



Curia Killed the Cat

Volume 1



Curia Killed the Cat

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Skyla Dawn Cameron



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Dedication

For all the amazingly awesome *Curio Killed the Cat* readers out there who commenters, reviewers, and donators, including: Jeroen, Elaine, Clare, Anna, Aaron, Kiyara, Hallie, guerabean, Damita, Shelley, gigistar05, Linda, Steve, Jacinta, man0801, Sharon, and others.

But really, really special thanks to Jer for the awesome site design, which I stole for my awesome book layout. <3

And of course to Hanna.





Foreword

I think the big problem I have with urban fantasy (meaning fantastical things happening in a contemporary, usually urban setting) is that everything is *so* dramatic and angsty. I mean...there are frickin' werewolves running around. How can you be serious when people randomly sprout fur? Or drink blood, like vampires?

So I created *Curio Killed the Cat* as an answer to a problem that only I seemed to have: making urban fantasy light and fun. The format was meant to be more like a half hour comedy with slower plot progression and just a few silly things happening. Sometimes I succeeded, sometimes I failed, but I always enjoyed what I was writing.

And I hope you do too. If not, there are plenty of melodramatic urban fantasy out there you can choose from, including my other work.

Stephan Cameron





Chapter One: Customers First

Briar

“Well, what did you do wrong?” I leaned on the counter next to the cash register and tried to keep from yawning. I succeeded, but accidentally let out a sigh that seemed to scream, “Bored now!”

Fortunately, the customer in front of me seemed too angry to notice. I’m also probably one of the only people on the planet who would see a pissed off customer as a good thing.

“I didn’t do anything wrong!” snapped the middle aged woman. She thrust a piece of paper in my direction. “I did *exactly* what the spell said and it didn’t work! I want my money back.”

I vaguely gestured to the sign hanging next to the counter and sucked in a deep breath before reciting the terms of sale listed. “The items in this store are only sold for curio purposes and no guarantee is made, and by purchasing our goods and/or services, you acknowledge that you understand this, therefore refunds are not permitted unless items purchased are damaged and/or broken in some way.” *Holy hell, I can’t believe how often I have to repeat that.* The same thing was printed at the bottom of every receipt as well. Was it that no one read anymore or was it willful ignorance?

“The hell with that—you said this spell was foolproof!”

Now that got my attention. I *never*, ever say such a thing. As far as I’m concerned, “foolproof” doesn’t exist—it’s a proven

fact of evolution. Nature will always build a better fool, and I was pretty sure I looked at a prime example in the shop that day.

I picked up the piece of paper she'd dropped on the counter and scanned it for where I had allegedly written, "Even an idiot won't get this one wrong!"

One look at the page and everything became a whole lot clearer. With a roll of my eyes, I handed the sheet back to her. "Okay, first of all, I said *near* foolproof, which is not the same as foolproof. Second of all," I pointed to the terms of sale sign again, "we make no guarantees here and there are no refunds. Third—and most importantly—this spell is from my *blog*. You know, where I give things away for *free*. You didn't pay for it in the first place."

That seemed to be about the worst thing I could have said. Her face went about as red as my 'ruby slipper' nail polish, which was *not* a flattering look on her.

"You listen here, brat!"

Brat? What was I, suddenly five or something? My late twenties had been kind to me and I looked a few years younger, sure, but certainly not *brat* worthy.

"I bought the ingredients here," she continued ranting. "I did your spell and it didn't work, so I expect a refund!"

I glanced at the spell she'd printed out. It was a fairly simple one designed to make the caster more attractive to members of the opposite sex. I was starting to suspect why it hadn't worked, and it had less to do with being unattractive and everything to do with a not-so-winning personality.

"Did you allow it twenty-eight days to manifest?" I asked, figuring I already knew the answer.

"It said fourteen!"

Of course. I pointed to "fine print" at the bottom of the page that was actually written all in caps and surrounded with asterisks. "Fourteen days minimum. Twenty-eight is far more likely, though it can take up to two months."

"Horseshit!" The woman raised her voice even louder. Thankfully, there weren't any customers in the shop besides one of the regulars.

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Unthankfully, my co-workers were around, and one of them was at my side in seconds. I felt the sharp point of an elbow in my side, but Lilith was all smiles when she faced the bitch of a customer.

“Hello there. Unfortunately, we can’t refund all purchases, however if you return any unused portions, we can discuss what options are available.”

“I’ll do that.” The customer glared at me again before stalking off toward the door.

“Thank you for shopping at *Curio Killed the Cat*,” Lilith called after her, but the horrible woman didn’t glance back as she left.

“Okay, the first rule of the store is that you *don’t* encourage people like that to come back,” I said as I turned Lil’s way.

She adjusted her wire-framed glasses, which was a nervous habit she exhibited whenever she was feeling conflicted about something. In this case, I imagined it was that she agreed with me about the bitchy customer, but couldn’t turn away from her must-be-the-perfect-employee nature.

“Briar, I know some people are difficult but—”

“But we really don’t want that woman coming back. She’s nuts. She brought in something she printed from my *blog*, Lil. She’s insane.”

“Still, she’s a customer.”

Stupid customers. If I had my way, I’d kill the lot of them.

Lilith is far too understanding. You probably wouldn’t guess that about a demon—succubus to be exact—but I guess that was part of her rebellion. Lil fully rejected the succubus stereotype and wanted to be desired for her mind rather than her body. As a result, I was pretty sure she hadn’t had a date in months, if not years. Maybe time moved differently for demons, though. I know she aged slower than humans; her pale complexion hadn’t been marred by a single wrinkle in the nearly ten years I’d known her, and she was older than me then. I did a few spells on her, once upon a time, in an attempt to draw some love—or at least one-night-stands—her way, but I don’t think they ever worked. She was like those women in movies—the ones who as soon as they took off their glasses, let their hair

down, and popped a few buttons to show some cleavage, would have the fellas lining up. But Lil would never relax like that.

And so she remained single. I wasn't sure how she could stand it, but then I'm not a succubus. Just a midlist rootworker.

"I glanced over inventory..." Her voice trailed off as she reached beneath the counter and pulled out a clipboard. Her name was printed on a crisp label along the metal clip, and the papers it held were stacked and lined up straight. If it belonged to anyone else, I'd feel compelled to rearrange the papers or draw rude things on her name sticker. But not to Lil. She was just too nice—I'd feel bad or something. "And I noticed we're low on a couple of oils."

"Just take 'em out of the spell kits."

She gave me a look that suggested I couldn't possibly be serious. I was, but that seemed beside the point.

"The kits are still selling well too. If you could just—"

"But I don't wanna," I said in my whiniest voice. Sometimes she got so annoyed with me that she just gave up. This wasn't one of those times, I guess, 'cause she stood firm.

"We're low on the Attraction Oil and the Commanding Oil..."

Because if people can't attract what they want, they try to order people around.

Her gaze continued to scan the page. "And we only have one bottle left of Follow Me Boy Oil..."

That's 'cause we get a lot of sluts in here.

"And actually, the bath salts have been going fast lately—"

"But I don't wanna!"

She set the clipboard on the counter and let out a heavy sigh. "Quit being a brat."

"Why is everyone calling me that today?"

"Because you tend to behave like one."

"Yeah, but that lady didn't know that."

Lil looked me up and down with a sigh. "And maybe it's because you're not dressed like someone who works professionally in the service industry, but a part time student?"

I glanced down. Okay, so cargo capris and a tank top didn't scream professionalism. The tribal tattoos on my back and nose

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ring probably didn't help either. But, whatever. "Let's not critique my wardrobe just yet, 'kay?"

"All right. Let's discuss you refilling the supplies."

Damn, I wanted to go back to my lame fashion sense.

"You make oils all the time," she continued.

Making oils was time consuming. It wasn't just throwing a bunch of herbs and roots in a bottle—I had to actually, like, *charge* them with energy and stuff. Not like the customers noticed a difference, as there weren't exactly a bunch of occult shops selling hoodoo oil in Kensington Market to compare mine to. But as lazy as I was, I didn't like to do things half-assed. "Yeah, but those are for *me*. Big difference."

Lil gave me a stern look. "Please, Briar. It's...not something I find myself in the mood for."

"Bad day?"

Worry touched her dark eyes. "You were late today?"

"Uh, yeah. But I had a really good reason—"

"Mr. Adamski is here."

I raised a dark eyebrow curiously. "Really?"

Lilith nodded. "He's been in a meeting with Madam Curio since just after I opened this morning."

Howard Adamski owned the building where my boss—Madam Curio, shop owner—rented space so she had a store in which to employ us. We rarely ever saw our landlord, usually because something needed fixing in either the store or the apartments above us, and he knew he'd have to repair things if he showed his face. This development had me curious.

"A good meeting or a bad meeting?" I asked.

"I don't know," Lilith said. "*But* I think you should give them some time and keep busy so you aren't bothering them. Perhaps with those oils?"

"Well, I *am* uber busy womanning the cash register..."

She nudged me out of the way and gestured toward the back where the stockroom waited. "Liam can take over. Start by restocking the rootwork shelves and when you see what we're low on, you can get working."

"Why doesn't Liam have to—"

“Because I already did my sections,” he said coldly from behind me. I jumped a little, startled, and it wasn’t too flattering. Sneaky bastard. I glanced up and met his dark eyes with a glare. Liam stood a foot over me and, despite the fact he was usually a nice guy, I think he enjoyed that bit of extra height. Made it easier to literally look down his nose at me when I did something he disapproved of...which was pretty much all of the time.

Grumbling under my breath, I left the succubus and Wiccan priest at cash and made a point of stomping to the room where supplies were stored.

An empty cart, used for hauling supplies around the store for stocking, sat parked to the left of the door. Shelves lined the walls, all carefully labeled by Lilith. I wondered sometimes if all succubi had her organizational skills, but she was the only one I knew, so I couldn’t say for sure. I doubted any of the modern encyclopedias of demons covered that kind of thing either. Maybe it should be added, though. *Succubus: demon from Judeo-Christian mythology that seduces men while they sleep. Also, very organized and can do wonders with your kitchen cupboard.*

I went through the shelves, grabbing various herbs as I went. Since Liam had been through first, I could guess which ones he hadn’t bothered restocking. Any herbs, oils, or other supplies that could be used in harmful spellcasting, he refused to stock them. Or sell, or that matter—he’d actually make me or Lil run through such items at cash. We had this stupid store policy of respecting people’s religious beliefs, no matter how lame they were. It’s not that I had a problem with Wiccans—get ‘em drunk and they loosen up a bit. But Liam could be totally anal about that whole, “And it harm none” stuff.

“Need any help?” called a voice from the doorway. I recognized it and didn’t bother glancing over my shoulder, but instead continued gathering various sachet powders.

“You’re not allowed back here, Ally,” I said. That time I glanced back briefly and tried to hide a grin at the darkening of his eyes. Okay, so he was wearing pale blue contacts so I couldn’t be sure if his eyes *actually* darkened, but “Alastair

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Nightshade” hated it when I called him that. So my guess is that they darkened.

He hung his tall, bony frame in the doorway, peering at me with those damn creepy eyes from beneath locks of dyed black hair. Ally—and I had no idea what his real name, but I just *refused* to call him Alastair—supposedly went to University of Toronto, though I think he spent more time in the shop than he ever did in class.

“And I’m not back there,” he said in his slightly nasally voice that did nothing to toughen up his image. “Just trying to help.”

I sighed. It wasn’t like I minded the kid back there. In fact, I used to get him to sort supplies and stock the shelves for me all the time, but then Lilith found out and I had to sit through a lecture. Ever listen to a prim and proper succubus try to chastise you for twenty minutes without *actually* chastising you because she’s just too nice to raise her voice? It’s painful to listen to. The first five or ten minutes were kinda funny, but it went downhill from there.

“Do me a favour and check the Spanish moss out in the store.” I paused my cart next to that very item on the shelf. I couldn’t be sure if Liam stocked that or not—according to my beliefs, it was used for stuffing doll babies and had evil purposes. According to his, it was used for protection. It usually depended on his mood whether he stocked it or not...

Ally left the doorway for a few moments, then returned. “Nope.”

Must have had some customers pick the stuff up for their dollies and Liam got all bent out of shape about it. I grabbed the packaged baggies of moss out of a box, and then tossed them on the pile.

“Madam Curio looks...weird today.”

I glanced back sharply. “She’s out there?”

He nodded. Fingers topped in black nail polish tapped on the frame of the doorway. “Something up?”

I abandoned the cart of supplies and bolted for the front of the shop. A tall figure exiting the store drew my attention first. The tiny bell over the door chimed as Howard Adamski left. My

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gaze moved immediately to where my boss stood next to Lilith and Liam. Frowns furrowed the brows of both my coworkers, and Lil clutch her clipboard tightly to her chest. Madam Curio took a step backward and turned toward us, blue eyes as bright as ever.

“Well...how about a family meeting?”

This couldn't be good. She only ever referred to us as family when something bad was going on...





Chapter Two: Family Meeting

Lilith

Although Madam Curio didn't seem any less cheery than usual, dread weighed heavily upon me as I watched her perch her short, portly frame on the stool behind the counter. It seemed this meeting would be held in the main shop rather than the office, so I stepped in and took charge.

"Liam, put on a pot of tea," I called as I moved toward the door. "Briar..." My gaze went to Briar Malik. She leaned on her elbows on the counter, chin in her hands as if she was unable to support her head. Her dark eyes moved in a sideways glance to meet my own and I suspected she wasn't eager to do...well...*anything* to lighten the situation at that moment.

"Just stay there, then," I said instead. My attention snapped to Alastair. He hovered in the corner of the shop, black clothes helping him to fade into the shadows. He probably expected we'd just let him stay there—he seemed, some days, to be a part of the furnishings and was all but glued to Wicca bookshelves. But this felt far too important to allow a customer—no matter how loyal—to remain on the premises. I opened the front door and gestured for him to exit. Alastair's eyes widened, but I remained firm.

His shoulders curved into a slouch and he dragged his feet out the door. Just as he exited, I swung the door closed and turned the sign on the front, letting customers—should we actually receive any—know that we were "out to lunch." A rather

apt message, I thought, since it frequently *did* seem as though at least a few of us weren't all there.

