

## CHAPTER 3: THE DARK STRANGER

BRIAR'S POV

Like a man on a mission, my feet don't stop moving.

Not when I make it past the pack gates, not even when I stumble across the city lights. I keep moving with one goal in mind.

And once the bar comes into view, I know I made a great decision tonight.

Getting s\*\*t-faced and getting rid of all the supposed worth I have left.

Being the perfect Beta's daughter got me nothing but despair and negligence.

I had my heart broken by the one person I trusted the most in the entire world.

The betrayal stung—still stings, to be honest—but at least I'm brave enough to admit that.

Despite it all, I'll be damned if I let myself go down without a fight.

I'll be damned if I let myself be handed off for the only benefit I'm capable of giving a man.

I'll give it to a nameless stranger, and then I'll have the last laugh.

Because if the innocent virgin bride is the offer on the table, then come tomorrow morning, I won't be a virgin anymore.

Even if it means my father will have his guards haul me out of the bar, drunk out of my mind, the night before my wedding.

Yes. There's already a set date and a happy buyer.

A buyer.

For me.

Just days after the trauma of losing Luke.

The goddess plays the cruelest jokes sometimes. It just so happens that I ended up on the receiving end... twice.

I've tried not to let myself stew in it, but sometimes, the grief just hits me hard.

I met Luke during one of the best years of my life—the years I attended wolf summer camp.

That year, I made so many friends and created unforgettable memories. One of them was developing a decade-long crush on the Alpha Prince.

I shrug off the bitterness as I step into the crowded pub.

A slow grimace forms as I take in the ambience. And the men. Lots of them.

Some men are sitting in groups in booths by the wall, while a few are being dragged off by their neckties and shirt collars by women in skirts that leave almost nothing to the imagination.

The place is packed, brimming with people with various agendas for the night.

My agenda is singular, though, as I make a beeline for the single empty seat at the bar.

My gaze travels down the line of men hunched over the long table, chugging their drinks while stewing over their thoughts in private.

My eyes settle on a lone figure sitting in a secluded booth by himself.

The low lighting seems to avoid him, but with a build like his, anyone could single him out in a sea of black.

He has both elbows propped on the edge of his table, strands of his dark hair falling over his temples and shielding his features as he tinkers with a silver ring on his left index finger.

Clad in a simple dress shirt and slacks, it seems like the most basic outfit.

But something about the way he looks in it makes him the best-dressed man in the room.

I swallow down a wave of something I can't quite place as I take a seat at the edge of the bar.

Even from a distance, I feel his head lift slowly, but the heat of his gaze doesn't graze my cheek.

Somehow, I feel I would just know if he deigned to look at me.

The bartender appears before me.

"What can I get for you?"

I'm distracted, watching as a waitress walks up to the man, leaning down a lot lower than appropriate to set a single tumbler of dark liquid in front of him.

She's dismissed as he picks up his glass, and I find myself transfixed by the slow movement of his Adam's apple as he downs his drink in one go.

Something stirs inside me, way too far south to feel appropriate.

I clear my throat, pointing at the incoming waitress.

"I'll have whatever he had."

The silence that ensues feels choking for a moment, and after a beat of careful eyeing, the bartender pulls out a second glass, filling it a quarter way with what I hope is two more glasses away from my damnation tonight.

He sets it in front of me, and I go for a swig.

And nearly lose a f\*\*\*\*g lung.

It's strong, too strong... and a single sip roasts the flesh of my mouth like I swallowed up a lit dynamite.

I choke down the tiny swallow, blinking away the tears in my eyes.

Peeking from my peripheral has my heart stopping in my chest because the mysterious man is gone.

How did he vanish so fast?

I stare down at the poisonous liquid in front of me. It might taste like hell, but I can already feel the fuzziness of its effect.

With a deep exhale, I take another swig.

And after two more glasses, I'm a mess.

I wobble through the long lines in the pub, looking for the nearest bathroom to relieve myself.

Everything's hazy, and I'm not even sure how I make it up the rest, much less second flight of stairs.

Almost every room on the floor is locked, but once I find the first open door, I know I've hit the jackpot.

I stumble into what I think is a bathroom gracelessly, but my steps falter a second too late as my mind registers what I'm seeing.

A bed, low lighting, and a scowling male figure.

And I may be drunk, but there's no way I wouldn't recognize the man from the lone booth earlier.

I've just barged into his space without permission.

One look from him, and suddenly, it feels like my mistake will have... consequences.

My words tumble over each other.

"Oh! I'm sorry... I'm sorry, I thought this was a bathroom. I got lost when I took the stairs and ended up here. I didn't mean to... to... to barge in and disrupt—disrupt your business."

