Fated to My Vampire Lord

Chapter 6

Damon's POV She let go of my hand like I'd burned her. "I'm so sorry." The words came out in a rush — tripping over each other, barely finished before the next one started. Mira Hale stepped back, color flooding her face, her hands pulling at the cuffs of her hoodie like she could disappear inside it. "I shouldn't have — I didn't mean to drag you out here, or — any of it. They think I'm human. My pack. If I can't prove I'm a shifter, they'll throw me out, so I said I had a mate, and then they wouldn't stop asking who, and — " She stopped. Took a breath. Pressed her palms flat against her thighs. "I'm not human. I swear I'm not. Thank you for not saying anything in there. You didn't have to do that." Then she turned and ran. Down the dark street, her gray hood pulled up, sneakers slapping the wet pavement. She didn't look back. I let her go. I stood there for a moment longer than I needed to. The street smelled like exhaust and cheap perfume from the couple that had just passed. The takeout bag hung from my hand — she'd shoved it back at me before she bolted, like she couldn't get rid of it fast enough. But that wasn't true, was it. Because in the café, when she'd looked inside that bag and seen the blood pouches, she hadn't flinched. She hadn't wrinkled her nose the way every wolf I'd ever met did when they smelled stored blood. She'd gone still. Her pupils had widened. For half a second she'd looked at my food the way a starving thing looks at meat. Then she'd snapped the bag shut and held it against her chest like she was protecting it. Interesting. I walked back toward the car, the takeout bag swinging from two fingers. The feeling of that kiss was still there — stuck on my mouth. Warm and clumsy and too brief to be anything real. She'd aimed for my ear and hit my lips instead, and for one second before I understood what was happening, something had flickered. Not a bond. I wasn't an shifter. But something. I unlocked the car and sat in the dark for a moment. I'd known her face the moment she walked into this school. I'd known it before I walked into the Vampire History class and she sat down beside me today. Eleven years is a long time. People grow up. Features shift. But some things don't change — the shape of the eyes, the stubborn set of the jaw, the way she held herself like she was used to being overlooked and had decided it wasn't going to stop her. She didn't remember me. That was obvious. She'd looked at me in that classroom like I was a stranger she felt strangely warm toward, and she couldn't figure out why. Good. That made it simpler. I'd figured out the order of the world a long time ago. Vampires on top. Shifters beneath. Humans gone, or close enough. A girl like Mira and a man like me were not friends — could not be friends. My father had made that clear before I could read. And he was right. He was right about most things, even the ones I didn't want him to be right about. But I remembered that pit. The dirt walls. The gray square of sky. And the small girl who'd held my hand in the dark and said *someone's going to come*. I'd never fully repaid that debt. Maybe now I could, in a way she never should know about. My father was waiting when I got home. "Sit," he said. I didn't. I

leaned against the doorframe of his study instead. He hated that. Lord Alaric Voss sat behind a desk the size of a dining table, his reading glasses low on his nose, tablet in hand. He didn't look angry yet. That was worse. It meant the anger was still loading. "Do you have any idea," he said, "what's being written about you?" He turned the tablet toward me. Headlines. Vampire Lord's Son Accused of Bullying Shifters. Voss Family Preaches Peace, Practices Cruelty. "They're saying my own son doesn't believe a word of what I stand for. That if the Lord's heir abuses shifters, the whole peace is a performance." "My friends explained it," I said. "It's nothing. Shifters and reporters were just making a fuss." "I know it's nothing." He set the tablet down hard enough that it clacked against the wood. "That isn't the point. The point is we rule because they agreed to let us rule. The day they stop believing we're fair is the day they stop being afraid enough to stay obedient. Not that we cannot win another war, we just don't have to." He rubbed his temple. "You don't have to mean the peace, Damon. You only have to perform it. That's how you rule everyone. I'd hoped you understood that by now." He kept talking. I stopped listening. I was thinking about a coffee shop. About a wolf girl announcing to a room full of witnesses that I was her boyfriend, and not one of those witnesses daring to believe what they just heard. About the fact that every phone in that room had probably captured the moment, and by morning the whole school would know. I smiled. What if I told everyone that was true? That I was actually dating a wolf shifter girl? "What," my father snapped, "is funny? Are you even listening?" "I'll have your bad press cleaned up by next week," I said. That stopped him. His eyes narrowed, then sharpened with something close to hope. "How?" "You'll see." I pushed off the doorframe and headed for the stairs. "Damon." His voice followed me. "Whatever you're planning — keep it controlled. Don't make this worse." I didn't answer. He wasn't going to like how I did it. But it was going to work. And that, as he'd just reminded me, was the only thing that mattered.