

Enslaved

“How can someone so deaf know so much about everyone?” I frown.

Sera snatches the dustpan and brush from my hands while I’m distracted. “She has a little horn she sticks in her ear. I’ve seen it.” Her concerned gaze searches my face. “Stay in here, and I’ll bring you some valerian and lemon balm tea. It will calm your nerves.”

I’m already shaking my head before she’s finished speaking. “I’m good. What will calm my nerves is if no wolf bursts through that back door and eats me.”

Smiling faintly at me, she efficiently deals with the mess and rises, offering her free hand to help me up. “No wolf is going to eat you.”

I waggle my brows suggestively. “Maybe I want one to? Just Liam Wolfe, though. The others are altogether too hairy for my liking.”

A dull redness sweeps over every inch of Sera’s face. “No, you don’t.”

She’s right, I don’t. Liam Wolfe might be hot, but he’s a wolf, and wolves and witches are oil and vinegar. They don’t mix. Ever. Especially in Madden Grove, where we’ve been at each other’s throats since... well, forever.

“Briar, can you give me a hand?” Aunt Mel’s voice is as unruffled as always, but there’s the same underlying strain that rises to the surface in anyone who has to deal with Bullhorn Ellie for too long.

After tugging off my chocolate-stained apron, I straighten my pink sweater and matching pants as best as I can before following Sera out of my safe space and into the café, a smile already stretching my lips.

The café is more empty than full, with only a few of the small white round tables occupied. Near the glass fridge, mostly emptied of the cakes and cookies I baked earlier, is Aunt Mel in her customary pale blue shirt and slim black slacks, the long sleeves hiding the stump from her missing right arm.

No one is certain how Aunt Mel lost her arm. Even she’s a bit hazy about the details since her focus at the time was on saving me when my power first flared to life.

She says that she remembers rushing in and falling. From the burns on her shirt and down the side of her face, the sheriff thinks some plank of wood, or a light fitting fell on her and that's what separated her arm at the elbow.

I can't imagine how she must have felt when she found out later that I wasn't even in the house, and she'd lost her arm for no reason. Not that she lets a missing arm slow her down, or dim the wide smile on her face. Every day that smile is always there, reminding me that there's no excuse for me not to do the same.

Finished pouring a long stream of fragrant tea into a delicate china teacup, she beckons me over with her head, sending loose strands of long brown hair that she calls mousy but I call a rich, beautiful chestnut, into her face, covering the burn.

"Oh, good Briar. You're here," she breathes.

I cross over to her, speaking in a low voice. "Do you want me to deal with Eleanor, because—"

"Briar Fenix." Eleanor's voice smashes into me, making me jerk my head toward her.

Her smile is so wide that I feel blinded by it. Dressed in a deep red velvet dress with white ruffles around the neck and a large fake diamond nestled between her sagging breasts, it's impossible to miss her. The effect is both horrifying to look at, while at the same time strangely hypnotic.

I don't know how old she is, because for as long as I can remember, Eleanor has always looked sixty, been a terrible dresser, and worn her white frizzy hair like a cloud around her face. I once asked her if she'd been an actress, thinking the reason she never seemed to age was that she was so vain, she cast spells to stop the aging process. It would explain the overwhelming scent of herbs and magic that always clings to her.

She went on for so long about a sexy cruise captain that wouldn't stop staring at her breasts, that at the first opportunity, I pretended the cell phone I don't have was vibrating in my back pocket and took off.

I mentally prepare myself for whatever is about to come out of her mouth that I desperately don't want to know.

"Isn't it time you settled down? Girls your age are pushing out babies like there's no tomorrow." She winks.

Oh, God.

"Just take young Maddy. No boyfriend that I can see, or wedding ring either, but that's not stopping her." Her tut is somehow as loud as her voice. "Don't know how good of a

mother she'll be at twenty-one, especially if she'd rather do her funny business in a parking lot and not her bed, but—"

"Eleanor," Aunt Mel cuts in. "Briar just has to do something for me. I'll be right with you, okay?" She turns to me before Eleanor can say a word.

"Can you take this over to table six while I talk with Eleanor?" she murmurs. "I have no idea what she's going to bring up next, but she's already scared off most of the customers."

By talk, she means keep her distracted so that she doesn't scare off the handful of remaining tourists who look like they're getting ready to leave.

With how quiet the café has been lately, the last thing we need is to lose even more customers when the cash register is more often empty than full these days.

"No problem." I pick up the cup and saucer. "Any cake?"

She shakes her head. "Doesn't seem the sweet sort."