

Enslaved

But at least I'm not alone.

The door swings open and Sera, my only friend in the world, steps in.

"Do you have it?" I whisper as I slip my white apron over my head and toss it on the least flour-dusted counter. Considering the amount of baking I've been doing over the last four hours, it's as dusty as the other two which, all together, form a U-shape in the stainless steel chef's kitchen.

While Sera's clothes are always dark, baggy jeans and flannel shirts, my t-shirts and pants are always bright pink or neon yellow. Cheerful colors to go with the sunny smile that snaps onto my face the second I step through the kitchen door.

When I serve in the café, I'm the always grinning Briar Fenix, a blue-eyed, red-haired twenty-one-year-old who is five foot two and has a generous butt that comes from tasting too many of the sweet treats she bakes every day.

She doesn't care that her curly red-gold hair clashes with everything she wears, or that her butt jiggles when she walks. All that matters to her is being the perfect waitress at the Madden Grove Tearoom, a café that's been in her family for generations.

In the kitchen, Briar Fenix is someone else. Who that is, she hasn't worked out yet. But maybe one day she will.

"This isn't a good idea, Briar." Sera's big brown eyes, mostly concealed behind her reddish-brown bangs, crease in a deep frown. "I don't have a problem with giving you any spell you want, but this is going to get you killed. Or worse."

There are only two covens in town—the green witches and the elementals—and Sera, a green witch with the ability to craft powerful spells using herbs and incantations, is well on her way to becoming the leader of her coven, even if she is still only twenty-one.

"What's worse than being killed?" I smile.

She doesn't smile back. "Being torn apart by a pack of wolves. For hours."

"There isn't another way, Sera," I murmur, shooting the kitchen door a pointed look. "I can't hurt Aunt Mel."

Sera doesn't assure me that won't happen, because it would be a lie. It doesn't matter that I have no memory of setting Aunt Mel's room on fire in my sleep three nights ago. The results would've been the same if the smoke hadn't woken her when it did.

"Please, Sera," I implore, willing her to understand how much I need this.

Sera edges closer and lowers her voice. "And you're sure she knows what kind of witch you are? Because... souls, Briar. We don't mess with souls for a reason."

My dream—my nightmare—swims in my vision. "Mom said I was special. She wouldn't have said it if she didn't know. Maybe there's some weird offshoot power on her side of the family and there's a distant relative who could help me figure out how to control it. But I have to find out, before..." I shake my head. "Well, you know what I'm capable of. Everyone knows what I'm capable of. I have to find out what I am, Sera. Whatever it takes. Whatever the souls do to me, it can't be worse than being this dynamite that can blow up in my sleep."

Not all souls linger, but the more violent and unexpected the death, the more they're likely to cling to the living. Mom and Dad's death was certainly that.

I leave unsaid the biggest thing. Will Mom even want to talk to the daughter who killed her?

Sera sighs as she sticks her hand into her back pocket and retrieves a small black bag that she places in my palm. "Here. But if you—"

After closing my hand tight around the velvet pouch, which pulses with enough magic to make my teeth itch, I give her a quick hug, inhaling her familiar lemon-mint scent. "Thanks, you're the best. I'll be so fast that they won't even know I'm there."

Before she can remind me again of how terrible this idea is, I rush out of the kitchen and into the alley at the back of the café. Her heavy sigh follows me.

A spring day in Madden Grove, a tiny East Coast town popular with tourists in spring and fall, is as beautiful as ever. Blue skies, white fluffy clouds, and birds singing are the norm.

Heavy rain, traffic, and trash on the ground are things you'd find in other places. That's just how it's always been here. Maybe it was different before witches and wolves settled here hundreds of years ago, but I like to think that we witches have made the town what it is. I'm sure the wolves would disagree.

Even the back alley is pretty if you ignore the less-than-fragrant rotting food scents wafting from the large metal dumpster that I toss our trash into every night.

Ducking around the pale, sand-colored stone building and to the front of the café takes seconds.

My eyes immediately go to the Italian restaurant on the other side of the quiet road. At mid-morning, the doors of Wolfe Trattoria are still closed, since it only opens to tourists from five to ten. That doesn't mean it's empty right now, though.

Through the glass windows, the long wooden tables heave under the weight of enormous white bowls and dishes. Large, heavily muscled men fill the benches, shoveling food in their mouths, barely pausing between bites. The wolves eating their lunch together is a familiar sight I've had years to get used to. It's why I've chosen now to go on my little errand.

There aren't any women at the tables, because they'll be in the kitchen cooking, cleaning, or doing whatever they need to do to serve the men.

Among the wolves, the women eat last.

It's just another reason we witches and wolves would never get along. In our culture, women are the strongest, the most powerful, but in theirs... the opposite is true.