

Enslaved

"I'm guessing a dead body," I mutter, letting him hear the growl in my voice as the door slams shut behind me. "It just won't be mine."

5

BRIAR

Icy fingers brush against my neck. A quiet chuff whispers in my ear.

I wheel around, ready to face down the wolf who must've followed me back to the café from the Madden Grove Wood, but there's no one there.

A second later, an almighty crash makes me shriek and spin back around to the sight of a floor covered with broken chocolate chip cookies.

"Crap."

Someone shoves the door open hard enough that it smacks me on the back of the head. I yelp.

"Oh, sorry, Briar. You okay?" Sera's expression is sheepish as her gaze darts from me rubbing the ache at the back of my head, to the cookie mess, then back to me. "You look terrible."

Grumbling, I go hunting for something to clean up my mess. "Thanks. Nice of you to say so."

"I didn't mean—"

"I know," I interrupt as I drop to my knees with the dustpan and brush. "I keep expecting..." I glance at the kitchen door. "Well, you know."

After I nearly gave Sera a heart attack by bursting into the kitchen two hours before, I haven't been able to shake off this sense that something is seriously wrong.

We lost a couple of mugs then. As we cleared up the mess, I filled her in as quietly as I could about the missing flowers and the feeling of wrongness that chased me away.

In the hour since then, I've broken three dishes, two more cups, dented a cookie tray, and likely another, plus been on edge as if I'm waiting for something to happen. What that something is, I couldn't say.

"I think you should go home, maybe lie down," Sera suggests, eyeing me closely.

"I'm okay."

I lose my grip on the pan and send crumbs flying.

"Your hands are shaking."

"They'll stop soon." I sound defensive as hell, and I don't know why. "I'm good."

A frown creases her brow. Well, what little of it I can see from between her bangs. "I've been thinking about what you said, about the birds and the—"

"It's clear as day that Patricia lied about a hair in her food to eat for free," an overly loud, high-pitched voice cuts through the wooden door as if it isn't even there.

Sera and I glance at it and sigh in unison.

Eleanor KilPatrickson. Otherwise known as Bullhorn Ellie, the biggest mouth in town. She wasn't in the café before I took off on my errand, but now she is, which means Aunt Mel is out there having to deal with her and the rest of the customers on her own.

Despite there being no response to her comment, that doesn't stop Eleanor from continuing.

"She spent all her money on wine, you see. Or was it vodka?"

I wonder what the tourists make of this. Maybe they've been in town long enough that they're getting used to her?

If such a thing is even possible, I mentally snort.

"Anyway, I think she has a problem. Not that Patricia would ever admit to it, but we've all seen the bottles on trash day, haven't we?" Eleanor says, her voice rising.

Poor Patricia. If she hasn't been on the wine or vodka today, she will be by the time Eleanor has finished shouting this around town.