

CHAPTER 11: COUSIN WUZZY

BRIAR'S POV

Chocolate brown hair falls in soft waves around his chiseled face, framing gentle grey eyes that hold a hint of mischief.

His features are striking—like a Greek god stepped out of a painting.

If I wasn't currently running for my life, I'd be frozen, mesmerized by his beauty, unable to tear my eyes away.

But reality crashes back in, reminding me I can't afford the luxury of staring.

I scream, unable to control the pitch, grabbing at a white towel hanging by the side and covering my body with it.

"Relax... it's just me, sweetheart," he chides softly, a sly smirk on his lips as he draws closer to me, arms outstretched to welcome me.

His countenance is chill and playful, as if I'm supposed to know him, as if it would be possible to remain calm in this situation.

I look at the door behind him, calculating my next move of escape. Of course, taking a break for a quick meal and bath was a terrible idea, Briar.

Stupid!

"I won't bite, lovely. You don't have to stop on my account," he murmurs, his voice low and smooth.

His eyes darken as they travel over my body, lingering on every inch of exposed skin.

There's an intensity in his gaze that sends a shiver through me, making my pulse quicken.

He's hot, I realize again.

Hot but cocky, the kind I would have gone for in the past before being with Lucas.

Dammit, Briar, concentrate!

You need to get out of here.

"I don't believe I've seen you here before, but I must say, seeing a face as stunning as yours is the highlight of my day." He reaches out to touch me, and my body reacts on its own.

Years of dealing with s*x-obsessed assholes have sharpened my wolf's reexes. My right arm recoils instinctively before shooting forward, my st clenched tightly, aiming straight for his face.

I sucker punch him right in the nose.

He stumbles backward, taken off guard, and I move for the door, ignoring my clothes, deciding to make it out half-naked if it means getting out of here safely.

Before I can cross the threshold, he's on me with lightning speed, his hand gripping my arm and yanking me back.

I spin around, colliding with his hard, washboard abs. Breathless, I look up at him, taking in his barely bruised face and slightly red nose.

"Feisty, aren't we? I don't remember requesting a dominatrix, but I don't mind it either," he purrs, the sound vibrating from his chest.

Now I want to vomit.

"Let me go, you bastard!"

"Why? Am I too much to handle compared to your usual clients?"

"What? Usual clients?"

I stare back at him in confusion and open my mouth to explain that I'm not whatever he thinks I am and that he has to let me go before Tavian shows up, but it's too late.

I feel him before I see him.

The mate bond tingles at the spot of my marking, a warning that sends a shiver down my spine.

It's like an electric current, announcing his arrival with an intensity that lls me with instant panic and dread.

The door is broken down like cardboard before a couple of guards rush in.

"Eli..."

His voice, a low and lethal baritone, slices through the room, carrying an aura of pure menace.

It wraps around us like a dark, suffocating fog, sending an unmistakable warning to everyone within earshot.

It's something I didn't notice before - something I should have noticed.

Immediately, this stranger lets go of my hand, his face turned towards the door with a light quizzical smile, not in the least bit threatened as the rest of us in the room.

"Oh, Cousin Wuzzy, you're here?"

Cousin Wuzzy! As in biological cousins?

The realization hits me like a bulldozer, and it's only now that I look at Tavian, instantly regretting it.

His cold eyes are xed solely on me, dismissing the search-party guards and his cousin entirely.

It's as if they don't exist; only I do.

I swallow a choking lump in my throat.

His gaze is a razor-sharp focus, dissecting every inch and breath I take.

He watches me with the vicious intensity of a hawk eyeing its prey, granting me the illusion of a chance, a eeting moment of false hope, before he inevitably swoops in to crush it.

"I see you've been keeping yourself entertained, running around and causing a nuisance," he remarks, his tone smooth and polite, yet there's a menacing chill to it.

I take a shaky breath, steadying myself and trying not to show just how terried I am.

"It's not my fault your guards are terrible at playing hide and seek," I say, hiding the tremble in my voice, raising my chin high enough to challenge him.

I see a twitch in his right eye, only for a second, like a sliver of rage that brier cracks through his perfect, impenetrable demeanor.

I see my deance affect him.

"Ah, so you think this is all just a game, don't you?" he asks, his voice dangerously low, his eyes glinting with a dark, predatory amusement.

I'm too frozen to shake my head in denial, to scream out that this is not the kind of game I'd willingly partake in.

I regret the statement altogether as he slowly draws closer to me.

My heart pounds harder than it should.

"Running amok in my halls like a slithering snake, and then cozying up to my cousin—that, too, a part of our little game?" He chuckles, the sound cold and empty, his smile not reaching his eyes as a shiver runs down my spine.

Suddenly, his hand grabs at my hair, just as he had done the night before.

It's rough and sudden, and I scream as he drags me away from his cousin. I scratch at his arm desperately; my scalp remains sore from last night.

"Did you nd pleasure in seducing him as you did with me? Is this another one of the cunning tricks you use on the men back home?" He leans into my ear, his whisper a venomous caress.

I hear the anger in his tone, the seething rage and blood thirst, and I know I'm nished.

"Tavian..." his cousin speaks, confused and perhaps concerned, but he's ignored completely.

He pulls harder, almost lifting me off the ground by my hair.

"Perhaps I alone cannot hope to satisfy that ravenous appetite to devour everything in your sight, innocent or not."

"Tavian... please." I beg now, tears gathering in my eyes against my will.

I don't want to beg him, but it hurts. It hurts so much.

"Please?" His chuckle is a sharp, mocking sound before his smile vanishes, replaced by a blank, emotionless stare devoid of any compassion.

"It appears the gravity of your situation has yet to dawn on you. You still believe this is merely one of your twisted little games. Well, allow me to remind you where you are and why you are here."

He throws me against the wall, hard.

I don't break my back, but it reopens a few sore wounds upon collision.

I wince in pain, looking up at him, shivering with renewed fear at this monster, this devil I've been sold to.

"You belong to me, Briar. That bastard of a father sold you to me, remember? And for a pretty high price, one I'd argue isn't worth it."

I look away, unable to meet his gaze, not wanting him to see the tears that refuse to stop.

His irritation is swift and brutal; he seizes my face with a rough grip, forcing me to look into his cold, sinister eyes.

"Look at me when I'm speaking," he commands, venom and ice. "There's no point pretending to be weak and innocent; we both know you're anything but. I've witnessed rstand the ugliness that truly rots within you."

"That's enough, Tavian. That's no way to treat a lady," the cousin speaks.

"A lady?" Tavian pauses, his eyes shifting to the other man for a moment before a cruel laugh escapes his lips, mocking and harsh, as if the idea were the most absurd thing he's ever heard. "Oh, that's right, you missed last night's dinner. I made sure you got an invite."

"I was... busy." He throws his eyes the other way nervously.

"Sampling more women, I suppose? Well, dear cousin, this one here..." he tightens his grip on me, a cruel smile playing on his lips, "...is no lady. She's the kind of lth you scrape off your shoes. And ah, yes, she's also my mate."

"What?" Confusion splatters across his face before Tavian dismisses him, leaving all the unanswered questions rushing into his mind.

He signals for a guard, who steps forward and grabs me roughly, forcing me to stand even as my legs tremble and struggle to hold my weight.

"Since you have so much energy to run amok and disrupt my morning," he says coldly, "why don't I give you something to do with it?"

With a dismissive wave of his hand, the guard drags me away from them, treating me again like a criminal.

I feel utterly humiliated and disgraced.