

## Chapter 3

DANE

I didn't bother to turn around and look at my manipulative, murderous mate. I just laughed without humor. "You know what the elders said. You'd bring the Council down on both our packs."

I'd finally f\*cked her. It was all she'd been begging me for for years.

She'd never pull her claws out of me now.

The sex had been incredible. Better than I'd imagined. And Goddess, had I dreamed about touching her over the years. All that perfect skin, all that softness. And those huge, gorgeous lilac eyes, soft as her scent.

I hated her for it.

I had fought myself tooth and claw over the years to keep from touching her. To remind myself what she had done. What she was part of.

Today, that control had snapped. I thought once would be enough. That I'd get my fill of her sweetness.

It was a mistake. I already knew. Something about the way her fingers dug into my back when I claimed her. Something about the way she called my name. It wrapped around my heart.

So f\*cking dangerous. Just as dangerous as the first time I caught the scent of blood and silver.

I shook myself. My control was iron. She had to have visited some hag in the woods. Spiked my drink.

"I'm...I'm serious," she said. "This is torture for both of us. Cutting our soul-bond would just sever our connection. We'd still be mated in the eyes of the Council, even if it doesn't mean anything."

Sometimes her sad little princess act almost got to me. Even though I wasn't looking at her, I could feel the tension radiating off her body.

But even though I didn't give a sh\*t about her, something about her words made unease wash over me.

Ann Reed was *mine*. We were bound together in suffering forever because of what she'd done. Because of what the Council ruled.

But I was patient. I was still going to kill her for what she'd done to my pack. One day.

I'd wipe Broken Forest off the map.

I finished straightening my tie and turned to face her. She had the ribbon clenched in her hands. How cute of her to bring a prop. It probably wasn't even a convincing fake.

I sauntered over and leaned down, pinning her with a hand on either side of her body. She leaned back into the couch, like she might be able to burrow into it.

This close, I could feel her heat. Smell the sweet lilac scent that always lingered around her.

The scent of her always got me inconveniently hard. She knew it because of the bond.

Because of the bond, I tasted her sadness. Her fear. I *felt* for her because we were tied together like wolves, when she wasn't even a true wolf. Not anymore.

I let my wolf out. Just a little. I'd seen myself in lycan form enough to know what I'd look like. My dark brown eyes would lighten to golden yellow. My teeth lengthened into fangs, my fingers into sharp-tipped charcoal claws.

I grabbed her chin with one hand and let my claws cut into her skin deep enough to draw blood. Like poppies on snow.

She whimpered. She was so vulnerable. So d\*mn helpless. My wolf wanted to claim her again. To bury myself in that softness.

If I didn't know she was manipulating me...I might actually want her. Want to protect her, like I did that first night, when I thought I'd felt something between us.

I might develop cracks in my armor for her.

But she was the reason my parents were dead. She was the reason I could never be with the woman I loved.

She was the cause of all my weakness. All my grief.

"The Reeds aren't getting anything from me, no matter how many empty threats you make."

Could I be married to someone I wasn't soul-bonded to? No wolf would want to live that way.

To my surprise, she jerked from my grasp, even though it left a cut. She wiped the blood dripping down her chin and shoved the thick silver ribbon in my face.

It glimmered with magic. When I grasped it, I could feel the power in it that connected us.

The ribbon was real.

I snatched it from her hand and stood to my full height.

"You've taken your little game too far," I sneered. "You think I'd fall for this?"

If I cut this ribbon, my connection to her would snap. I wouldn't be able to sense her anymore. What if she ran from me?

Then again, if we cut it, I wouldn't have to feel what she felt anymore. At first, I'd thrived on her despair. It meant we despaired together. Lately, it just made me sick. Every time I hurt her feelings, I was the one who'd swallowed poison.

"You could be free," she coaxed. "You could...be with Evelyn."

Hearing that, I relaxed.

Ann hated Evelyn – the woman who'd saved my life. The one I

truly loved.

She'd never try to leave me. It would mean letting Evelyn win. As soft as Ann pretended to be, there was steel in her. I knew it.

She didn't want me to do this. She was just desperate for attention, like she always was.

I'd teach her not to pull this sh\*t with me.

Besides, in that moment, being free didn't sound all that bad.

I gave her a casual smile. "You're going to regret this. Without me, you have no connection to wolves at all. Remember that."

Then I sliced the ribbon with my claws. It fell in two neat pieces on the ground.

There was a sound like flames snapping, a burst of heat. The threads of magic in the ribbon flickered out.

Then Ann was gone from my mind. For a second, I felt blank. Like the deepest part of me was torn away. I fought not to stagger. My stomach lurched. I swallowed down bile.

Still reeling, I took out my black card and threw it at her.

"Consider that payment for your...services." I smirked, covering how unsteady I was. "Now clean yourself up. I'm going to find Evelyn. I think I need the company of a woman who knows how to please me."

That would show her for trying to bait me.

I turned and left the room.

As I closed the door, I heard a muffled sob. It was the most heartbroken sound I'd ever heard.

I froze. I wondered if I was wrong about everything.

Was Ann a victim of her family?

Did she truly love me?

If I could tell those things from the bond alone, I would have years ago. But all it gave me was impressions of her emotions, where she was, if she was hurt.

I felt like I'd stepped into a cold shadow. Like I'd just made the biggest mistake of my life. Like if I didn't go into that room, beg for her forgiveness, and repair our bond, I would regret it forever.

Almost of its own will, my hand grasped the doorknob.



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Gifts