

Enslaved

“Oh?” I frown as I turn to table six. While the café isn’t as popular as when Dad and Aunt Mel’s parents ran it, most people came for the daily baked cakes and pastries.

When my gaze settles on a lowered tawny-blond head at the table in the far corner of the room, I wish I hadn’t been so hasty to agree.

Darting a glance at Sera, I find her chatting happily with an elderly couple who are flashing her photographs. Probably of their grandkids. Sera seems to have that effect on people.

She’s busy, and Aunt Mel is going to be tied up with Eleanor for Goddess knows how long, which means there’s no one else to serve him.

Still, I hesitate.

Just because the guy in the black t-shirt and dark denim jeans has his head lowered, doesn’t mean I don’t know what he is.

Wolf.

There’s a wildness in their scent. But it’s not just that. There’s this unidentifiable... energy about them that makes me want to run or hide.

It’s your self-survival instincts kicking in, Briar. That’s what it is.

As if he feels my lingering attention, he raises his head, and his gold eyes connect with mine. My fingers tighten around the saucer. Holy crap, he’s hot. Everything from his high cheekbones and full lower lip to his tanned skin, sooty dark lashes and the heavy muscles barely contained by his cotton t-shirt has me seriously tempted. Even if he is a wolf.

Liam Wolfe, who?

Something in his gaze shifts, and a blush sears my cheeks, because a shifter nose is acute as hell. The last thing I want to be doing is letting any excitable thoughts influence any biological responses downthere. But when his nose twitches, I’m guessing it’s far too late for that.

“Briar?”

I jump. Hot tea splashes my hand, and wincing, I turn to Aunt Mel, who's eyeing me with a frown creasing her pale blue eyes. “Are you okay?”

Smile.

I smile the smile that tells the world I'm okay. That nothing is ever wrong with Briar Fenix. “I'm good, thanks.” And then I force myself to cross over to the wolf in the corner who knows I just had a sexy thought about him, because he smelled it.

The closer I approach, the more confused I get, because I know he's a wolf. Something about him is a little familiar, just enough I think I might have seen him once before, but the acrid cigarette smoke clinging to his clothes distracts me from trying to work out where that might've been.

Shifters don't smoke because it messes with their sharp nose. Or I'm guessing it does, because I've never seen a wolf anywhere near a cigarette before.

So why does this one smell like an ashtray?

“Hi, I'm Briar.” I smile wide as I place the cup and saucer down in front of him. “Your tea. Did you want—”

A happy chuffing sound echoes in my head, and the cup and saucer clatters against the table, spilling yet more tea. The way I'm going, the guy's going to be lucky to have a single taste left if I don't gain control of myself.

I feel eyes turn my way, but I'm still trying to work out what the hell I just heard.

“Sorry about that,” I murmur, hanging onto my smile by sheer force of will.

The wolf's expression doesn't change. He just stares at me.

“I'll get a cloth for the spill.” I'm turning when a low growl makes me jerk my head back around. My eyes go to his mouth, but they're clamped just as tightly as before. “Did you...” I clear my throat and lower my voice. “Growl?”

Silence.

Realizing what I just said, I take a step back. “Uh, sorry. I didn't—”

“No.” His voice is surprisingly rich. There's a growl beneath the surface, enough that I'm almost positive the growl in his voice is nothing like the one I just heard. “I don't do things like that in public.”

We stare at each other.

“Of course not,” I mutter after a painfully long silence. “It was probably just in my head.”