Liam returned with a tray of aromatic tea, and he poured a cup for Madam Curio. Briar slipped off her flip-flops and stood up straight, then slid onto the edge of the counter facing our boss. I set my clipboard down next to her and waited while Madam sipped her tea. Spindles of long gray hair escaped her casual bun and brushed her cheeks as her head bobbed up and down to some unheard music. Although she'd called the meeting, she didn't seem ready to discuss what was going on.

"Can you tell us what Mr. Adamski said?" I asked.

"Did you miss the rent again?" Briar asked. I sent a sharp her look way immediately, but she stared back as clueless as could be and didn't deign to apologize.

"Oh, it looks that way," Madam said.

There had to be more going on; Mr. Adamski wouldn't merely show up for the sake of collecting rent. Not when the back steps needed fixing and occasionally water leaked in the bathroom. No, he'd send an angry letter if we were late paying.

"It seems," Madam Curio took a sip of her tea, "that we've run out of money."

Liam, Briar and I exchanged glances.

"There was a finite amount?" Briar asked.

Our boss nodded.

"Are we not making a profit?" Liam asked, blonde brows pulled into a frown.

Briar burst out laughing. She sobered and sighed dramatically as she realized no one had joined in. "C'mon, that was funny."

"How long have we been out of money?" I asked gently.

Madam Curio still didn't seem upset or at all bothered by the circumstances. Though it was nearly noon, a strong odour of whiskey surrounded her—it wouldn't entirely have surprised me if she had partaken of certain 'spirits' already that day.

"Well, I had a letter from the bank in the spring."

"June only just started," I said. "We have plenty of time to—"

"Sorry, dear. I meant the spring before that."

I tried to keep my expression calm, but that wasn't the easiest of tasks when presented with such information.

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"If we aren't making a profit, how is it the place is still in business?" Liam asked.

"Oh, I've just been paying with my lottery winnings."

"You won the lottery?" Briar said, echoing my thoughts and no doubt Liam's as well.

"Oh yes," Madam Curio said with a smile. "About eight or nine years ago."

"How much?"

"Fifty-three million."

Not one of us said a word. Not even Briar, and she had a comment for everything.

"So Howard is looking at closing the shop," she continued, again looking quite unperturbed.

I forced my voice out calmly. "How soon?"

"Three weeks to come up with owed payments plus interest."

Three weeks. I gasped audibly. Liam backed up slowly until his rear hit the edge of the counter, and he slouched against it, his expression one of shock.

"Three weeks," Briar whispered. "But...this is heavy stuff. It can take me up to twenty-eight days to manifest a decent money spell!"

"Of course you'd make this about you," Liam said.

"I don't see you coming up with a solution!" Briar shot back. "So we go to the bank and get a loan. I'll do a major honey jar or something, and—"

"You can't *coerce* someone into giving us money—"

"No, *you* couldn't 'cause you're incompetent with anything that doesn't involve some lame blessing—"

"Would you two stop it?" I whispered. Madam Curio might not have been bothered by their quarrelling, but it certainly wasn't helping the situation. We had to approach this logically. Every problem could be solved; we merely needed to discern the solution. "Three weeks seems rather...abrupt. Isn't this a process that would take much longer, normally?"

"Oh, yes—there's something around here somewhere..." She stood and set her teacup on the stool seat behind her. A set of drawers—two of which were locked—lay under the counter near

the cash register. She stooped and unlocked the second one, rifled through the papers within, and finally retrieved a few crumbled pages. Her face beamed as she stood straight and turned my way. “There they are! I thought maybe I had lost them.”

I accepted the sheets and my nervous stomach churned as I read the print. It was a notice of eviction. Dated four months ago, at that.

“You didn’t tell us?” I tried to keep the accusatory tone out of my voice, but in truth I was hurt. I knew she didn’t share all of the business side with her employees, but something of this magnitude certainly seemed like the sort of thing she would tell us.

Or at least tell *me*.

“I didn’t want to trouble you with it,” she said, smiling kindly. “We’ll sort something out. Now, you know, I do have to get down to the deli today—they have those lovely macadamia nut cookies. Would you like any?”

We barely shook our heads before she left.

Briar broke the silence. “I bet she’s going to a bar.”

I opened my mouth to suggest otherwise, but I wasn’t entirely certain myself.

“Three weeks,” Liam said. “We’ve got three weeks to find another job. I don’t believe this.” He shook his head sadly, fingers raking back through his hair. “Three weeks.”

“That’s only if he actually closes the place,” Briar said.

“And you think he won’t?”

“I think he’ll try, but I came up with this great new spell—”

“Would you just stop messing with these things!” Liam snapped. “The Law of Three states that—”

“You wanna know where you can shove your Law of Three?”

“Enough!” I snapped suddenly. They both paled and went silent, and I immediately regretted my outburst. When I spoke again, my voice came out cool and relaxed—far from how I actually felt, of course. “We need to start actively bringing in customers. Start advertising your services, maybe do readings again—”

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“But I *hate* readings,” Briar said before I could even finish the thought. “You always get the stupid people in, expecting tea leaves and crap. And I *suck* at Tarot.”

“You really do,” Liam agreed.

“Shut up—so do you. Besides, there’s Quentin’s crew down the road—they’re opened up to all kinds of readings. And they lie like a broken magic carpet. Telling people what they want to hear; now *that* is doing business.”

“Well, we’d better start getting competitive,” I said.

The bell over the door chimed again and we looked over to see Alastair peek his head in the doorway. “I saw Madam Curio leave. Can I come back in?”

I sighed. No sense upsetting one of our few regular customers. “Yes, please come back in.”

“And please buy something,” Briar said under her breath.

I gave her a look.

“What?”



Not long after Madam Curio left and Alastair returned, the bell over the door jangled again. I felt the usual thrill at the hope of another customer, but that swiftly deflated when I recognized the...unexpected visitor.

Alicia Rutherford was somehow related to our employer, though no one knew quite how. Daughter seemed unlikely, since Madam Curio didn’t have children—that we’d heard of—which seemed to rule out the possibility of granddaughter as well. Niece seemed possible, as well as likely, given her age of late thirties to Madam Curio’s late sixties.

“Hello, Alicia,” I said with a friendly—if not forced—smile.

She threw back her head of short dark hair as she strode forward. “Is *she* here?”

I took “she” to mean Madam. Part of the reason we didn’t know how they were related was because Alicia didn’t refer to our employer as anything but “she” or “her”.

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“Just missed her,” Briar said, coming from behind me to stand at my side. “On her way to Union Station, I think, so—”

“I’m *not* doing that again,” Alicia snapped.

I reached up to pinch the bridge of my nose, a headache already starting. Briar and Alicia weren’t exactly what one would consider friends, and Briar used every opportunity she could to make life difficult for the other woman. The last time, their clash came about when Briar tricked her into looking for Madam Curio down the street, and then moved her car to behind the building. She brought it back, but only after Alicia had phoned the police. After being slapped with a warning for filing a false report, Alicia had gone out of her way not to return to the store. I didn’t find myself overly saddened by that prospect, even if I disagreed with Briar’s methods.

“She’s gone out, and I don’t know when she’ll be back today,” I said. “Can I take a message for you?”

“Tell her it’s important she give me a call.”

“Hey,” Briar leaned on the counter and looked up at Alicia innocently, “did you know she won the lottery? She’s like a multi-millionaire. Or was.”

Alicia rolled her eyes. “Very funny. When you get fired one of these days, I’m going to throw a party.”

“Well, am I invited?” Briar asked.

“No. It will strictly be a party *without* you.”

“But if you’re throwing it ’cause I got fired, I should be the guest of honour.”

“No, I’m not inviting you to the party!” With that, Alicia swung back around and stomped towards the door.

Briar turned to me. “She doesn’t even try to come up with comebacks anymore. I’m so disappointed.”

“You really think she doesn’t know anything about the lottery?” I asked, my gaze still lingering on the door.

“Of course not. She’s too stupid to lie.”





Chapter Three: After Hours

Lilith

Spirits were fairly low around the shop after our employer's announcement. I spent the afternoon in the office going through bills, balance sheets, and trying to come up with a solution. Briar and Liam bickered out front—which wasn't particularly out of the ordinary—regarding the use of something in spells. I believe it was valerian root. I closed the door so their voices fell to a low murmur, and returned my attention to the books. No answer came to me, however, and I felt more depressed than when I'd first heard about the financial difficulties.

I closed the shop earlier than usual. Briar and Liam didn't disagree with me regarding the choice, and Madam Curio didn't return to the store, so she didn't have any say in the matter. She commonly left me to run the place in her absence, and this was one instance where I was glad of it.

My small apartment in downtown Toronto was cool to my entrance, even though it was June. I'd always been like that, though—I craved the heat, the warmth. When cooking, I often stood too close to the stove. As a child, my babysitter would worry about my safety when I tried to curl up next to the oven. And then one day she saw my mother do the same while baking blueberry muffins, and she understood where I got it from.

I didn't, however, appreciate smog and humidity, so I turned on a few fans around the living room to increase the air flow. After changing out of my work suit and into a pair of light linen

pants, T-shirt, and cardigan, I prepared dinner. Just as my steamed rice and vegetables were ready, the telephone rang. I sat at the kitchen table, cordless phone in hand, and pressed the receiver to my ear with a barely audible sigh.

“Hello, Mom.”

“How did you know it was me?” my mother replied.

“You’re the only person I know who calls my landline rather than just email me.”

“Oh, the bloody computer again. Just a fad, I tell you. I can’t see anyone really using those. You don’t get phone calls because you don’t get out and meet people. You should have a man phoning.”

“All right, Mom.” I chewed on a bite of rice. With anyone else, I wouldn’t dare eat during a conversation, but when speaking with one’s mother, sometimes it’s best to keep one’s mouth occupied.

“Had any dates lately?”

I winced a little. She called me at least two or three times a week, and this was almost always our conversation. “No.”

“You really should. It’s not healthy to go that long without sex. Not for humans and especially not for us.”

I considered making mention of my vibrator, but I blushed at the thought. That would go too far with her. She might have given birth and raised me during the sexual revolution of the early 1970’s, but she herself grew up in the 1910’s. Some things were taboo still.

“I met a brutally hot man the other day. Definitely your type—”

And now she not only thought she knew what my “type” was, but had a potential date already in mind. It seemed best to terminate the conversation immediately.

“You know, Briar from work is on her way over—we’re going out. To a...club of some kind. I really ought to get ready.”

“Of course, dear. I’ll call you later.”

I swiftly hung up. I’d never, ever go out with Briar anywhere—even if she did ask me—and I suspected my mother knew that, but perhaps wishful thinking on her part allowed her to believe the lie.

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I felt movement around my legs, and reached down absently to pet my Russian blue cat, Bill. He purred in response. We found Bill wandering out in front of the shop a few years earlier, and he'd taken to me right away. I had never thought of myself as a cat person, but I brought him home anyway.

The shop... I had to do something about the shop. Although we didn't make much money, I loved that place.

I took my plate to the polished wood desk across the living room and turned on my laptop. Briar was online, which came as little surprise, but before speaking to her, I opened a word document and began to brainstorm. We had to bring in customers...and quickly at that.



Briar

I spent my first hour at home obsessively checking email. If I lost my job at the shop, that meant I'd be without a regular paycheck, which meant I could very well be without an apartment sometime soon. Obviously, that would sucketh to the nth degree, so I scoured my inbox to see if I had any paying private clients. No such luck. Perhaps the fact that I was a total bitch who yelled at most of her clients for their constant stupidity meant I wasn't getting any referrals.

I surfed over to *The Magical Pentacle* website, where Bille Humphrey a.k.a. Wilhelmina Raven had her ugly mug plastered all over the main page. How could so many people be willing to take advice from someone wearing that much black eye shadow? Sure, I wore black eye shadow now and then, but to draw attention to my eyes...not to blind myself. Yet her site drew way more visitors than www.CurioKilledtheCat.com, which really pissed me off. Nothing I'd been taught from a long line of rootworkers ever gave details on spellcasting to increase internet traffic. Unfortunately.

When I'd convinced Madam Curio—and Lilith—to let me open the website a couple years earlier, I had originally thought the darker spell work—like controlling magic and the like—would draw more people in. No such luck. They all seemed to be stuck on the light and love from the new age movement, and Billie pedaled that quite well.

And Liam wouldn't help at all either. Didn't want to work with me on the site and *really* didn't want to give away spellcasting advice. I don't know what danger he thought people would be in if he told them how to bless something, but whatever. I didn't really want his help anyway.

Just as I was about to sign off, a message popped up from Lilith about all of her ideas to generate sales in the store. I glanced through them, then put it out of my mind and left the laptop. Her heart was in the right place, but getting me to okay spell discounts didn't feel like a productive use of either of our time, 'cause I cringed at the thought of charging any less.

I went to my *Santa Marta la Dominadora* alter in the corner of my living room and lit a candle. I knelt there and closed my eyes, making my petition.

Tears burned a little in my eyes. I let myself think of him once a week, when doing my petitions, and that was it. I always kept it together and pushed him from my mind, except during these moments when the hurt was all too real.

Bring him back.



Liam

My coven gathering ended late in the evening. I was distracted thinking the entire time about the troubles at the shop, and I suspected people noticed. But no one in the circle spoke about it. I felt a lot of disappointment in myself for just going through the motions like that. Perhaps some meditation before bed and a cleansing might settle me a little.

Curio Killed the Cat

“Liam.”

I paused in the doorway of the community center to see one of our high school students from the Wiccan Youth Group, Madison, approach.

“What is it, Maddie?”

She gazed up shyly from beneath long golden lashes. I shifted a little, uncomfortably. Some thirty-one-year-olds might accept the attention of a seventeen-year-old girl, but I wasn’t one of them.

“We’re having a meeting after school tomorrow,” she continued. “With some new members. I wondered if...” She paused and chewed her lip as her face coloured slightly.

“What do you need?” I said kindly.

“I wondered if maybe you could join us? As a guest speaker? To talk about the impact the craft has had on your life and your personal struggles? They’d love to hear from an actual priest and maybe you could inspire them.” She sucked in a deep breath after pushing all her words out at once, and then her shoulders tensed as she awaited my response.

“I’d love to.”

Her face beamed. “Yay! That’s great!” She clasped her hands together. “I’m so excited! The meeting is at my house. You have my address, right?”

“I—”

“I’ll text it to you tomorrow. Oh, I’m so happy!”

