

CHAPTER 5: THE GROOM

BRIAR'S POV

Being late for your own wedding has to be unheard of.

But as the sunlight slithers in through the gaps in the blinds, I know it's inevitable.

Peeling my eyes open brings me face-to-face with all my bad decisions from the previous night. None of which I regret, might I add.

The bad decision in question is snoring softly on the other side of the mattress, his back to me.

I watch the slow, involuntary ripple of his muscles with every breath.

Something inside me tightens, and a slow smile spreads.

Last night actually happened.

I had a one-night stand with a stranger, lost my virginity, and got wasted at a bar the night before my wedding.

Mission accomplished.

As I detangle myself from the sheets, looking for my clothes so I can make a clean break, I feel my chest tug with longing.

I wish I had something to keep the memory of this encounter alive. I

watch him as he sleeps, and my eyes catch on the soft reaction of his sigma ring on the bedside table. My ngers itch.

A memento. A pretty expensive-looking one at that. Can't hurt.

Tiptoeing over to his side of the bed, I pick up the ring and slide it into my bra.

"Sleep tight, no name," I whisper to him. "Last night was probably the best night of my life."

He doesn't even stir.

After getting dressed, I get the hell out of there.

I hail a cab this time, because if I walk again, I won't make it in time.

By the time I make it back home, relief washes through me when I realize no one is up and about yet.

Slipping in through the back door, I pass through the kitchen on my way to my room and bump right into Tess.

Shit.

She smiles at the confusion on my face.

"Oh, you don't have to worry. I'm just here to pick up the rest of my stuff."

Bile rises up my throat as the pain of my wolf rocks through my heart.

I had pushed her to the back of my mind the night before, but now, the ache of it all was returning with brutal force.

Through the haze of everything that happened last night, I somehow managed to forget all about Lucas and what happened.

The agony of my wolf, the raw, unhealed wound of rejection, claws at my insides, threatening to break me down.

But before I can utter a word, Tess speaks again.

"All I can say is," she leans into my personal space, "I'm more than delighted to rule beside Lucas as his Luna one day."

I blanch at her audacity.

"Oh, don't act so surprised, Briar. It's no fault of mine that you weren't good enough for him. He had to think about his pack and its future. You just..." She grimaces. "Weren't the right t."

It's one thing for her to corner me like this. But knowing what she does and having the bitter intentions I know she has is such a low blow.

I've known Tess since I was a little girl.

The triumphant glee dancing behind her eyes has me questioning everything about the relationship I always thought I shared with my longtime help.

"Is this a joke?"

She shrugs.

"I didn't force his hand, Briar. It was his decision. The only joke was you, Briar." She pouts at me, feigning pity. "You really thought Lucas wanted you. And you begged him, like a broken toy that he was done with. That's too bad."

It's like a complete stranger is standing before me.

"I don't even recognize you right now."

"Hopefully you will," she says, "when you walk down the aisle today like a good little bought prize, and I'm standing in the audience with my future mate, and not as your maid anymore. Or even better, when you come for my coronation, as Luna."

She taps my shoulder twice. "Don't worry, I'll save you a front-row seat."

She turns away from me, but as if remembering something, she turns back around. "And don't even think of sneaking out of your master's bed and trying to seduce—"

And something inside me just snaps.

My arm rears back, the satisfying crack of my palm against her cheek spurring me on.

I grab hold of her wrist and spin her around as she tries to recover from the shock.

Her eyes widen as I shove her against the wall next to the freezing chamber, pulling the door wide open.

"You little—"

The words die off her lips once again as I shove her into the fogged, freezing space. She drops to the ground with a panicked expression.

"You seem a little tense, Tess," I mock. "Guess I'll let you cool off for a little while."

She scrambles for the door, but it's already too late. My smile is all teeth as I slam the metal door closed.

The smile drops instantly, though.

The backs of my eyes sting as I stand there, stewing in everything she just shoved down my throat.

I can't spend the rest of my life obsessing over Lucas and what he does with his life. He made his choice.

And I just have to come to terms with the fact that it wasn't me.

Tavian Silverton.

Two hours after my altercation with Tess, I'm seconds away from walking down the aisle, from sealing my fate, with a man named Tavian Silverton.

The gaudy dress, its stupid elbow gloves, and the kilos of makeup packed on my face sell me off as the happy bride. Literally.

I just want to drop the pretenses and get it all over with.

Passing the people idling in the hallways feels like a walk of shame, as the girls point and snicker to themselves about the ridicule that I am.

The truth of the matter is, I'm marrying someone I don't know. Someone I may never get along with or be compatible with.

And all is well that ends well, as long as Dad is happy, and the Ashwood name is risen from the dust, regardless of whatever sacrifices I'm forced to make.

He barely looked at me all morning, and soon enough, he disappeared into the throng of waiting guests, probably dropping off a 'thank you' card with the man who coughed up the best chunk for my hand.

Childhood Briar must be rolling in her grave by now.

None of this is how it was meant to go—getting married off to some old and haggard stranger with grubby hands.

But I'm here now, and the silver ring still tucked in the cups of my bra serves as a reminder that I'm not as much of a pushover as they all think.

I can plant my feet and dance with the wind without being swayed by the selshness of others. And I'll do it with my head held high.

Because the last memory of my remaining days here won't be of when I was weak and reduced to nothing.

I'll overcome it all, even if it means I have to do it clad in one of Cinderella's missing dresses.

My ngers strangle the corsage in my grip, and with two maidens by my side, I step into the clearing.

It's packed with guests, the sight of them making my stomach churn.

I make my way down the central path, taking slow steps so I don't fall on my face.

Inhale. Exhale.

Up on the dais, Dad stands tall with his arms at his side.

With one last breath for courage, my eyes slide to the man standing beside him—the groom.

And my heart drops right to my f****g toes. Lava pools in my gut the moment recognition hits.

Cool grey eyes watch my every move as I continue down the aisle, but I can barely bring myself to maintain a straight line.

It feels like a fever dream I can't wake up from.

Because standing just a couple feet away, every atom of his being oozing composure and condescence, is the exact same nameless man I had s*x with last night.