

CHAPTER 8: THE HEART

BRIAR'S POV

Glass shattering. Screeching tires. Blood.

Blood.

More blood.

My heart hammers in my ribcage, threatening to burst as I struggle to catch my breath.

My father's voice, his raging accusation echoes in the walls of my head.

"It was all your fault! You killed her! You caused her death! You took her from us! You are the reason your mother is dead!"

I jolt up from bed, sweat coating my skin as the memories of the horrifying nightmare flood my vision once again.

I press a hand over my pounding heart, tugging up the bed sheet to hide my naked frame.

One glance to the side, and I notice Tavian isn't in bed with me.

A soft glow pulls my attention lower, and a gasp tears from my chest at the sight before me.

It's faint, barely visible, but the birthmark on the left side of my chest... is glowing.

What the...?!

"You're awake." My gaze lifts just as Tavian walks into the room. The morning sun bathes him in a warm glow.

"I'm glad," he says, "because it's high time I bring you home."

Delight shoves my earlier confusion six feet under as I rise from the bed, just as eager as he seems.

He tells me to pack every single thing I'll ever need because... I'll never be coming back here.

I can't think of a fate more endearing.

But as the town car pulls up at the house an hour later, the only possession I have tucked at my side is one of my mother's old journals.

The rest of it... can all burn. I don't want any of the memories.

And with that, I make my way to my new home.

We spend hours on the road before finally making it to Tavian's pack.

And right from the moment the front gates let us in, I'm suspended in a growing state of awe. His home is... breathtaking.

Dozens of staff and security wait outside the palace gates as the town car pulls into the massive driveway—rushing to ood the car, dishing out greetings as the driver opens Tavian's side of the door.

He holds a hand out, helping me down alongside him.

My gaze darts from place to place, taking it all in.

Back home, at The Crimson Beasts', is nothing compared to Tavian's kingdom in any light.

His voice presses right by my ear, "I trust you like it?"

"Like it?" I turn to him with a smile, "I'm in love!"

A devastating grin pulls on one corner of his mouth, "Wait till I show you the bedrooms," he says. "And in a couple of hours, I have something special planned for tonight. A welcome dinner if you may."

"A welcome dinner?" I ask, "For us?"

"For you," he claries. "For my new Luna."

A flush deepens my complexion from my neck up.

"Let me show you around." He pulls me by my waist into the grand building, tucking me close to his side.

The warmth radiates off him and seeps into my clothes.

He pays no mind to the dozens of people giving off greetings and welcome backs as he takes me inside with him.

I snuggle into his side as he takes me on the grandest personal tour of my life.

Hours later, I'm looking through the blinds, scanning the guests for familiar faces.

His deep voice scolds me, "You're peeking."

I spin around guiltily, just as the maid shuts the bedroom door behind her. My eyes shift to the garment laid over the bed.

He had a dress sent in just for me. For tonight's dinner.

Every second so far with him already seems too good to be true, but I'm letting myself get used to it. To this... good life.

Seconds after the woman leaves, he takes charge, pulling the luxurious material from its casing and laying it out on the bed for me to see.

I'm admiring it in all its beauty when he comes up behind me, letting his hands trail up the sides of my torso.

I lean my head back on his chest, enjoying the simple touch.

"Do you like it?"

"I love it." I spin around to face him, wrapping my arms around his neck. "It's beautiful, Tavian. Everything so far has been. I'm grateful for it all, you know?"

"Wait till tonight's dinner." He promises, "I can't wait for you to see what I have planned for it."

He's told me he's invited a lot of people he gathers I'm familiar with, people whose contacts I'm clueless on how he got hold of.

Just the effort it took for him to arrange something like that cements so much gratitude inside me.

At first glance he doesn't look it, but I'm starting to believe he's a romantic at heart.

Nevertheless, I'm just as excited as him.

"Let's put that dress on, shall we?" he suggests, pulling away from me. "The evening's about to begin."

I shrug out of my robe as he picks up the gown.

I'm in nothing but my underwear as he circles back to me.

And leave it to me to bask in the warmth of his gaze, eating up every inch of my exposed flesh.

I've never been attracted to any man with half the intensity as I am with Tavian.

It's like my body is automatically attuned to him.

Every gaze, every lingering stare, every soft caress pushes me further and further over the edge of being lost in a world where nothing else exists but him.

It's far from normal, but I can't even bring myself to be bothered about it.

He crouches down to his knees, holding the dress for me to step into.

I grip his shoulders as he drags the material up my body slowly, dark eyes locked on mine the entire time.

He pulls it up over my bust, cupping one mound in a large hand like he just can't help it.