I bid her goodbye before she could say much more. I certainly didn’t look forward to a room full of teenagers all night—I got enough of that working with the likes of Briar Malik during the day—but perhaps it would mean good P.R. for the shop. And perhaps gain us a few more customers.

As I left the center and started towards my car, a shadowy figure came to view in the parking lots. It stepped forward and stopped by my vehicle. Streetlights shone on her long red hair, and I recognized Wilhelmina Raven.

The psychic from *The Magical Pentacle* had shown nothing but contempt for me in the past, and I wasn’t sure why she would show up at my coven meeting. She had her own circle, after all—one with more members and prominence than my little group.

Skyla Dawn Cameron

“Wilhelmina,” I said curtly as I fished my keys from my suede jacket.

“Liam Ashby.” She leaned on the car, directly in front of the driver’s side door.

“What can I do for you?”

“Good question.” She stood straight and her expression took on a serious look. “A little birdie told me that your store is having some...financial difficulty. In a word, you’re broke.”

“And where did you hear that?”

“I’m psychic, remember?”

I didn’t think she found out from her supposed supernatural abilities, but I didn’t argue for the sake of expediency. “And what, pray tell, is your point?”

“My ‘point’ is that your talents have long been wasted there...and Quentin has a proposition for you.”

I remained silent for a moment, weighing the options before me. I didn’t trust Wilhelmina in the least, but mention of Quentin Nicholas—her boss and owner of *The Magical Pentacle*—had me intrigued.

“I’m listening.”





Chapter Four: Desperate Times

Briar

This sign is god awful.

Lilith had picked up a sign kit at Staples and made it herself at some point the night before. And she sure as hell wasn't a designer—the thing was hideous. Now, I wasn't a designer either, but then I was the kind of person who had enough sense to hire someone else.

Lil would have pointed out that we couldn't afford to pay a professional, though. And she'd be right. But still, ugly is ugly, and bright yellow with orange stripes is *ugly*.

The sign slipped. Damn, why couldn't I get it straight?

"Stupid sign," I muttered.

The hot June sun had sweat dripping from every inch of my body, but determination drove me on. Barefoot, I balanced on my tiptoes and hung the sign from the hook over the front window. I couldn't actually see it that far above me, so I worked blindly, lifting and dragging it back down and hoping it caught on the hook. At last I felt a tug. I released the corners of the sign and dropped my weary arms. Okay, so it was crooked. Whatever.

"Reconciliation spells twenty percent off?" a voice said from behind me.

I glanced over at the random Chinese guy watching me. Friendly dark brown eyes met mine, so I looked him up and down. My age, a little above my height. Short, messy black hair topped his head, and he looked like a walking Old Navy display

with layered shirts and cargo pants. He leaned against the wall outside the shop door and crossed his arms over his chest, drawing my gaze to the simple white lettering over his black T-shirt: *What Wouldn't Jesus Do?*

Awesomeness. Never saw that at Old Navy.

“Yeah,” I said in answer to his question. “My co-worker’s idea. But I raised the prices by ten percent before I put that sign up, so not really.” I knew I should probably chat up the cute potential customer, but I was hella hot and my arms hurt, so I wandered back inside. Two fans on either side of the room blew warm air and I stood in the cross breeze, closed my eyes, and enjoyed it.

The door opened behind me and closed again. I cracked open an eyelid to see the guy from outside browsing the shelves near me.

Lilith and Liam weren’t around. I was pretty sure Lil went to a meeting about a bank loan she seemed to believe we could get. Or hoped. I thrust a mojo bag in her hand before she left to make her—and our cause—more attractive to whoever she’d be dealing with, but saints knew she wouldn’t be doing anything to encourage that strategy. Liam had the task of printing and distributing flyers—another of Lilith’s strategies from last night—and apparently that would take him the whole day because I hadn’t seen him yet that morning. I glanced at the customer again. *Guess it’s time for me to be all service industry-ish.* Customers have the worst timing.

Although not cooled off yet, I dragged myself to the cash register and leaned on the counter. At least the hardwood kept my feet cold...maybe it would work its way up my body *eventually*.

Ally materialized from the shadows and pulled a stool up to the opposite side of the counter, where he sat down. “Where’s Liam?”

“Distributing flyers.”

“For the store?”

“Uh, duh?”

“When is he coming back?”

“Why—are you going to ask him out?”

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Beneath the white make-up, his face coloured. His skin tended to get a little blotchy red, which looked ridiculous on an Emo-boy.

“No,” he said in a whiney voice. “Shut up.”

Everyone knew he had a crush on our resident Wiccan priest. And although Liam occasionally swung that way, everyone knew he didn’t like Goths. Hated, more like it—he turned his nose up at any “posers” in the magic(k) using community, including kids wearing black capes who thought they were vampires. So Liam ignored poor Ally. Lilith felt bad for him. I mostly thought it was funny.

“That’s not why I come here,” he continued.

“Sure you do. That’s why you never buy anything.”

“I buy stuff! Sometimes...”

I rolled my eyes. “Sure.”

The newbie came up to the counter. “So how much are spells?”

“It all depends. What do you want? Reconciliation?”

He nodded. “So what does the cost depend on?”

“How much work I have to do. I’ll do a regular strength spell—good for a lot of situations—for one-fifty.”

“Hundred?”

“Yep.” I waited, but his expression didn’t change—he still seemed interested. I continued. “That one takes a couple of days. For something stronger, you’re looking at double that. It’s good for most other cases. Now, in the case of major work, you’re looking at five hundred or so.”

“Minus twenty percent?”

“Damn. Right. So yeah, minus twenty percent.”

“What if I want to break someone up too, along with the reconciliation? Is that covered?”

Twisted little bastard. My kind of client. “That’s a whole other spell. And it’s not twenty percent off.”

“What about revenge? Do you do that?”

“And it harm none,” Ally began.

“Liam’s not here to see how well you suck up, so stop.” I turned a little so my body was angled toward the customer and away from Ally. My fingers brushed through the fringe of dark

hair on my forehead, still damp and sticky from my time outside. “It’s all doable. If you can pay. But you should know that as fun as it all is, if it won’t solve your problems, you’re better off doing something else. So what’s your issue?”

Elbows on the glass counter, he leaned forward, close enough that I could see his long black eyelashes dust below his eyes when he blinked.

Ally slid his stool closer, perhaps attempting to be casual, but the legs scraped loudly across the floor. Me and the new guy each gave him a look.

“What?” he said innocently.

“Go away.”

Ally pouted but grudgingly did so. I watched him disappear in the direction of the dream interpretation books.

“So my girlfriend and I broke up,” the client said, singing a song I’d long known the words to. “And she’s dating someone new. Because she’s a slut.”

“And you want her back why, exactly?”

“Well, I did kinda love her.”

“Kinda?”

He shrugged.

Same old chorus. “Why did she break up with you?”

“She didn’t. I kicked her out. ‘Cause she cheated on me.”

“Nice. So if you did the dumping, why hasn’t she taken you back?”

“Probably because I cut up all her clothes. But it seemed like a really good idea at the time, before I knew I wanted to reconcile.”

I stifled a chuckle, having done that the odd time myself. “Always fun. Set anything on fire?”

“No.”

Amateur.

“Just ran her favourite skanky dress through the shredder at work. So she’s kind of mad at me.”

“Uh huh. Now, go over for me again what exactly your goals are for this one?”

He counted off his list on his fingers, one item at a time. “I need them to break up and for something bad to happen to the

Curio Killed the Cat

new guy. Then I have to get back together with her and live happily ever after.”

“Except she’s still a cheating slut.”

“Well, yeah.”

“We can do something to make her remain faithful.”

“Really? You can do that?”

“Yeah. If you can pay.”

“This stuff really works?”

That’s usually where we lost people. I couldn’t legally promise any results. “Actually, everything in this shop—including goods and/or services—are sold as curios and for entertainment purposes only. I do, however, guarantee that I’m *much* more effective than the palm reader at *The Magical Pentacle* down the street, though I can’t legally guarantee anything.”

“Okay. Good enough for me: you’re hired.”

My eyes widened a bit. “Really?” *This is way too easy.*

“Yep. Any cost.”

Sweet! New client! I extended my hand. “I’m Briar Malik and I’ll be your spellcaster.”

He clasped my hand and shook it, giving me an easy, lopsided smile. “I’m Sebastian Xiao, and I guess I’ll be your customer.”

“Awesome. Half your cash up front. And I might need to do a credit check.”



Letters of Love by Alastair Nightshade

My Dark Magical Lord. Liam.

*Today your golden hair looked like sunlight,
shining across the dark, lonely valleys of my
heart, only not like real sunlight because it's*

the mortal enemy of my kind. So metaphorical sunlight. Or something.

In the vivid, relentless dreams of my restless sleep, I envision you coming to take me away from this cold, cruel world. But alas, dreams are all I have, for you will not grace me with even one kind glance. Oh how I long for—

“What are you writing?”

Alastair Nightshade glanced up to see the she-harpy Briar so close that she practically peered over his shoulder.

“Nothing.” He crossed his arms over his faux leather hardcover notebook. “Go away.”

“Buy something,” she shot back, and then she moved past him to set some bottles on the shelf nearby.

Harpy.



Lilith

I folded my hands on the desk before me and waited. The bank had a very sterile, clean smell and feel. Designed to make people uncomfortable, I imagined. And uncomfortable I was. I didn't want to be there, begging for money. I shouldn't have had to be, but I didn't think it would be...“responsible” of me to leave this up to Madam Curio, in case she didn't show. *Or* in case she inadvertently offended the bank employees. No, I seemed the best person for the job.

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The door to the office opened suddenly. I stood and turned to face a smiling clean-cut man in his late thirties. He extended his hand. I greeted it with my own. Our eyes met, and I got that little familiar tingle when confronted with an attractive man. Another succubus quality—we naturally wanted to use our sex appeal to obtain things we desired, and I had to fight to keep my nature at bay. Normally I succeeded, but that task became more difficult when a good looking man came into view.

“Thank you so much for waiting.” He gave my arm a forceful pump.

I slipped my fingers from his grasp as quickly as possible, as the physical contact made concentrating on business difficult. He moved to the chair behind the desk and I took my seat once again.

My throat went dry. Why hadn’t I brought water? Of course, it wouldn’t be appropriate to down a bottle of water at a meeting with the bank, the plastic cracking in my grasp and huge gulping noise echoing in the room. Still, I wished I had *something*. If only this man—my gaze went to his name plate—Scott Mclean would offer me something...

I could make him, an internal voice reminded me. It would be simple. Take off my glasses. Bat my eyelashes. That sex appeal other women thought they had? I didn’t think. I *knew*. All part of my demonic genetics.

But I was better than that. I’m not that kind of demon and woman. Never had been, never would be.

“My name is Lilith Mare and I’m representing the interests of the owner of *Curio Killed the Cat*.” I reached for the portfolio beside my chair. “And—”

“Yes, I see that.” Mr. Mclean’s dark blue eyes went to the file folder on his desk, which he flipped open. As he scanned the pages, his brow furrowed. “You’re looking for a loan.”

“Just a small one,” I said quickly. “Until—”

“This business hasn’t made a profit in the past eight years, which is exactly how long it’s been in business. We expect new businesses to take a loss in the first five, but...” He looked down at the papers again, then back at me where he gave a wan, half smile. “Not to this extent.”

Skyla Dawn Cameron

“I realize that, but—”

“And I can’t see any justification for loaning such a substantial amount for a failing business.”

“I know—”

“Even under vastly different management, my answer would have to be the same.”

I felt myself pale. “Your answer?”

“No.”

No.

His expression pained. “I’m very sorry—you seem like a lovely person. But the numbers... It just doesn’t make financial sense.”

I forced my lips to move, not into pleas or promises, but a weak smile instead. No financial sense. Of course.

“I understand.” My voice came out soft, the chilled air strangling it. “Thank you for your time.” I clutched the portfolio folder tightly in my hands, occupying them so that they didn’t shake too badly, and I rose.

“I’m very sorry, Ms. Mare,” he said again. “I don’t mean to—”

I paused at the door and glanced back at the handsome Scott Mclean. “It’s your job. I understand that.” Before he could say another word, I stepped out of the office and hurried for the front of the bank.

I hope Liam has more luck with the flyers.





Chapter Five: Praise Jesus. Not Satan

Liam

I sat behind the cash register in near silence, listening to the Celtic flute playing over the room's speakers slightly louder than usual. Normally Lilith opened the store in the morning, but in the two days since Madam Curio announced our impending closure and subsequent job loss, Lil had been stressed. She spent half of the day on the phone, begging for money and trying to solve things. The rest of the time, she obsessively cleaned. Lilith clearly needed a break, so I took over opening this one time.

And I sincerely hoped she didn't show up any time soon.

Briar ducked in the front door about ten minutes after she was scheduled to. She slammed it closed, the bell jangling violently, and pressed her back to the wood while panting. Her big brown eyes looked larger than I'd seen them before and they stared directly at me. Her shaggy hair wasn't bound back as usual, but hung in wet chunks because presumably she'd just hopped out of the shower after falling out of bed half an hour ago. The dark clumps stuck to her cheeks and she brushed them back from her face.

"What. The. Hell."

I could pretend I didn't know what she referred to, but that would make me a liar, and I'd rather not stoop to her level.

I sighed heavily. "They're still there?"

“Yes.” She walked forward at last, dropped her oversized, patchwork purse on the counter, and pulled herself onto the stool in front of me. “How long have they been there?”

“A few were outside before I got here,” I said. “Three or four?”

“It’s more like a dozen now. They’ve never bothered with us before. Why can’t they bug the hassle free clinic or something?”

“Because then it wouldn’t be considered a ‘hassle free’ clinic anymore, I imagine,” I said dryly.

The door opened and closed again. We both glanced over to see Lilith enter and my stomach tightened a little. She must have been hot and miserable in her dark gray suit, but she kept her head up and not a single light brown hair fell out of the tight bun that held it. Her skirt swirled around her knees and her heels clicked on the hardwood as she walked across the room. She passed us without sparing a glance and disappeared into the office. Moments later she returned and stopped next to Briar and me.

“Why are there protesters outside?” she said in a cool, calm voice. Her sharp gaze moved away from me, thankfully. “Briar?”

