

## You Don't Touch What's Mine

"Over your dead body?" I laugh, sharp and a little unhinged.

"Fine. Over mine too, before I ever accept you as my mate. If you don't let me go right now, Kei, it will be the greatest mistake of your life—don't say I didn't warn you." I lift my chin, every nerve screaming. "So I'm giving you one last chance to accept my rejection. Just one. I reject you—this bond—everything that ties me to you—"

I don't get to nish.

His hand comes up—not to strike, not to seize my throat—just to catch my jaw, while his other hand sts in my hair.

Then his mouth crashes into mine.

It cuts off my words. My breath. My rebellion—in front of my father, the court, and everyone who has ever wanted to see me break.

It isn't a kiss meant to be sweet. It isn't even meant to be mutual.

It's a command.

Hard. Brief. Uncompromising.

It's a bruise in the shape of his mouth—heat and pressure and dominance slammed into me like a door being shut. My back hits his chest, my thoughts scatter, and my body betrays me by freezing instead of ghting. Wolf-less, I'm helpless—and he knows it.

I don't kiss back.

I don't even get the chance.

It's over almost as quickly as it begins, but it leaves me wrecked anyway.

For a heartbeat, my body forgets how to work—and forgets how to breathe.

I don't even realize I'm not breathing.

It feels like being dropped into icy water—everything going cold and hot at the same time. My lungs lock. The world tilts. Sound fades to a dull roar.

I just stand there, stunned, lips burning, mind blank.

When he pulls back, his eyes aren't green anymore.

They're dark.

Not shadow-dark.

Wolf-dark. The kind of dark that means he's barely holding his wolf by the throat.

"Breathe," he says—and damn him, there's a smirk there.

And like my body is a traitor, it obeys before my pride does.

I suck in air like I've been drowning. It rushes back into my lungs in a humiliating gasp. My face burns, my legs go weak at the worst possible moment, and I would fall if his hand didn't snap to my waist and hold me upright.

Which only makes it worse.

Because I feel the room now.

I feel every eye on me.

I hear the grins.

I catch a few low, approving chuckles.

Somewhere in the crowd, a wolf howls.

A few amused rumbles of laughter ripple through the alphas who think this is entertainment.

Humiliation roars up my spine, and my shame snaps straight into rage.

I open my mouth to unleash hell—

—and my father's voice cracks across the hall like a whip.

"Enough, Ravelle! Guards, take her back to her cage. She needs to be taught a few more lessons—"

"There will be no need for that, Your Majesty."

Kei's voice is calm. Too calm.

"I'll handle her myself," he says, meeting my father's gaze as if this has already been decided. "From now on, she is mine to punish."

My father studies him for a long moment, then lets out a short, humorless laugh. "Are you sure? As you can see, she just rejected you—proving me right. The most stubborn she-wolf to ever exist. Going soft isn't how you tame her and make her submit. I tried that. Look where it got me. It's a mistake I'll regret forever."

"With all due respect," Kei replies coolly, "I know how to handle my woman. In my own way."

His gaze drops back to me, heavy, unreadable, predatory.

"What more surprises do you have for me?" he asks quietly. "First you ran. Then you lied. You made me want you before you even told me who you were. And now that I know the truth... you reject me?" His eyes search my face as if looking for something broken. "Tell me, Princess... was any of what we had real?"

My heart stumbles. Actually stumbles.

I swallow, but I don't look away.

"Yes," I say, because I'm done hiding behind half-truths. "It was. And that's the problem. For one stupid moment, I thought you were different."

The words hang between us like a challenge.

He did say it. He said he'd rather die than give up the throne. My throne. I had thought he was different from all the other power-hungry alphas. Maybe even worse, since he is my fated mate.

A icker of pain crosses his face—just for a heartbeat—then it vanishes, replaced by something far more dangerous: resolve, sharpened into steel.

"Well," he says softly, leaning in just enough that only I can hear, "I am different. Just not in the way you hoped."

His voice has no warmth.

"I'm the worst kind, Because I don't let go of what's mine. I don't forgive. And I don't lose." his breath brushes my ear. "And soon, Princess... you're going to learn exactly what that means—every way a person can learn it."

A chill snakes down my spine. My body tightens, senses screaming. Deep in my bones, I know—whatever he plans next, he means every word.

Then I don't even see it coming.

One moment I'm still reeling from Kei's words, locked in a silent war with him, and the next, someone yanks me hard—rough ngers biting into my arm.

I stumble straight into a chest that smells wrong. Unfamiliar muscle, cheap arrogance, dominance. Sour pride. Rot.

I look up.

Darius.

He's tall—almost Kei's height—but where Kei feels like stone and storm, Darius feels like a tower built on sand. Loud. Hollow. Desperate. Trying far too hard to look important in a room that has already decided he's nothing.

"Stop forcing yourself on the lady," Darius snaps, loud enough for the entire hall to hear. He shoves himself between me and Kei like a badly timed hero, like he's brave enough to die today. His grip on my arm tightens—not for protection, but possession.

"She doesn't want you. And she isn't yours—she's mine."

Mine.

My stomach twists.

"I'm the one who won the competition to be her mate and husband," he continues, chest puffed out. "She rejected you because she knows she belongs to me. Now accept the rejection, Alpha Kei."

For a heartbeat, the room freezes.

Then disgust hits me so hard it almost knocks the air from my lungs.

I wrench my arm away, my skin crawling where his ngers touched me. "Get your lthy hands off me, you bastard," I hiss. "How dare you touch me?"

Darius scoffs, eyes wild now. "I was the one you were supposed to marry, not him."

His voice cracks at the edges, insecurity bleeding through every word.

Pathetic.

"Kei can't take you from me. He already owns the strongest pack—does he have to take everything?" His laugh comes out sharp and broken. "I won't let him. I'd rather die than let Alpha Kei steal you from me. I don't care about fate. I was chosen rst."

Chosen.

Like I'm a prize. Or a war trophy.

I stare at him, genuinely stunned by the depth of his delusion, by his audacity.

My gaze icks to Kei.

Bad idea.

Kei is no longer pretending to be civilized.

His eyes are murder now—cold, focused, calculating. His lip curls, a low growl tearing from his chest as he moves. He doesn't rush. He doesn't need to. In one brief motion, he grips Darius's wrist, wrenches my arm free, and pulls me back against him—gentle with me, devastating with Darius.

I hear bone strain.

Darius chokes out a cry. He never stood a chance to begin with.

Kei twists hard, and Darius drops to one knee, like gravity has suddenly remembered him.

"You don't touch what's mine," Kei snarls.