," Ace went on.

He was trying to change the subject. I wondered if he could feel how devastated I was.

And yet, I couldn't help but notice the sudden huskiness of his voice. Despite my inner conflict, my ears perked. Why the change in demeanor?

"As an omega, you go through something called heat."