

CHAPTER 1: HE PICKED MY MAID

BRIAR'S POV

It all seems like the worst dream I'm unable to wake up from.

Just this morning, my life was amazing.

After months of waiting to announce the news to everyone in our pack, I knew that when we nally revealed the truth at tonight's ball, my life would never be the same again.

I was overjoyed to discover that Lucas, my best friend and the boy I'd had the biggest crush on for years, was my mate.

Just months ago, we found out and kept it a secret, sneaking off where no one could see us to be together. I understood his reasons.

As the heir to the Alpha Throne, he wanted everything to be done right.

My biggest worry this morning was choosing a dress for the ball tonight. I wanted to look my best when I showed up at the palace.

I wanted Luke to take pride in everything we shared as he declared to everyone that I would be his next Luna.

We were supposed to have the fairy tale ending I'd prayed for since the day I met him. Tonight was meant to be perfect.

Tonight was meant to be worth it.

But now, as the seconds count down to midnight, I can't escape the daunting reality. I can't turn back the clock to this morning.

In fact, I can't even breathe.

He nally shared the news I'd waited so long for him to announce.

He revealed to everyone that he had found the girl he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. But the shock of it all is... she wasn't me.

The girl standing by his side is painfully familiar. I'd spent every waking second of my existence with her.

She knew more about me than I even did. She's taken care of me and loved me like a sister.

But now she's standing by his side, proud eyes gleaming as he proclaims that my maid, Tess, would be his chosen mate forever.

I remain frozen in place as people congratulate them. Confused. Lost in a haze of hurt. Absolutely shattered.

"W-what?" is the only word I can utter. With my entire world crumbling at my feet, it's the only question I can muster.

Lucas' eyes are hard, piercing right through me as he closes the distance between us with Tess by his side.

"Don't make this any harder on yourself, Briar," he bites, his tone low. "You heard what I said loud and clear."

He's saying it like it means nothing. Like in the last half hour, he didn't just wreck me.

Thirty minutes ago, I stepped onto the dance oor with my heart in my throat.

The palace was overowing with attendees, and despite my father's high position as Beta of the pack, standing before the masses has never been my strong suit.

Dancing neither.

I braved through it all. And the second Lucas came into my line of sight, it was all suddenly worth it.

And more.

But he'd walked up to the stage and crushed my heart like it was his sole destiny to do so.

All the elation and anticipation that had taken root inside me thinned to despair in a matter of seconds.

"I meant what I said, and I'm not changing my mind."

I shake my head as he says the words to me now, refusing—hating the mere insinuation of what is about to happen.

"Lucas, you can't—"

"I can't?" He c**s his head harshly, making me jump back as he gets in my face.

A crowd starts to form around us, the couples dancing nearest to the area we're standing in giving us a wide berth.

"Luc—"

"I thought that the longer I let you believe we could be together, the sooner you would realize that we just weren't compatible. But you just couldn't get it through that thick skull of yours, could you?"

My forehead creases.

"How can you say that, Luke?" I feel a lump forming in my throat faster than I can get the words out. "Don't you see? The goddess wants this for us. She didn't make a mistake!"

"That might be what you assume to be the truth, but forgive me for not being as delusional as you."

My head draws back. Why is he being so mean?

"I'm gonna tell this to you straight, okay?" He gestures between us. "This? Will never be happening. I've chosen the mate I want, and I'm not sorry that it isn't you."

The hurt embeds itself into my expression like tattoo ink.

My lower lip trembles. "You don't mean that."

"Quite frankly, I do," he says. "Come on, why would you think I would even be open to this? Because I f***d around with you all these years? Because we hung out a lot? You really let that get to your head, didn't you?"

He doesn't mean any of this. He just doesn't. He's Lucas. My Lucas.

And he would never treat me this way. He wouldn't... he wouldn't.

The words pour out of me like a faulty tap.

"You're confused, Luke. I know we've been friends for so long, and maybe this is too much for you. We can gure it out, we can... we can—"

"I don't want you!" he growls.

My shoulders stiffen as the force of his declaration echoes off the walls of the crowded room.

If we weren't being scrutinized before, we denitely have the attention of every lingering body present now.

I shrink under it all. The weight of their pitying glances and the force of Luke's glare shred every iota of condence left inside me.

"I didn't want to have to do this, but you're so block-headed that it seems I have no other choice, Briar." He comes so close, the heat of his breath fans my temple.

"As far as I'm concerned, this was a colossal f**k-up on the goddess' part. Because there's no way you and I could ever work. You think I'd actually be willing to merge my bloodline with your vindictive scam like you? Do you really believe I'd want a woman as vile and mean as you by my side? Maybe I would along with it when you were parading us as the best of friends in the entire f****g realm, but I've had it. You're nothing but a toxic, manipulative b***h, and I'd rather die than make you my Luna."

My lips purse to the side, and I feel the tears then, burning the backs of my eyes and threatening to make me look like an even bigger fool.

But even with all the reservations in the world, I wouldn't have been able to brace myself for the effect the next words out of his mouth would have on me.

"There's no way royalty like me could ever make a girl like you my Luna. I choose Tess, and I'm certain about my choice. You're going to have to learn to live with it," he spits. "And to make it impossible for you to have any ideas, I'll make this easier, Briar."

"Lucas, please," my voice cracks.

The harsh set of his face makes his bitter words that much harder to swallow.

"I, Lucas Wolfyn, Heir to the royal throne, reject you, Briar Ashwood, as my fated mate."

Something inside me splinters until it shatters into a million tiny pieces at my feet.

"Did she just face a rejection?"

"Oh, that's bad..."

"What will her father say?"

Like little kisses from the devil himself, their words tear at my esh until I'm a bundle of nothing standing in the center of the crowd.

The shock of being rejected by my own mate—a fate so rare for someone of my status, the daughter of a Beta—is unbearable.

The excruciating pain from my wolf howling in agony inside me only amplies my torment.

My attention shifts to the corner of the room for less than a second, but it's long enough to see the absolute disappointment coating every inch of my father's face.

The emotion behind his eyes almost crumbles all that's left of me.

My father, a man of unwavering strength and dignity, watching his only child be humiliated so publicly—his disappointment cuts deeper than any blade ever could.

I let my head drop between my shoulders weakly. I can't bring myself to meet anyone's gaze.

The whispers, the pitiful glances—they're all suffocating. I've never felt so small, so insignificant, so utterly destroyed.