Briar’s jaw dropped. “I didn’t do anything!”

Lilith cocked her head to the side and raised her brow skeptically.

“I didn’t!”

“I think they’re here because of the flyers that went out yesterday,” I said quickly. It didn’t seem fair to let Briar get in trouble over it, and maybe Lil wouldn’t question—

“We’ve had flyers go out periodically,” Lilith said. “And *The Magical Pentacle* down the road sends them out once a week.”

“It seems that they ended up in the lockers of the Christian High School.” I spoke with care, hoping not to upset her too much.

“And how did they get there?”

“It seems they were mis-delivered.”

“How could they possibly be mis-delivered? You had very specific, simple instructions to follow.”

As well as a diagram, I thought with annoyance, but I didn’t say anything. “I...outsourced.”

Curio Killed the Cat

“You what?”

“Outsourced.”

She looked at Briar again. “How could you take them to a Christian school? Why?”

“I didn’t!” Briar said.

“I met with a group last night,” I said. “So I outsourced because I felt it was important to get the flyers out as soon as possible. There is a kid from a local Wiccan Youth Group who runs errands for me, so I asked her to deliver the flyers. It appears she believed she could just deliver them anywhere.”

“And this kid goes to a Christian High School, doesn’t she?” Lilith asked.

I nodded.

“This is so awesome,” Briar said.

Lilith and I each looked at her.

“Because it’s not my fault,” she added. “I mean, protesters suck and all, but at least I didn’t do it. This time.”

“So because Liam decided to outsource, we now have a dozen Christian teenagers and their parents protesting out in front of our store, scaring customers away when we actually are in desperate need for them.”

“You don’t know they scared anyone away,” I said. “Maybe—”

“Alastair is hovering across the street, afraid to come near the door.”

“He doesn’t buy anything anyway,” Briar said. When we gave her another look, she elaborated. “I’m just looking on the bright side today. Shut up.”

“I’ll see if the police can do something about this,” Lilith said as she started toward the phone.

“It won’t do any good,” I said. “Freedom of speech means freedom to protest, and they’re allowed to as long as they’re on public property. Which they are.”

“I can call anyway—”

“I already did.”

Lilith sighed. She slipped her glasses off for a moment and swept her fingers over her tired eyes. “Where is Madam Curio?”

“She called and said she wouldn’t be in today.”

“Of course.”

“Oh, and a Mr. Mclean called.”

Confusion clouded her eyes as she pondered the name, then they widened. “Scott Mclean? From the bank? What did he say?”

“He just asked you to call him—”

Lilith bolted for the office and closed the door behind her.

“I thought the bank thing didn’t go so well,” Briar said.

I didn’t think so either, but perhaps Lilith had just seen the meeting through a more dire lens.

Before we could discuss much more, the door to the office opened again, and Briar and I turned to see Lilith glaring from the doorway. Her pink lips parted, as if to speak, but no words followed as she seemed to be considering something.

“Good news?” I asked, though her expression said something far different. I wasn’t surprised when she shook her head.

“He just asked me out on a date.”

“The bank guy?” Briar asked.

Lilith nodded. Her gaze settled on the root-worker. “Why would he do that, Briar?”

“Okay, yeah, that’s my fault,” she said. “But it wasn’t to get him to date you, just give you money. He didn’t, perchance, offer you money to date him, did he? Because that would still count—”

“Briar!”

“Well I had to do something!”

Lilith raised her hands, a request for silence that Briar followed. “I don’t care! If you want to *help*, do a floor wash to either attract new customers or drive away the protesters. Otherwise, please don’t bother.” She returned to the office and shut the door behind her. Even though she was fuming, she still didn’t actually slam it.

“Nice work,” I said dryly.

“Don’t start,” she snapped. “At least it worked. Sort of. The money would have been better.”

“Maybe it didn’t work because you’re messing with things you shouldn’t. You can’t affect people’s wills—”

“Oh, I’ve got news for you on that front,” she said with a smirk. “I can and I *do*.”

Curio Killed the Cat

“And how are things working out with Devlin?”

Her mouth snapped shut and eyes darkened at my words. I felt a twinge of regret over the statement. Briar could cast all the spells she wanted and give love advice to stupid customers who ate it up, but she couldn't reconcile herself with her ex-boyfriend. A sad irony she didn't talk about, and we rarely mentioned.

“If *you* want to sit back and cast your weak little spells and pass judgment on the rest of us, that's fine.” She slid off the stool and glared at me. “But at least shut the fuck up about it.”

I did feel bad. Such a blow was beneath me, and I knew that would come back to me in some way, someday. But I saw plainly the reason *why* her attempts to return her lover Devlin to her would fail: everything came back to a practitioner threefold. I tried to tell her that. All the time, in fact. But she didn't listen.

Briar stomped in the direction of the sound system, where she played with the dials on the radio until she came to a hard rock station, and then cranked the music up.

The noise annoyed me, but she probably needed something to distract her so I didn't complain. Instead, I moved from the cash register to peer out the front window. There were nearly twenty of them out there now. *And* they brought signs. “Praise Jesus, Not Satan” and “Thou Shalt Not Suffer a Witch to Live.” I sighed and turned my back to them. Maybe they'd find something better to do later.



Briar

The protesters actually *did* seem to be successful in scaring customers off, for the place was even quieter than usual. The odd time—while slumped over the counter and staring at the clock—I caught sight of people walking by, peering inside, but the shouts regarding eternal damnation usually frightened them off. By the end of the afternoon, the only person who had come into the store actually did so with the sole purpose of saving my soul. I

solved that problem by pretending to talk to an imaginary devil on my shoulder who I claimed instructed me to sacrifice tender Christian flesh to my dark lord. The pimple-faced teen girl left pretty quickly after that, no doubt to plant a pipe bomb at an abortion clinic or something.

The shouts and jeers outside grew even louder suddenly. I glanced toward the door to see the protesters swarming someone. Pity this was Toronto and not the US or something where a shop owner could pull out a gun and threaten to shoot troublemakers. Of course, I doubted that really happened anywhere outside of the movies, but still, it would be fun.

The door opened, and I half expected to see another cross-bearing teenager. My new client from the day before, Sebastian, surprised me.

“They didn’t scare you off?” I asked.

He jerked his thumb over his shoulder as he closed the door behind him. “What the hell?”

“My sentiments exactly.”

“Have you phoned the police?”

“They’re entitled to their lame ass opinions, even if it means scaring away customers.”

“They can’t threaten you, though.”

“They haven’t—”

He gestured over his shoulder again. “Thou Shalt Not Suffer A Witch To Live.”

“That’s a threat?”

With a mysterious smile, Sebastian pulled out his cell phone. “It certainly sounds like it to *this* concerned citizen.”

I sat up straight and watched, a smile slowly spreading across my face as he dialled the phone.

“Hi there.” He grinned at me as he spoke into the receiver. “I’d like to file a complaint of harassment and threats...”



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Although the protesters weren't removed from the front of the store, they were required to change some of their signs. The police made them turn "Thou Shalt Not Suffer a Witch to Live" into "Thou Shalt Not Suffer A Witch To Own And Operate A Curio Shop In Kennsington Market in Peace."

Unfortunately for them, they had to write the additional words on the back. Now it just says, "Thou Shalt Not Suffer a Witch," and really, who can blame them for that? Witches can be whiny.





Chapter Six: Devil Worshipping

Sara Gosling

“Heck, no, we won’t go! Satanism and witchcraft—just say no!”

I was, like, pretending to shout along, but my voice got totally scratchy and I didn’t want to lose it completely. What if I was on my way home after dark and one of the Satanists or like gay black thugs tried to violate my pure, innocent body, and I couldn’t shout for help? That would be like *so* not good. I might get pregnant and have to give it up for adoption like in that movie *Juno* which was way cool because it really showed that babies have fingernails just like people do, so you shouldn’t have the devil worshipping doctors kill them. And then I got raped, I wouldn’t be pure anymore and I’d have to take off my purity ring that my daddy bought me and I’d be so mortified with embarrassment that I’d throw myself off a cliff or in front of a bus or just eat Baked Lays potato chips on the couch for the rest of my life until the rapture, and they tell you those chips aren’t bad for you ’cause they’re baked, but I think that if I ate sixty-two bags of them, I’d still get sick.

“Sara.”

I glanced over at my little brother. He was so annoying. Why do they act like that? He was nine whole months younger and he drove me nuts.

“If you’re not focusing on praying really loudly for the Lord to strike down this totally unholy sin den, then you should shut

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up and not bug me.” I turned away from Josh and waved my sign some more.

“Don’t you think we should go back to school? I have a Math test.”

I sighed and dropped my sign to turn to him for a moment. “This is like so much more important,” I said. “They tried to get *you* and *me* to do witchcraft! They probably put a spell or something on the flyers. The only way to purge the evil from our souls is to protest.”

“And it’s not ‘cause Zeke is here?”

“Start praying for your immortal soul,” I said. “Jesus doesn’t like what your wicked thoughts are implying.” I held my sign up extra high for the sake of both our souls, and so that Zeke could see I was participating like a true Christian warrior.

Zeke was in Grade Twelve. I saw him on the first day of school two years ago and I knew that Jesus wanted me to marry him so we could have sex. Well, I didn’t know that Jesus wanted me to marry him, but I *was* pretty sure it was His divine will that gave me the sex feelings, and since you can’t have sex until marriage or you’ll burn in hell forever, I figured that meant I was supposed to marry him.

“Heck, no, we won’t go! Satanism and witchcraft—just say no!”

I saw that totally ungodly slut, Kerri McLeod, slither up to Zeke to bat her probably fake eyelashes at him. They couldn’t be real. Even if she was wearing mascara—which is totally the devil’s gateway drug into full facial whoredom—there was no way her lashes were that long. Zeke smiled politely back at her, but I was pretty sure he saw right through to her badly dressed, demonic soul. He was strong, I knew—a true prayer warrior—but I still didn’t trust that ho, so I boldly marched up to see if Zeke could give me some tips on my sign carrying or something.

Police stood around the front of the witchcraft store, talking with some guy. Although I was really close to Zeke now and could totally butt Kerri out of the way, the guy with the police turned around and I like totally almost fell over. He was so hot. He was tall and blonde and I think that’s probably what Jesus looked like, but without the beard, and by the way, I think it’s a

total lie that he was like black or brown or something because Jim Caviezel isn't black and he played Jesus and everyone knows that Mel Gibson was divinely inspired to make that movie. So Jesus was probably white, just like the gorgeous guy talking to the police.

The guy shook hands with the police, and then glanced over crowd of us protesters. For like nine elevenths of a second that felt almost like eternity or something, his eyes were on mine and I felt way unworthy to even be in his presence. Like, his eyes were *so* pretty. Brown...or maybe blue...it was over quickly, and he was a few feet away, so I couldn't really tell what colour they were. Then he turned back to the store.

I was *so* sure that he was going to point at the shop and a bolt of divine lightning would strike it down or something. But instead, he walked right in!

Holy H-E-double-hockey-sticks, I thought. Jesus is a Satanist!



Briar

I dragged a pair of chairs to the side of the room where Sebastian and I could sit and talk uninterrupted. After ruining some of the protester's fun by changing their signs, they'd doubled their efforts and were shouting even louder. Liam had a couple of his little Wiccan friends show up anyway for some purchases, so he took care of running things while I did some client work.

"So I kinda gotta know some things about your skanky ex and her new boyfriend for this," I said, pen poised to write.

"Like?"

"Her name, to start with."

"Noelle Jean. She's from Quebec."

"Ah. And what brought her to Toronto?"

"Actually, I think she came here with some random tourist she met there."

Curio Killed the Cat

Slut, I thought, though I avoided saying that aloud. “She sounds...social.”

“She’s really nice and interesting,” Sebastian said. “You should meet her.”

“Let’s hope I don’t have to. So who is she dating?”

“I don’t know his name. Do you really need it?”

“At some point. I mean, if you want me to do bad things to him, I’m going to need information about him.”

“Ah. Right. So what do you need?”

“Still have any of her clothes you cut up?”

He thought on that, and I figured I already had my answer. “No.”

“Her hair? Finger nail clippings?”

He scrunched up his face, as if the guy who *shredded his girlfriend’s things* was horrified at something I suggested. “That would make my kinda stalkerish, don’t you think?”

I sighed. “Yeah. Welcome to hoodoo—we do all kinds of stalkerish stuff. We can’t do much without those kinds of things. I mean, we can, but it usually won’t be very effective.”

“So does this mean we can’t do the spell?”

“No, it means we need to get some biological items. I’ll make you out a list of stuff, starting with the most effective and leading to the least effective. You see what you can get and try not to get arrested in the process.”

I laid out plans with Sebastian, or at least tried to. I went a little above and beyond the usual, mostly ’cause he was willing to pay. Our first priority was some magic to open the mind of the skank—or ‘target’—and make her more susceptible to a break-up and reconciliation work. Although I tried to lay things out so they didn’t seem too daunting or creepy, I felt some of his enthusiasm wane.

“Have doubts?” I asked at last when it seemed he wouldn’t say anything about it.

“Not doubts, per se. Worries.”

“S’plainy.”

“How am I going to get her hair when she won’t even let me see her?”

Skyla Dawn Cameron

God, people certainly didn't have much forethought in the heat of a break-up. "Guess you should have thought of that."

He threw up his hands in frustration. "It *never*, honestly, occurred to me to collect this kind of stuff ahead of time. Does it occur to anyone? Do you really keep around things that remind you of your exes?"

My gaze shifted to the side and a familiar face flashed in my mind. A lump formed in my throat, and I swallowed it back. "Yeah. But then it's kinda my job."

"Right. So what am I supposed to do?"

"Okay, we'll skip the hair for now. We don't really need it for this initial spell. What we need is a photo. I don't suppose you still have one of—" He was already shaking his head before I'd even finished, but I continued anyway. "Even a wallet sized one?"

"Tore them all up."

"Is she on MySpace or something? We could snag something from online."

"She's on Facebook, but there aren't any pictures of her. She just has this skanky cartoon for her profile photo."

"Fine. So you take a new one."

He shifted a little, dark brown eyes narrowing. "That sounds dangerously like stalking. I thought you said I was supposed to avoid getting arrested."

"It would probably be bad publicity for the store, and we don't need any more protesters out there, true. But if you're careful—"

"Can't you just do it?"