His hands move to the back of the dress to secure the ties.

Every scrape of his fingers along my spine has me wanting to strip myself bare and lose myself in all the rough caresses he can offer.

But it can wait.

He sweeps my hair over my shoulder, placing a delicate kiss at the nape of my neck.

"It's time," he says. "Are you ready?"

"I am."

He steps away from me then.

"I'll have to leave you here."

A crease forms along my forehead, but he continues, "A maid will walk you to me. I have one more present I need to have ready before the night begins."

The stupid little butterflies take flight once again, and I'm at a loss for words as he leans in, capturing my mouth in his with the sweetest pull.

It's just a feather-light brush, and it lasts for less than a few seconds, but I still feel the effect of it in my toes.

"I'll see you soon," he promises, before giving one last kiss and exiting the room.

I take my time to admire the rich fabric in the mirror once he's gone.

It's fabulous, but a little stiff in some areas. Walking in it won't be difficult though.

As long as I keep my stomach tight and food intake minimal, it'll make it through the rest of the night without bursting at the seams.

A soft knock on the door brings me out of my reverie. The same maid who brought the dress in pokes her head through the door.

Her smile is kind as she tells me, "He's ready for you."

She leads me down the maze of a palace to the outside garden, where the celebration has just begun.

I squeal the second I see all the familiar faces from summer camp all those years ago.

It has to be one of the most thrilling aspects of the night.

We stand around and chat as we drink wine, recollecting memories, and catching up on all the missing time.

Ever since the evening commenced, I've felt like nothing less than a deity.

The people of Tavian's pack, as well as my old friends from camp, look at me like I hung the moon.

Like I belong nowhere else but right where I am. It's the most wholesome feeling in the entire world.

To finally belong.

I'm alone at my table at the center of the gathering, seeking out where Tavian might be.

But my search comes to a halt as his voice resounds through the clearing.

"May I have your attention, please."

My head shifts to the stage at the front of the garden, where Tavian stands tall, speaking into the microphone as he waits for everyone to settle down.

Goosebumps surge all over my exposed skin at the mere sight of him, commandeering an audience in his unique ethereal glow.

I just can't get enough of him.

"As you all know," he starts, "I've recently tied the knot."

A resounding cheer flows through the crowd, pipes of congratulations and joyous laughter at the reiterated news.

My cheeks burn bright red, calling dozens of gazes in the direction of the table positioned in the middle of all the guests.

Tavian gestures for the crowd to quiet down, and soon enough, they do.

"As I was saying," a large hand smooths over his tie as he continues, "My marriage has been... different from what I'd expected."

In a good way, I hope.

"It might not have been what I imagined it would have been like, but I can't say I'm displeased in the least." My chest warms. "In fact, I might even be content enough to tell you all that this very well may have been what I'd searched for all my life."

Another bout of cheers.

And if I get any redder, I might just combust right in my seat.

My cheeks hurt, even as I try to keep the smile from running ear to ear off my face.

It's nothing like I'd expected it would be either, but goddess, I'm the most satisfied I've ever been in my life.

"Briar, my love," he calls, "I have something especially for you, a gift I thought carefully on. Come up here for a moment, would you?"

A male servant rushes up to the podium and hands Tavian a small box.

Could that be the gift he'd needed to collect?

Anticipation cools my blood, and I rise to my feet on shaky legs.

As I take the short steps towards him, something horrible happens—the clean rip of fabric meeting my ears as my dress slackens around me.

Goddess.

Why now?

My dress must have torn at the back seam, and if the slowly rising murmurs all around me are anything to go by, then that means it must be visible for most of the guests to see.

I'm suddenly mortified.

I wrap my arm around my chest, keeping the dress from slipping off my frame.

My eyes lift to the podium, to Tavian standing there, oblivious to my dire situation as he waits expectantly. And I know I just have to keep going.

With a strained expression, I make it to him, and he holds his hand out to help me up the stage.

"Tavian," I whisper, "my dress—"

"Your gift." He holds out the small box, waiting for me to take it.

My eyes hesitantly shift from the gift to his face.

If I let go of my dress, only the goddess knows how long it'll remain on my body.

But he's almost eager as a puppy when he presses, "I want you to see it here. Open it."

And I just can't turn him down.

I take it into my arms, keeping my body tight as I pull at the satin ties.

A slow giggle forms at the base of my throat, just as I pull the top open.

But a paralyzing chill cools me down to my very bones, and I let out a shrill scream, sending the opened box away as my heart pounds in my chest.

It's a bloody heart.

A bloody, pulsing heart.