Goddess. I mentally smack my forehead.

"I'll, um, I'll be leaving now," I say, turning around to make my exit.

But I must have miscalculated where I stood because I walk smack dab into the banister behind me.

I wobble backward, gripping my nose where the smarting pain is supposed to sting. But... nothing.

I'm so drunk off my ass that the collision doesn't even hurt. A giggle travels up my throat, rather lewd and carefree.

Only after the sound permeates the air do I remember that I'm not alone.

And damnit, I'm not drunk enough to not feel the absolute mortification.

My feet are unsteady as I spin around, meeting the mysterious man's gaze once again.

Nothing about his demeanor seems different; he's just as cold as he was when I'd barged into his space.

Knowing that I'm drunker than a skunk, I could be imagining things. But I let myself believe the slow sweep of his eyes down my body.

Even trusting the spark of dark interest pooling within his distant gaze.

I toss my thumb over my shoulder, pointing at the door.

"I'll be leaving now."

"So you said." Those three words glide through the air between us like sweet whiskey.

And that's proof I need to make my way back home.

Because nothing about whiskey is sweet.

A sloppy pivot has my back to him, but my entire body freezes at the low-spoken, "Wait."

I don't hear him rise from his lounge chair, but I hear each lazy footstep as the heat behind my back intensifies.

It's almost right by my ear when he voices the question, "Who let you come here tonight?"

Drunken indignation sparks my protest.

"I don't need anyone's permission for any—"

But that fury is lost as I spin around once again to face him.

How is it possible that the goddess could carve a man so perfectly? A stutter breaks free at the unexpected closeness.

He's right there.

My hesitation has his head c\*\*\*\*g slightly, like I'm a puzzle he's bored enough to attempt.

The forgotten speech sparks back to life, and I lift my head to meet his high stare.

He's so tall, I feel like an ant's child staring up at him.

"I don't need anyone's permission to do anything."

"Why did you come here?" He questions me like he hadn't heard a word I said.

I wobble on my feet slightly.

"I was looking for the bathroom."

He takes a step toward me, so close I almost take one back.

"Why did you come here?"

"Because tomorrow is my wedding."

It's like word vomit, and I realize too late what I've said.

A dark glint deepens the grey of his slanted eyes.

"The plan was to enjoy a bachelorette party of one?"

It's almost like an insult, but goosebumps surge at the realization that he'd been paying enough attention to me tonight to have known that.

And the feeling is like deception because the word vomit ows freely.

"The plan was to take away what my future husband would want from me the most," I say.

He waits for an explanation without outwardly expressing that he cares enough to want one. Almost like he knows I'll give it to him anyway.

"Se.x."

"Se.x." He deadpans.

"I'm a virgin," I say. "And the bastard emptied his pockets to have the first and final try with me."

His eyes narrow. "And you resent him for it?"

The question stalls me, but somehow, an answer springs forth easily.

"I resent the man that let it happen."

"Your father," he suggests, so spot on.

"Am I wearing a sign?" I joke. "Do you often hear stories of women being sold off by their dads for a sum of cash or something?"

His eyes trail over my face carefully as he utters a low, "Or something."

Then, seemingly losing interest, he turns away.

It feels like the most effortless dismissal ever, and my pride can't take it.

"Are you interested?" I blurt out before I can think it through.

He pauses but doesn't turn around. "Interested in what?"

"Sleeping with me." The alcohol keeps the warmth from reddening my face.

A low, dark breath of amusement comes from him.

Over his shoulder, he says, "I thought you were leaving."

My retort comes fast. "Till you said to wait."

He turns to face me once again, a pull between his dark brows.

"You're drunk."

"And you're still listening."

He studies me. "I don't f\*\*k virgins."

I give him a loose shrug. "Well, then I lied."

His eyes narrow at the edges.

"And what would your future husband have to say about getting 'tarnished goods'?"

He says the last part like it's the most unamusing joke ever.

"I'm not sure. I've never met him. Don't know enough to answer that."

"And what will you tell him when he finds out?"

"Two words." I breathe. "F\*\*k and you."

One stride and his chest brushes mine, his arm snaking around me and springing a surprised gasp from my throat.

"If you came here looking for a gentleman to turn you away," his eyes burn bright with intensity, "know that you won't get that from me."

He punctuates his declaration with a slow tug of my hair, angling my neck till my eyes meet the ceiling.

A haughty breath slips from my parted lips.

A feeling of exhilaration runs through me the moment his mouth comes in contact with the skin of my throat.

His words are rusty when he grates out, "There will be no one to hear you scream tonight. No one but me."