"Wanna pay me overtime?"



And that's how I ended up in the back of Liam's black smart car that night with a camera pointed at the entrance to a restaurant on Front Street.



Chapter Seven: Noelle Is Another Word For Skank

Briar

Sebastian and I sat ducked down in the cramped space. We wouldn't have had to, except that Liam wouldn't let me take his car myself, and mine was...unavailable. I'd accidentally hit another car while on my cell phone months ago and it seemed best to *not* drive anywhere anymore after my insurance skyrocketed. Sebastian didn't have one 'cause Noelle apparently dropped him off places. The Wiccan wasn't pleased, but didn't do a whole lot of complaining now that I was the only one bringing in money.

"Ow!" I whispered as I felt an elbow in my side.

"Sorry," Sebastian whispered back. "It's...cramped."

"Just watch it when I'm trying to take the picture. What time does she leave work again?"

He shifted and tried to manoeuvre his wrist around where he could see it. "It's too dark to tell," he said when he tried to look at the watch.

"Eight fifty-seven p.m.," Liam said, his voice seeming far too loud.

"Shhh!" I said.

"Why are you whispering?" he replied. "The only ones in here are us."

"Cause I need to concentrate."

"For a photo?"

"Shut up."

“Why can’t you just ask her for one if this is a protective spell?”

Actually, pay or no pay, the only way I could get Liam to help was to tell him we were doing protective magic. I was surprised he believed me, but maybe I was just unaware of what a great liar I am.

Or maybe he didn’t want the truth.

“I don’t want the spell to influence her,” I said. “If she knows what we’re doing, she might over-think it.”

“I think she’s coming!” Sebastian whispered.

I snapped to attention and pointed the camera at the front door of the restaurant.

A short young woman with kind of frizzy dark hair stepped out of the restaurant dressed in the green blouse and black skirt all the female waitresses wore. I zoomed in and started snapping photos, but paused.

“That guy there with her,” I pointed to the older man linking arms with her, “is that him?” If so, we’d be set with a photo of him too. *Best way to kill two birds with one stone...without actually killing any birds.*

“That’s her boss. Quick, take more before she gets in the car!”

I lifted the camera and snapped a few more. “You sure she’s not doing her boss?”

“Pretty sure. That’s awfully skanky.”

“But you *did* say she was a slut.”

“Doing your boss, though? That takes slutty to a whole new level. He probably likes her, though. Everyone does.”

I sighed and tried to focus on my task. No use arguing with him—not since he was paying me and all. Who was I to criticize him for being an idiot?

Noelle’s boss walked her to her car, then returned to the restaurant. Okay, so maybe she wasn’t doing him after all, but it seemed pretty damn weird to me that he’d walk her to her car on a brightly lit, busy street.

After Noelle drove off in her car, Sebastian and I turned back around in our seats. I met Liam’s gaze in the rear view mirror.

Curio Killed the Cat

“This doesn’t sound like someone you want to protect.”

“Can you drop us back at the shop?” I said. Although I didn’t directly answer his question, that must have told him what he wanted to know. Liam shook his head, sighed disapprovingly, and did as I requested.

Sebastian left the car first. I followed, but not before catching Liam’s gaze in the mirror.

“I want to help the shop too, but...but don’t pull me into this kind of thing again.”

I bit back a comment about his misplaced sense of morality. It wouldn’t do any good—not for either of us.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I said instead.

“Late?”

“Probably.”

Sebastian waited for me outside of the shop and I pulled my key out of my pocket as I walked to the door.

“You bring all your clients back here after hours?” he asked with a crooked grin.

“Only ones who pay me overtime. There aren’t a whole lot of them, though.” The key slid easily in the lock, but stuck a little at first. I smacked the middle of the door a little with my ass and that seemed to get everything in place—the door opened easily after that. “So how is it you can afford me?” We stepped inside and I flipped on the lights. I’d never felt anything but safe in Kensington Market, but I still locked the door behind us. “Trust fund kid?”

“Nah, I was more like a latchkey kid. I work in computers and rent a crappy place. Lots of disposable income.”

I headed toward the laptop in the back office. The swivel chair sank a little when I sat....and then a little more...and a little more after that... *Stupid chair*. I pulled myself up to the desk, though by this point my ass was practically dragging on the floor and the edge of the desk therefore came up to my chest. I paused there for a moment, gazed at the laptop, then looked up Sebastian.

He covered his mouth to keep from laughing at me.

“Okay.” I snapped down the top of the laptop and carted it out to the main room. “We’ll work out here.”

“There’s a message blinking on the phone,” he called after me.

“Hit ‘Play.’”

The machine beeped in the other room and Sebastian joined me.

“Ms. Mare,” said a smooth male voice on the machine—one I didn’t recognize, but that wasn’t a surprise since he called for Lil. “I just wanted to apologize again for the other day. I hate that we had to meet under these circumstances, but I did obtain a pair of tickets to *Requiem*, and wondered if you’d be interested in attending. I purchased the best I could find, but if you’d prefer something better I could—”

“Yeah, you can stop that now,” I said to Sebastian, rather than return to the office and do it myself. “Lilith can get it tomorrow.”

“He seems really interested in your friend.”

“Yeah, well, she’s a succubus,” I said with a sigh as I slipped the camera’s memory card into the laptop. “She tends to have that effect on men.”

“Oh.” That “oh” hung in the air for a few beats longer until I met his gaze. “Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“They exist?”

“Um, if they didn’t, my ‘yeah’ would have been a little stupid, right?”

“Huh.” He pulled up the barstool Ally usually occupied and sat across from me. “Never really thought about that kind of thing before. Maybe Noelle’s a succubus. ‘Cause she’s slutty and all guys like her.”

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t suggest that around Lilith. She doesn’t like stereotypes and she’ll kill you.”

He paled a little. “Really?”

“Oh, no. She’d probably just give you a stern talking-to. It would be totally pathetic...okay, here’s your skank.”

We glanced over the pictures and selected one that showed her the best. The wireless printer near the cash register spit out the photo and I took a pair of scissors to crop it into a more manageable size.

Curio Killed the Cat

“So you don’t think Noelle’s a succubus?”

“Probably not.” I pulled some supplies from the shelves as we spoke and brought everything back to the counter. “They’re pretty rare. Your girlfriend—*ex*-girlfriend—is probably just a slut. Um, sorry—I guess I shouldn’t insult her.”

“It’s okay. I won’t fire you.”

You wouldn’t be getting a refund anyway.

“Do you mind me asking...what exactly it is that you like about this girl?”

He folded his arms on the counter and gazed down at the beat-up surface for a few moments, perhaps really considering my question. If he was smart enough to make a lot of money with which to hire me, he must have a good reason for liking the tramp.

“She was just so different,” he said thoughtfully. “She’s been to all these places and she’s done so much. Being with her is more interesting than being alone, I guess.”

“Which is probably what half of Toronto has said,” I muttered. Almost immediately after the words flew from my mouth, I kicked myself for it. *Stop alienating customers, dammit!* “That was bitchy of me. Sorry.”

He grinned. “But it was funny. So it’s okay.”

“Really? Wasn’t too over the top?”

“Nah. Came really naturally. I’m glad I got a funny voodoo girl.”

“Hoodoo.”

“Sorry. So is this going to get her back?”

“This is going to open her up to our next spells.”

“Which are?”

Jesus, where was Lilith when we needed a diagram or flowchart? “Break-up her and the new guy, then bring her back to you.”

“Oh, right. Aren’t we going to do bad things to the guy too?”

“Later.”

“Okay.”

He was so agreeable. I wondered if he had any other well-employed friends he could refer...if only everyone could be so easy to deal with.

The spell didn't take long. I try not to make them take too long with clients anyway—the longer it takes, the more they stress. Sebastian seemed fairly easy going, but who knew what his energy was going to do to fuck things up. I stuffed the photo—and other things—into a jar, which in turn I stuffed into the freezer in the office's mini-fridge. I returned with a bottle of cheap whiskey and a pair of Styrofoam coffee cups.

"Here's to a job well done," I said as I poured the drinks.

"You keep whiskey back there?"

"My boss does. Every few days I stumble across something half finished. Total alcoholic."

"So your shop is going to close down?"

I frowned. "I hope not. I don't have a lot of job opportunities."

"Can't you do a spell?"

"I've yet to come up with one to keep me from getting fired from most places."

"Ah. Well, if things don't work out with Noelle, I'll hire you again."

What an idiot. "Even though—in this hypothetical scenario—I utterly failed in the task you hired me for?"

He smiled faintly, dark eyes softening. "Sure. Everyone deserves a second chance, right?"

I pressed the cup to my lips and downed the mouthful of whiskey without answering.

"You don't think so?"

"I..." *Saints help me, I'm such an idiot.* I added the remaining drops of scotch to my cup. "I should probably be honest with you. I'm a complete and utter failure. Before you ask for your money back, really, I'm good at what I do. I reconciled my neighbour and her ex a few weeks ago, and not only had he left her, but he was in an entirely different country—with no plans to come back. I can win small sums of money, court cases...I can do curses, cleansings, bad-ass enemy tricks..."

"But?" he prompted with a nudged of his cup against mine.

Curio Killed the Cat

“But I can’t get my boyfriend back.”

“How long as he been gone?”

“Four months.”

“Put his stuff through a shredder at work?”

I chuckled. “We don’t have one.”

“What happened?”

I hated that question. Any time someone heard you and your guy split, they either ask it or they want to. And I never knew what to say. How the hell does anyone answer that question? Some vague, “it didn’t work out” was probably in order, but I could never leave it at that.

“Was he a skank?”

Laughter left my lips again, which was a welcome change from the tears a conversation like this would normal bring up. “No. I don’t even know what happened. One day we were together, one day we weren’t. I like to think I was just too awesome for him, but I don’t get it. Fuck, I probably seem like such a useless rootworker now. Can’t even Goofer him back. *Now*, I don’t blame you for wanting to fire me.”

“Nah. Actually, I think you’re the perfect person to be doing this for me.”

“And why’s that?” *I knew it: he’s an idiot.*

He held my gaze steadily when I looked up at him. “Because you know what *this* feels like. So you’re going to do your best to work all this out for me so that I live happily ever after.”

Maybe he wasn’t so stupid after all.

“And everyone *does* deserve another chance.”

Tell Devlin that.





Chapter Eight: At Least There Won't Be Midgets

Lilith

"He's stalking me."

Briar looked up at me. "Huh?"

I could never tell if she just played dumb some days, or just genuinely didn't know what went on with anyone but herself.

"The gentleman from the bank."

"Oh yeah. I almost forgot—he left a message last night."

"He left *three* this morning."

"If he's not hanging outside of your house yet, it's not stalking. He's just...eager."

I didn't like throwing accusations around, but... "This is your fault."

"Nuh-uh. You're the sexy succubus. You attract people."

"You did a mojo bag."

"But that's nothing compared to the hotness that is you."

I sighed. "I do fairly well already keeping them at bay. This is different."

"Nope. Sebastian is totally in love with you too. He told me so."

"Who, pray tell, is Sebastian?"

"My new client. You haven't met him."

"Then how do you know he finds me attractive?"

"Oh, right. I suck at lying."

Curio Killed the Cat

“You haven’t told me about a new client. Is this private or—”

“He came into the shop, therefore the money is going towards our, ‘Save *Curio Killed the Cat* Fund.’ Plus my modest commission. We should do a fundraiser.”

“You want to organize one?” I found that to be a bit of a challenge to believe.

“Well, no. I thought that you should. I’d probably just watch.”

Of course. I wasn’t exactly averse to the idea of fundraising, but we weren’t a non-profit organization, so I wasn’t sure how we could encourage people to give us their money for nothing in return.

“Stop it,” Briar said.

“Hmm?”

“Stop it.”

“What?”

“Thinking.”

“I cannot very well stop *that*, now can I?”

“You can stop thinking whatever it is your thinking of. You’ve got that look. Plotting.”

“I don’t ‘plot.’”

“Well, you plan. Next thing that happens is you ask me to do something. Probably for free.”

It dawned on me suddenly. It was so simple, I couldn’t believe I hadn’t come up with it sooner. I turned to Briar, eyes wide with excitement.

“Oh, saints,” she muttered and dropped her head onto the counter.

“A psychic carnival.”

“You want to hire a midget? You know how they freak Liam out—”

“No. A weekend where we give people entrance for a nominal fee...say, twenty dollars per person. And they we have booths set up. Tarot readings, easy spells—”

“Hey, I don’t want to—”

“Liam can do the spells then. You can do the readings.”

“This keeps getting worse and worse...”

Skyla Dawn Cameron

“We can run it over a weekend.”

“Which one? We only have...um...two more before we’re closing the shop down.”

She had a point, but I didn’t want to let that distract me. “We’ll see how quickly we can put it together. We can get people to help out for us. Alastair would volunteer, as would some of Liam’s circle.”

“What would you be doing while you’re making the rest of us work? Kissing booth?”

I blushed a little. “I’d be overseeing it, of course.”

“I think you should have a kissing booth. Bet your mom would do it.”

“Let’s not ask her to participate. We *will* need more for people to do, though...”

“And space. We don’t have room. And you need to pay for supplies. Those aren’t cheap.”

For once, Briar was being the logical one and it was all incredibly disconcerting.

“Yes, it will take a bit of an investment. One we probably don’t have.” I sighed and sank down onto the stool across from the counter. “You’re right. It was a silly idea.”

“Oh, don’t be like that.” Briar left her chair and walked around to sling an arm over my slumped shoulders. “It’s a good idea. We just need to exploit people so that we get everything for free. Leave that up to me.”



Liam

Lilith had asked me to take over some of the accounting for the shop that day. I wasn’t sure why, but then she seemed under a lot of stress. Truthfully, I felt a lot of worry myself, but I wouldn’t let it consume too much of my time. The universe would unfold as it should.

Curio Killed the Cat

A shadowy figure stepped into the doorway of the back office. I didn't look up from the computer where I had been working.

"You're late," I said to Briar.

"No I'm not. I was doing business errands."

"Sure."

She walked over, nudged some paperwork onto the floor, and plopped her rear onto the edge of the desk beside me. I sighed. Whatever she wanted, I didn't want to hear it, but before I could reprimand her, Lilith joined us. She sat in another chair near the desk.

Both women looked at me, obviously up to something that they were at last ready to let me in on.

"Oh dear," I mumbled.

"We're having a psychic carnival," Lilith said.

"A what?"

"Psychic carnival," Briar repeated. "Everything's ready for Saturday afternoon, except you need to do some things."

"How are we going to have a carnival in here?"

"We aren't," Lilith said. "We're having it at a small park."

"That you're renting?"

"That's where you're helping," Briar said. "You're getting it because your circle is an actual non-profit charity thing. So you're 'renting' it for us, and we're having donation bins for a soup kitchen, which you're also going to have to work at for a few weeks."

How delightful. "You're doing this on the weekend? But—"

"I got the vegan restaurant next door to cater for free," Briar said.

"And why would they do that?"

"Their logo is going on all our material...which at this point is just some flyers, but we'll have signs at the carnival too."

"And how much is the advertising costing?"

"I'm doing that too," Briar said.

Better and better.

"The print shop down the street is doing it for free because we're including their logo on it."

"That doesn't seem like a good enough reason to."

“Well, I’m doing some freebie spell work on the side,” she said.

Lilith briefly looked confused. “You didn’t tell me that. What is it?”

“Just a little reconciliation spell to get the owner’s wife to come home.”

We knew Fred and Stacey quite well—we used to have flyers for the shop printed there all time, when we could afford to. *Strange...* “I hadn’t heard they were having problems.”

“Well, they weren’t, until I hotfooted her out of town,” Briar said with a quick grin. “It didn’t take much, so she was probably going to leave anyway. But I’ll get her home for him and it’ll be all good.”

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t just hear that,” I mumbled.

“We figured Alastair would volunteer to help,” Lilith continued. “And perhaps the students from the Wiccan Youth Group because they need volunteer hours to graduate. You and Briar will be overseeing spells and that. I’ll oversee the whole thing and hope that we don’t have any problems.”

“And Sebastian—my new client—is going to help out, and his company is donating five hundred dollars if we hand out their flyers to people. Oh, and Lil’s mom is running a kissing booth.”

Lilith paled and swung around to face Briar. “What?! I told you—”

“She called to talk to you this morning,” Briar said. “She wanted to set you up with some guy. I told her what we were doing and she offered. Buy a ticket, get a kiss from a hot succubus MILF. I think people will go for it.”

Lilith sputtered something incoherently.

“You really think we can pull this off?” I asked.

Briar shrugged. “Probably. It was Lilith’s idea originally, and she’s the smarty-pants around here. What could possible go wrong?”



Letters of Love by Alastair Nightshade

*Liam. My love. My life. My death.
My afterlife. My heaven. Not my hell,
though. That's Briar.*

Darling Liam.

*I've stood in the dark shadows the shop,
dreaming that you would break the monotony
of ceremonial ritual books and English Lit
homework with just a brief smile. But, alas,
I feared I would be doomed to yet another
day of darkness.*

And then it happened.

You spoke.

*You stopped next to the bookshelf, just feet
away from me. It was like sunlight suddenly
spread upon me, warming me from the cold
dark winter of utter loneliness and
solitude—the kind of winter with icy slush
on the street that gets stuck in your combat
boots and makes your socks wet and cold.
But you, my love, warm my socks.*

“You heard about the carnival on the weekend?” you said.

I nodded. The harpy had mentioned it, but I tried to ignore her.

“Can you help run the cash register that day?”

I nodded again.

“Good. Lilith will tell you more later.”

And then you left once more, but your warmth remained. This is a sign from the goddess—we’ll be working together. It’s meant to be!

Forever yours,

Alastair Nightshade





Chapter Nine: Carnies

Liam

I had been cautiously optimistic about the prospect of a psychic carnival, and was incredibly surprised to see it falling together in such a relatively short amount of time. The afternoon unfolded smoothly, which shocked me considering Briar had a hand in nearly everything. I expected something to be unfinished, but instead the Goddess took pity on us, and it all came together well.

Half a dozen tents dotted the grounds we'd been permitted to rent, with a rope circle around it. Bright balloons—purchased in bulk from the dollar store and blown up by my Wiccan Youth circle—were tied along the rope fence. Volunteers walked the perimeter to ensure no one slipped in without paying, and the people running the booths checked for stamps on the hands of visitors to ensure they had paid.

Maddie had a tent set up where she was teaching meditation to the people who came by. I wasn't sure what qualified her, but I went along with it. The Goth kid who hung around the store worked the cash register, taking twenty dollars from each person who came. I did what I could to avoid doing readings. The beginners spellcasting class, as well, was one I didn't want to attempt to run.

"Looks pretty good, doesn't it?" Briar said with a grin as she stopped beside me to survey everything. At least two dozen people had paid so far and were visiting the tents.

“I admit, it’s a good turn out so far.” I may not have appreciated Briar’s methods, but I admired her effort. “Where are the protesters?”

“They received an anonymous tip that a woman was aborting her octuplets that she got pregnant with during a pagan orgy.”

“You didn’t really send them to a clinic—”

“Oh, god no. I stuck a sign on a building that said, ‘Abortion on Demand: The Tenth One’s Free.’”

“What building?”



Wilhelmina Raven aka Billie Humphrey

“Murderer!”

Something smacked the front window.

Wilhelmina glanced up sharply, dark eyes focused on the street beyond the glass. “Blessed Be” was written in big white letters directly on the pane, and she couldn’t make out what was happening out there.

“I don’t know what crystal to pick,” the teen boy in front of her said.

She put on a fake smile. “Just find the one that speaks to you the most.”

The idiot felt just about every damn crystal in the shop and he clearly had *no* idea what he was doing. At last he settled on one and pulled it from the pile. Billie was determined to spray everything down with Lysol later—Goddess knew what germs the boy carried.

“Remember, it will absorb negative energy, so you’ll have to cleanse it at least once a month, preferably on the new moon.”

“How do I cleanse it?”

“Rainwater blessed by a priestess is best.”

“But...I don’t know where to get that.”

Curio Killed the Cat

She smiled coolly. “We have some right here.” *For \$4.99 per half ounce bottle.*

“Murderers!” Something struck the window again.

After showing the customer to the blessed water and pointing out the fabulous bulk order deal, she stomped to the front of the store and yanked open the door.

An egg narrowly missed her head, splattering on the open door beside her. Two dozen people stood outside, waving signs that declared Billie and her coworkers to be murderers.

“What in the Goddess’s name is going on here?” she demanded.

She received no answer through the din of shouts. Stepping forward, and avoiding another flying egg, Billie turned and looked up at the shop.

A huge sign hung from the top, over *The Magical Pentacle* sign.

Billie’s eyes widened for a moment in horror, then narrowed again as the identity of the prankster became clear to her.

“Oh, goddess damn her!”



Liam

Briar couldn’t stop grinning as she told me.

I winced. *I guess I should expect another visit from Wilhelmina soon.*

“And then I started a rumour that they performed abortions there so that they’d have babies to sacrifice to their dark horned god.”

“You realize that by saying these things, you’re hurting the Wiccan community as a whole? Including me?”

She looked genuinely confused. “So?”

“Briar—”

“Oh, whine whine, love and light, blah blah. You should come to the dark side already.”

“Yes,” said the Asian guy who had been hanging around her a lot. He came up beside us with a platter of chocolate chip cookies. “We have cookies. Join us.”

Briar took one and bit into it. “Vegan friendly. Hell, they’re even made with carob.”

I grudgingly took a cookie. “So you really think all this,” I swept my free hand in the direction of some of the tents, “will make a difference? That we’ll make enough money today to pay for the bills?”

“Probably not,” Briar admitted. “But we have a plan, don’t we, Sebastian?”

“Yes,” the guy said. “This will hopefully increase your customer base. Generate some interest. And if you can take a chunk of money to your landlord, that might buy you more time. And you’d be showing a profit, which would increase the likelihood of getting a loan from that guy at the bank.”

“You mean the guy stalking Lilith?” I said.

“He isn’t stalking her,” Briar said. “You two shouldn’t be so dramatic.”

“He’s been two feet away from her for the past hour.” I nodded to where Lilith stood with a clipboard outside of the tarot booth, where admittedly I was supposed to be doing readings. Not far away from her, waiting in the line with others waiting for their cards read, stood a man in a suit whom we all surmised was from the bank. I’d seen him pay an extra twenty dollars to attend, and he’d attempted to approach Lil ever since he arrived. She, of course, ignored him, but that could be due to other distractions...

Which included her mother running an actual kissing booth.

Maura Mare could have been the sort of woman you’d almost mistake for Lilith’s older sister. Her eyes crinkled when she smiled, and a few silvery strands sparkled among the light brown hair at her temples, but with a seductive smile and an air of youth around her, most would think her to be under forty. She wore her age—which could have been approaching a century for all I knew—quite well.

She wore a simple lacy tank top and pair of jeans, soft hair grazing her shoulders. The makeshift booth had been hastily

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prepared just after she arrived when half a dozen young men offered. I blushed to recall that even I'd jumped in, but there really was no denying who Maura was. One look in your direction, and you felt yourself drawn to her. Lilith could do the same thing, I supposed, if she ever felt inclined. I was rather glad she didn't, as I wasn't sure I could deal with that day after day.

Lilith chewed at her bottom lip and watched the line up of boys and men, all ready with a ten dollar bill in hand for a brief kiss. A sign proclaimed Maura a "real" succubus, and surprisingly, no one had once questioned it. Or perhaps not surprisingly. Demons walking around was hardly common knowledge, but for the carnival goers, it seemed to be just part of the fun of the day.

Lil caught my eye and promptly stomped over. I knew what was coming, and walked to meet her, face resigned.

"You're supposed to be doing tarot readings," she said immediately.

"On my way now," I replied.

"Do me one more favour, and I'll replace you at the booth with Briar sooner rather than later."

I halted my step to hear the conditions of that promise.

"Tell *him* that it will never work out and he should leave me alone."

"Maybe—"

"I don't care if he's a nice guy," she cut in. "I'm not interested."

With a sigh, I nodded, and prepared to let him down as easily as I could. I didn't like the idea of manipulating the cards, but if it meant I had to do fewer readings...I'd agree to just about anything.



Lilith

“You should have kept the money as cash longer,” Briar said as we walked back to the shop after depositing the money we had raised into the bank. “I like the cash part.”

“You sound like Anya,” I mumbled.

“Who?”

Of course, Briar never watched TV. I wasn’t sure if she even had cable. Urban fantasy fiction was my guilty pleasure that I rarely mentioned, but perhaps the positive outcome of the day had my tongue slightly looser. “A T.V. show character,” I said instead.

“You need to get out more.”

“Maybe we all do,” Liam said, a slight smile tugging on the corner of his lips.

“Can’t,” Briar said. “I’m meeting Sebastian. We have to gather stuff for his spells that I’m doing on Thursday.”

Liam glanced my way as we stepped up to the shop door. “Shall we go out and celebrate anyway?”

My mother would have been *thrilled* at the prospect of me doing so, I’m sure, which made me initially hesitate. At last, however, I smiled and nodded. “Why not?”

I slid the key into the lock to open the door, only to realize it was already unlocked. My fingers paused on the door handle for a moment, then I turned it and pulled the door open. The bell jingled.

The sight of Madam Curio in the shop startled me for a moment. We hadn’t expected her in, and I’d closed the place down for the evening.

I strode inside with a smile on my face for once, Briar and Liam at my heels. We still had troubles, true, but for the first time in two weeks, I felt a glimmer of hope.

Madam Curio frowned for a moment when we reached her at the counter, her brows pulled into a thoughtful crease. “Were you supposed to be in earlier?”

“We were busy today,” I said. “We had a psychic carnival, remember? To raise money for the shop?”

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“Oh!” She smiled, though I sensed she didn’t have the vaguest idea of what I spoke. “Of course. How did it go?”

“Awesome!” Briar said as she pulled herself onto the stool in front of the counter. “We made a killing!”

“I think we raised a lot of awareness,” I said.

“But the money is so much better than that!” Briar said, eyes bright. She snatched the bank deposit receipt from my grasp. “Look at all those digits! We raised almost three thousand dollars!”

“It’s not enough to cover all the expenses,” Liam said. “But it’s enough to—”

“Pay me back.”

We all looked to our left in the direction of the familiar sharp voice.

“Alicia?” Briar blurted out. “Who let the Wicked Witch in?”

“Oh, she called and asked me to meet her at the shop,” Madam Curio said with a smile. “To get her loan.”

“Loan?” I repeated. I reached out to grasp the edge of the counter as the heavy weight of dread descended upon me.

“Yeah,” Alicia said. “She took a three thousand dollar loan from me six months ago to pay for store supplies.”

“But...” I glanced to the receipt in Briar’s hand. “But we need this. To save the store. We just spent all day working—”

Alicia’s gaze fixed on me. I expected to see venom in the depths of her eyes with what she was doing to us now, but it wasn’t there. No, she wasn’t trying to be mean, she just...she didn’t care.

“It’s important to pay off loans,” she said.

“Well, too fucking bad,” Briar said. “You can wait ’til after the landlord gets his. We’re not sending you any money, so—”

Alicia pulled a piece of paper from her pocket and waved it at us. “I already have my cheque. At least now I know it won’t bounce, so...thanks for that.”





Chapter Ten: Stalkerish

Briar

"I'm glad you warned me to wear something crappy. I'm going to have to burn these clothes when we're done."

I looked at Sebastian across the trash heap between us and grinned. "You should never doubt your hoodoo spellcaster."

"We should put that on a T-shirt."

"Would you wear it?"

"Absolutely."

We sat in a dumpster behind Noelle's building. Yes, it's as glamorous as it sounds.

I grasped a dark green plastic bag in my hands and yanked a hole in the side. Reaching inside with one gloved hand, I felt around until found some paper. I yanked it out and glanced at the name. Nope, wrong place.

With one heave, I threw the bag over my shoulder, and then I went to the next.

"What if stuff is under the guy's name?" Sebastian asked.

I figured he was looking for a reason to get out of the dumpster, but no way would I be doing that kind of job by myself. "We hope that's not the case."

The evening had been rather tense every since that bitch Alicia took our money. I'm not sure if anyone had really believed that three thousand dollars would make much of a difference, but...we hoped. And now it was all gone. I wanted to throttle Madam Curio. I think Liam was ready to throw his "an it harm

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none” rule out the window too and just go totally nuts on everyone. But it was Lilith who calmly tried to reason with Madam. Can we cancel the cheque? Can she just speak to Alicia about replacing it with a post dated one? Can we re-borrow three thousand dollars?

Oh, it'll all work out. Hearing those words said with Madam's usual vague, confused smile just drove me over the edge. I left the office, went home to change, and then sat at the coffee shop across from Sebastian's building for three hours until he arrived to meet me for our nightly stalking of Noelle.

We were fucked. Completely and utterly. We had...what...a week and a half left? Something like that. I was too angry and upset to count the days anymore. The economy was shit and unemployment was on the rise—where the hell would I get a new job? I sucked at everything but hoodoo, and even that was looking a little weak.

I'd have to give up my apartment. No doubt about it. So I'd probably end up having to move in with one of the other two unemployed people I knew, and maybe combined we'd afford somewhere to live. Of course, those two people were Liam and Lilith. Liam and I would probably kill one another within a weekend. Well, I'd likely win 'cause I'd play dirty.

So then there was...Lilith. Lilith who would probably unleash her demonic powers and kill me the first time I left a towel on the bathroom floor.

“Briar?”

I looked up as I realized Sebastian stared at me.

“Huh?”

“Did you find anything?”

“Oh. Right.” *Better start focusing on the job I currently do have.* I rifled through the trash in front of me. “Nothing here.” The other bag slumped onto the pile behind me when I threw it over my shoulder.

“I'm a little worried,” he said as he went through papers in the bag in front of him.

“Why? 'Cause I'm a failure and will never get you back together with your girlfriend?”

“No...’cause I can’t smell anything anymore.” He scrunched up his nose and breathed in deeply. “That probably means I now smell like what I’m sitting in, right?”

“Uh...probably.”

“And all ’cause you had the brilliant idea to put us in a dumpster. Why are we doing this again?”

“Because you didn’t have the foresight to be creepy and keep your girlfriend’s hair.”

“So you thought we should be creepy and steal her garbage?”

“It’s not stealing. It’s now public property.”

“Says who?”

“A discussion on a hoodoo message board. Keep looking. Stop arguing.”

“Yes boss.”

I neglected to point out that since he was doing the paying, *he* was technically the boss.

“So I guess all this isn’t that bad.”

“What? Sitting in garbage and...going through garbage?”

“Well, at least we’re having fun.”

Saints, this guy is weird.

“I’m sorry you had a bad day after all the carnival stuff went so well.”

I sighed and ceased the busy work of sorting trash for a moment. “Thanks. I’m sorry the money your company donated went to that conniving bitch.”

“Thanks. You know, if you ever need help doing this kind of thing—digging through garbage, or stalking, that is—to cast spells on your ex-boyfriend, I’ll help out.”

“Will you be charging me as much as I’m charging you?”

Sebastian grinned. “Half as much.”

“You’re too kind.”

Several minutes passed with just the crinkling of plastic bags and occasional hacking as we ran into something rotting and gross.

“Oh! I recognize this!”

“What?” I dropped the stack of junk mail in my hands and leaned forward. I caught a whiff of something awful over to the

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left, suggesting that we couldn't smell *that* bad yet ourselves if olfactory fatigue hadn't totally set in.

"This." He held up a make-up case. Leopard print. Broken zipper and a little worn. Smelled awful, like bad perfume, which was really saying something about how awful it was considering we sat in a fucking dumpster.

"It's hers?"

"Definitely. She's had it for years. See?" He turned it over and pointed out a little tear in the side. "This is hers."

I grabbed the large Ziploc bag from the set we had sitting in a pile beside us and Sebastian dropped the make-up bag into it. I tossed the package over the edge of the dumpster onto the pavement.

"Remember," I said as he rifled through the bag. "You may find things you don't like in there. She's seeing someone else...so she's probably *sleeping with* someone else. So—"

"Oh god..." He dropped the bag. Resting his back on the side of the dumpster, his eyes rolled back and he frowned.

"What?"

He didn't answer me.

"Um, hello? Bueller? Anyone there?"

"In the bag..."

He found something like condoms or something. I tried to warn him, but of course he wasn't prepared. "Don't fall apart. It's okay—"

"You don't understand." His attention returned to the garbage bag, where he pulled out a few broken glasses and an empty jam jar. "They're not recycling. I can't believe this. I used to tell her how important it was to not overwhelm our landfills and—"

I grabbed the damn bag and started going through it myself. "You're so lame."

We collected some of her cigarette butts and some bits of hair from the bottom of another bag. Not my favourite way to get that kind of stuff, but it had to be done.

We also found a few shorter, strawberry blond hairs. I bagged those as well—would likely be the new boyfriend's. We didn't have a name yet, which kinda bugged me, but Sebastian wanted the focus on Noelle. Any mention of getting photos or

something of the new guy left my client looking like a kicked puppy.

“We don’t need anything else?” Sebastian asked as I stood on shaky trash bags and hopped over the side back onto the pavement.

“This should be good,” I said. I was still pretty pissed off about Alicia and ready to pour all my anger into the most badass breakup spell I could conjure up.



Lilith

“You really don’t have to stay the night,” I said, even as I tucked the bed sheet around the cushions on the couch for my mother to sleep on. No sooner had I stood and reached for the folded quilt when she flopped down on the neatly made make-shift bed and stretched out. The sheet pulled at the corners a bit and one of the throw pillows fell to the floor. *A mess already.*

Remote control in hand, she immediately began surfing the television channels.

I knelt to pick the pillow up, but Bill rushed over and promptly took a seat on the middle of it, gazing up at me lovingly. A low purr came steadily from his throat.

“As if I actually put that there for you,” I mumbled as I stood straight again.

“Hmm?” my mother glanced at me briefly.

“Nothing. Need anything?”

“Nothing at all, dear. Why don’t you call your boyfriend?”

I bit back a response. She’d seen Scott McLean, from the bank, gazing at me for most of the afternoon at the carnival, and now had some sort of delusion that we were either involved or had recently broken up. I’d grown tired of arguing, and instead headed for the bathroom to shower.

My entire body ached, as did my mind. We’d worked so hard all day...and I was out of ideas. When I told my mother what had

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happened, she first suggested that we head to a bar and pick up some men. After I nixed that idea, she mentioned how she'd spoken quite a bit with the man who owned the vegan café, who did the carnival catering, and how we could probably “score some weed” from them.

I also declined that offer.

I stood in the hot water for at least fifteen minutes. I would have stayed longer, but didn't want the hot water to run out completely in case my mother wanted take a bath later. Not feeling the least bit refreshed, I stepped into the steamy bathroom and shut off the water.

My mother's voice, muted through the walls, sounded from the living room.

With a frown, I swiftly dried off and wrapped myself in a thick, terrycloth robe. *Please don't let her have actually invited any men here...*

I padded out of the bathroom and toward the living room. Bill immediately ran towards me so that he could run circles around my legs and nearly trip me as I walked.

My mother, still on the couch, had the phone to her ear, and she laughed into the receiver. I sighed with relief; at least she didn't have anyone there.

“Oh!” Mom's dark brown eyes, burning with that spark I always saw when she saw or spoke to any human with a “y” chromosome, glanced up at me. A slow smile spread across her lips. “She's right here.” With a long, deliberately slow gesture, she extended her arm and held the phone in my direction. “It's for you.”

Please let it be Liam. I accepted the phone. “Hello?”

“Ms. Mare—”

I recognized that voice all too well. And I snapped. “Mr. Mclean, unless you're calling to give us a bank loan for the shop, I don't want to hear from you.”

“But—”

“I have told you, repeatedly, that I'm not interested in your advances, and this is bordering on harassment.”

“But I only meant to—”

“I am not interested in speaking with you unless it is in a totally professional manner and I’m seriously considering phoning the police at this point.”

“But I—”

“What?”

There was a pause of silence on the other line. It suddenly registered with my brain exactly what my mouth had been saying, and I felt my face blush at the thought. I never lost my cool like that. Never. What was wrong with me?

Just as I opened my mouth to apologize, he continued.

“I just wanted to let you know how lovely the carnival was today,” he said.

I am such an idiot. “Thank you,” I said softly.

“And that you looked absolutely stunning—are you free next—”

I hung up immediately, then spun to face my mother.

“You’ll never get a boyfriend with *that* attitude,” she said, not taking her eyes from the television.

“How did he get my home phone number?”

“I gave it to him. Today.”

“You...what? You gave my number to a complete stranger? A *stalker*?”

“He seemed...nice.”

I couldn’t bear to even continue the conversation. Instead, I stormed to my bedroom and closed the door behind me. Just in case she got the idea to try to speak to me again, I turned the lock in the knob to keep her out.

The mattress sank beneath me as I sat down and switched on the bedside light. What an awful day. We had worked so hard...and all for nothing. The store would close. Perhaps I could get another job somewhere...a library, or a bookstore. That might be nice. I could work at cataloguing things. Somewhere...away from the public. Such a shame that there probably wasn’t a library night shift.

Bill leapt onto the bed beside me and walked across my lap, purring. I absently reached out to stroke his back.

“And what am I going to do about this mess, Bill?” I asked. Generally I wasn’t the sort of person who spoke aloud to my cat,

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but perhaps I ought to add, “crazy cat lady” to my list of things making a bad day worse. “Mr. Mclean from the bank won’t leave me alone. The store is going to close. My mother is driving me mad. And...” *And I have to admit—occasionally, a boyfriend would be nice.* “And I often wish I wasn’t alone.”

Bill promptly left my lap, walked across the bed, and went towards the window. He gave me a look that suggested he expected me to open it for him.

With a sigh, I reached over and complied, and watched him wander along the ledge and off into the night.

What’s it say about me when even my cat won’t stick around?





Chapter Eleven: Inside Man

Wilhelmina Raven aka Billie Humphrey

Billie tapped her long, purple-painted fake nails on the counter.

“You shouldn’t let it get to you,” Stone said.

She glared at him. Who asked his opinion anyway? “Shut up.”

“We didn’t really lose any business.”

“That’s not the point.” Her fingers coiled into a fist. “She can’t do this kind of thing and get away with it.”

“I don’t see—”

Her glare silenced him. Of course Stone didn’t get it. He didn’t get anything. She’d never met anyone who seemed as out of the loop and apathetic as he did. She couldn’t wait until Quentin fired and replaced him. Stupid kid with a stupid name. A far better candidate was in line—almost—to work at the store. She’d fire Stone personally when the opportunity arose.

“Let me tell you a little story,” she said.

Stone shrugged. “Sure.”

“Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess with lovely red hair and a constant smile. She went to high school in a quiet little community north of the city. She was very good and volunteered to help disabled children and everyone loved her. Senior year, all the princess wanted was to be class president. She’d been campaigning all summer. She had posters and

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cupcakes and everyone ready to vote for her. It was the best campaign the school had ever seen.

“And then an evil, wicked fairy in tenth grade told the whole school she was a witch. This was a predominantly Christian town. And what do you think happened? The princess lost. She never got to be class president. She lost to some other kid who immigrated from Pakistan and barely spoke English!”

“You hate Briar Malik because she outted you in high school?”

“It’s just a story.”

“What was that...like...ten years ago?”

Twelve, but who’s counting.

“The *point*,” Billie said, “is that she is determined to ruin me.”

“She can’t have any real power, right? I mean, even if she did, it’s all going to come back to her threefold.”

Not once, in her entire career as a rather successful witch, had Billie *ever* believed that anything at all came to anyone threefold. She’d go through the emotions and say the prayers with her coven—as any good high priestess would—but she didn’t believe that part. “I’m doubtful about that.”

“Karma will get her. Don’t worry about it.”

Stupid kid. “I’ll get her.”

“And her little dog too?”

“No. And her whole damn shop.”

“And how are you going to do that?”

“Easy.” She took a sip of her herbal tea. “I have an ‘inside man’ so to speak.”



Briar

“Are dark spells *supposed* to be fun, or am I just twisted?” Sebastian asked.

“Um...” I pretended to think it over, but couldn’t keep back a smile. Some days I really sucked at lying. “No, the dark stuff is indeed awesome.” Lemons, Goofer dust, Break-Up condition oil, and a divorce candle, among other things. Good times. Allows a person to get really creative, and Sebastian seemed to dig it as well. I couldn’t wait to get to doing something bad to Noelle’s new boyfriend—used motor oil on a doll baby is most bad ass.

“So yeah, for once, you’re not twisted. Either that or we both are.” I turned the key and locked up the shop.

“I think that might be it, actually.” Sebastian leaned against the shop window and grinned at me. “Definitely. We’re both twisted. Makes for good team work.”

“True. Very few people would sit in a dumpster with me.”

And that’s the truth.

“Absolutely any time.”

I yawned. “Saints, I’m tired. We should hit a bar.”

“Even though you’re tired?”

“Yes.”

“And even though we smell?”

I breathed in deeply. Couldn’t smell anything anymore, which was definitely a bad sign—I was used to our horrible odour. “Oh. Right. Yeah, still. A karaoke bar. Maybe we’ll scare them off and get free beer.”

Sebastian frowned. “I really think I should shower. I mean, I would, but—”

“It’s okay.” I felt a twinge of colour rush to my cheeks and started backtracking. I shouldn’t be going to a bar with him anyway—he wasn’t a friend, he was a client. *Dub, Briar*. “I really should sleep anyway.”

“Maybe we could—”

“Gimme a call later this week,” I said, continuing backwards and hoping that it was actually the direction of my apartment. “We’ll discuss more work stuff. G’night!” I took off as quickly as I could and didn’t look back.

Well, that was embarrassing, was my first thought, but then I felt stupid for feeling awkward in the first place. I *really* needed some sleep.



Scott Mclean

A woman with light brown hair passed in front of one of the windows.

Scott squinted, as if that would help him see better. He wasn't sure what apartment belonged to Lilith Mare. He had the number, sure, but without being in the building, he couldn't tell for sure which was hers.

It might have been stupid to be out there, but he missed seeing her. Just one glance was worth being arrested. The other woman he'd been speaking to—Lilith's older sister, Maura—had encouraged him. Said that Lilith needed a boyfriend. That she should get out more. And he was more than willing to oblige, if...

...if she stopped hanging up on him.

Scott paced back and forth. He should maybe try calling again. Sure, it was...he glanced at his watch. Two-thirty in the morning. Jesus, he'd been out there for hours. Scott reached for his cell phone...oh, but he didn't want to wake her up. She might be awake, sure, if that girl he kept seeing in the window was her, but if it wasn't...he wouldn't be winning her favour by waking her up in the middle of the night.

If only I knew what apartment was hers. He glanced down at the bouquet in hand. Twelve long stem roses. He had been hoping to drop them off but she wouldn't take his call. It was the second bouquet he'd purchased in the past week—the other one went to waste when he couldn't convince her to go out with him.

But perhaps he still could give this one to her...

Scott jogged across the street to peer inside the apartment building's front door. A security lock and a buzzer. Damn. He stepped back to think about it for a moment. Maybe—

A hand violently grabbed him by the collar of his jacket. Before he could turn, the figure behind him shoved him into the alley next to the building.

Scott stumbled a few steps, then turned to see a tall, broad figure approach. The other man's steps were slow, deliberate, and menacing.

"H-here—" Scott fumbled for his wallet, and then tossed it in front of him. "Take all my m-money—it's yours."

The man approaching him stepped directly over the wallet.

"Please, don't hurt—"

The man snatched Scott up by his collar and thrust him against the brick wall. Cold hazel eyes glared at him, and the yellow streetlights gave them an eerie amber glow.

"You will walk across the street, get in your car, and *never* come here again," the assailant said, his voice calm and detached. "You will forget her phone number, her address—even her name."

Scott paled, but he tried to regain his composure. "I-I don't know what you mean—"

He yelped as he was pushed against the brick once more.

"This is the last time you'll hear it. *Lilith Mare*. Stay the hell away from her. You're *not* wanted here. Understand?"

Weakly, Scott nodded.

The stranger let him go. Scott ran from the scene, past the flowers he'd dropped when being attacked, and even forgot his wallet.



The stranger watched the other man drive away, tires squealing down the empty street. With a sigh, he lifted the bouquet, dusted them off, and tossed Scott's card in a nearby garbage can. He wouldn't leave them at her apartment—that might scare her if she thought some stalker knew where she lived. Instead, he walked to Kensington Market and left a single rose in the door handle of various shops—including one at *Curio Killed the Cat*. Perhaps that would brighten her day without frightening her.

And if an unwanted visitor tried to contact her again...perhaps a stronger warning would be in order.



Chapter Twelve: Joining the Dark Side

Sara Gosling

I've had this diary for like ever, because my mom gave it to me on my twelfth birthday but then told me not to use it to keep secrets because Jesus doesn't like secrets and they make him cry, and my brother would probably read it anyway, so I always keep it in my dresser drawer. And then I was pretty sure I *saw* Jesus at that evil Satanist store, so I thought that if he was a Satanist, he probably wouldn't mind me keeping a diary with secrets, because secrets are totally not as bad as being a Satanist...unless your secret *is* that you're a Satanist, but if Jesus is one, it can't be *that* evil...

Oh my I-can't-say-the-Lord's-name-in-vain, I couldn't believe how totally confusing it was. Like, it was more confusing than trying to figure out how dinosaurs fit into creationism because I believed that the Bible was true, but wouldn't *someone* in Genesis mention really, really big lizards eating people? Oh, I once drew this picture in Sunday school when I was, like, five years old, and it had Adam riding on a Tyrannosaurus Rex in the Garden of Eden, and my teacher got upset because she said it was blasphemous and my mom grounded me for a whole week.

So anyway, I brought my special diary with me when we went to evil store to protest because I thought I could write my observations about Jesus while I was there. I didn't want that stuff in my school notebook because someone might see it and

I'd probably get expelled or forced to volunteer to read to homeless people or something.

No one was protesting that day because there was a prayer meeting at the school, so I went all by myself and took the TTC. I had to take one of those buses where there was a sign on the side that said all Christians should die or whatever those Richard Dawkins worshippers had put on buses, and doesn't it seem kind of weird that his name is *Dawkins* and he's totally in love with *Darwin*? I have this theory that I'm going to use for my independent study unit in science next year that all evil people who deny God's divine word have last names that start with *Da* and have a *w* in the middle and an *in* at the end. There are *two* examples right there. There totally have to be more. It's probably in the Bible or something.

The Satanist store was really quiet when I got there—they had like no customers, which is strange because the devil really should be able to tempt people into evil a little bit better. But *then* I thought that maybe all the prayer I did made the customers see the light and go spend their money at church bake sales instead, and I felt totally bad because that meant people were now ignoring Jesus!

A little bell rang when I went in the shop. I got this really bad feeling in my stomach like I ate way too many rice crispy squares and had to lay on the couch and not go to school for a few days like a week ago when I had an English test.

Some evil woman was sleeping at the counter. She had a tattoo and stuff and I thought that her skin would probably burn if I put a cross on it or something, but I ignored her 'cause I could just try doing that later.

At the back of the room was an office where I thought they probably did their sacrifices and stuff so that they wouldn't get blood on the customers up front. The door was open a bit and I peeked inside really quietly.

And I saw him.

An aura of light and beauty and holiness surrounded him! He was frowning at the open book on the desk in front of him, but it was the most glorious scowl I had ever seen, and I thought that he probably looked totally hot up on the cross even when he was

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upset and dying because some guys are just that beautiful no matter what, and of course Jesus would be one of them. If *I* was God—although it's a total sin to think so—I would so totally make my son majorly hot.

I didn't know what to say to him. I mean, I prayed all the time, but it's not like you could say something like that in real life. *Dear Jesus, I am a wicked sinner for letting that boy touch my arm last summer at the beach. Please forgive me. Love Sara.* No way was I saying that out loud! I'd die of embarrassment and probably go to hell for seeming like such a lame-o in front of the Son of God.

"What are you doing?"

I jumped a little and hiccupped. That happens sometimes when I get startled. Clutching the diary to my chest, I turned around and backed up. I thought maybe it was the girl from the counter, but I saw her still sleeping there. Then I saw a really, really tall...I don't know if it was a guy or a girl. It was probably a hermaphrodite or something ungodly like that. It was very tall, like a boy, but with girl features and black make-up.

Jesus always surrounded himself with weirdos in the Bible, I thought. I bet that other girl is a hooker like Mary Magdalene. It's so stupid that people think they were married. Jesus wouldn't marry a hooker—he'd marry someone like me. I bet a honeymoon with the Son of God would be *completely* awesome. Better than Edward and Bella's. I so wanted to give Jesus my virginity.

"You can't be back here," said the hermaphrodite.

"*You're* back here."

"That's because I almost kind of work here. Sort of."

"You're lying. I can tell. A dark aura of lies surround you, you lying...liar."

"You still can't be back here. Liam won't like it."

"Who's Liam?"

The hermaphrodite pointed to the office behind me, where Jesus worked.

"Jesus is using the name Liam?" I asked, though I don't know why I expected the heathen to know what I meant.

"He's not Jesus."

"He looks like him."

"No, he doesn't."

Skyla Dawn Cameron

“How would you even know what Jesus looks like?” I said.
“You’re a devil-worshipper.”

“I am not!”

“Are too!”

“Guys!” the tattooed hooker called with her head still on the counter. “I’m trying to get some sleep.”

“She started it,” the whiney boy-girl abomination complained.

The hooker pointed across the room. “Ally, go water the plants.”

With a final glare at me, “Ally” walked away.

I glanced back into the office. Liam/Jesus was still reading something. I wanted to rush in and tell him how much I loved his father’s book and how he was way cuter than the guys who played him in the movies, but that would probably have been such a newbie mistake. Instead, I went to the prostitute.

“Can you tell me what you do here?” I asked

She opened her eyes and studied me for a moment. “I can’t tell you unless you pay.”

I usually got an allowance for keeping my grades up and doing housework, so I had my little brother Josh do it for me, ’cause if he didn’t do it, I’d tell Mom and Dad about the Sears lingerie catalogue he had stashed under his mattress.

I handed the hooker twenty dollars and hoped she wasn’t going to start undressing or something.



Lilith

“Who is that girl staring at Liam?”

Briar glanced over her shoulder, then turned back to me with a grin. “That’s Sara.”

“She looks familiar.”

“She’s a protester.”

“One of the ones from outside...?”

Curio Killed the Cat

“Yup.”

“What’s she doing in here?” I felt the colour drain from my face. “She’s not planting a bomb, is she?”

“I kinda wish she would—then we could collect the insurance money.”

“Briar!”

“Yeah, okay, I know—that was harsh. So she shows up here this morning and started nosing around, arguing with Ally. I think she has a thing for Liam.”

“A ‘thing?’”

“Yeah. Like a crush. Only not a normal crush...” Briar straightened her back, clasped my upper arms in her hands, and looked me directly in the eye. “Okay, Lil, prepare yourself for this. Are you ready?”

“Ready for *what*, pray tell?”

Briar took a deep breath. “She thinks he’s Jesus.” She let go of me abruptly and burst out laughing.

I crossed my arms at me chest. “Really, Briar—”

“For reals! She totally thinks he’s Jesus, Son of God, Christ.”

“And you *did* tell her he wasn’t, right?”

“Of course not. She gave me twenty bucks. I think we can convince more of her richy friends to come by and drop some dough. I haven’t yet decided if I’ll tell her Jesus is here to save us from our wicked ways, or because he’s so disillusioned with the world that he wants to join the dark side.”

“I really don’t want to hear about this anymore.” I walked past Liam at the counter and went into the office.

Briar followed. “Liam doesn’t know, of course—he’s just ignoring her like he does everyone who isn’t from his coven. So don’t tell him.”

I wouldn’t even *begin* to know where to start that conversation, so suffice to say I had no intention of informing Liam of his growing fan club. “How did everything go with Sebastian last night?”

“Huh?”

I glanced up at her and she had a deer in the headlights look to her face, sparking my curiosity. “You had another spell to do last night, didn’t you?”

“Oh.” Her shoulders relaxed and face softened slightly, then she shrugged casually. “Of course. We sat in a dumpster and looked for his ex-girlfriend’s trash. It was very classy. I showered about sixteen times afterward.”

“Ah. Anything else?”

“How’s your mom?” she said instead.

Clever tactic. She definitely didn’t want to talk if she was bringing up my mother, but I played along because, truthfully, having a parent around my apartment constantly had grown tiresome. I welcomed the chance to complain.

“She’s offered every bit of advice on everything you can possible imagine.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Remember Mr. Mclean? From the bank?”

“You mean your boyfriend?” she quipped with a grin.

I held my tongue to keep from snapping back. “She gave him my phone number. He called my *home*.”

Briar frowned. “That’s creepy.”

“I know. And I thought you were going to take care of him? Use a Cut and Clear?”

“Hey, did you see the rose someone left?” she said to change the subject.

I’ll take that as a “no” on my spell.

Briar lifted a make-shift vase—a bottle of Dasani water—from the desk that had a rose standing in it.

I refused to take it when she held it toward me. “And I suppose Mr. Mclean left it?”

“I don’t think so. There were roses at the doors of a few of the stores this morning. I guess someone was trying to be nice.”

At last I did accept the flower, and lifted it so I could inhale the fragrance around the dark red petals. It *was* a sweet gesture, whoever did it.

“So your mom is driving you nuts, is she?” Briar said.

I sighed. “There are...difficulties.”

“That’s not very nice, dear.”

I tensed at the sound of my mother’s voice behind me.
Dammit, Briar...

Curio Killed the Cat

I didn't need to turn around—my mother joined us in the office and slipped her arm over my shoulder. “You're not going to say hello?”

“On your way home already?” I asked instead.

“Actually, I might be here a tad bit longer.”

“Oh?” I managed as my throat went dry.

My mother's face beamed. “Yeah! Your boss called after you left. We had a nice chat. I thought it might be helpful to have a second succubus around. You know, to help the more masculine customers part with their money.”

Oh, no...

She squeezed my shoulder. “We're going to be coworkers!”



From the ~~Diary~~ **NEW** Chronicles of Jesus by Sara Gosling

Dear Diary,

I'm so glad I brought this to the store today because I'm pretty sure that it's going to be way famous on Ebay or whatever it's called after the rapture. I realized that I, Sara Gosling, have been Divinely Chosen to write everything that the New Lord Jesus Liam does. It'll be...like...The New NEW Testament. Or something.

Today, "Liam," as he likes to be called, ate an organic peanut butter sandwich. He looked at me once and I totally melted like a Mars bar in the backseat of my mom's car, but I can't eat those anymore because last summer I gained three pounds and mom said she was going to send me to a special camp for fat girls, so now I usually just throw up every time I eat something that's more than fifty-three calories. I don't remember where I got the fifty-three number from, but I bet it was like Oprah or Tyra or one of those coloured shows. Mom doesn't like me watching them but I think that I'd be racist or something if I didn't and I don't want Jesus to get mad at me for not loving everyone who isn't lucky enough to be white like me and him.

The hermaphrodite is staring at me again.

Curio Killed the Cat

I'm pretty sure he/she is
kueffer. I'll have to watch him/her
carefully...

In Christian love,
Sara.





Chapter Thirteen: There's Something About Maura

Briar

Lilith's mom was starting to drive even *me* nuts.

I was the awesome one whom the guy customers usually spoke to! A man would walk into the store, Lil would scurry into the corner and only peek out to tell me to be nicer, and I'd convince him to buy stuff or one of my spells. I could be all charming and shit like that, flash some cleavage, and they'd spend money. Well, at least it worked that way when I was feeling ambitious, which happened once or twice a week.

And then Maura comes along.

Oh, it was a great idea, at first. She was working for free. Just wanted to help us out. I was all in favour of keeping my job, so I loved the idea. Less work for me, but the same money. Yay!

And then it became *The Maura Mare Show*...starring Maura Mare and every guy who walked down the street. And in this lame show, I was like the wacky neighbour who never got any screen time.

First, she wandered the shop and offered help to the nice boys who came in to pick up a blank Book of Shadows to impress their girlfriends, and she got them to buy another fifty dollars in stuff. I thought that was great, so I took a nap.

Then I woke up to find her completely gone. And the store was empty. But, lo and behold, a bunch of people were standing outside the front door. I waited for half an hour, but they didn't

Curio Killed the Cat

go away, and no one came in, so I put on some shoes and went to investigate.

Lilith's mom was there. In a lawn chair. Wearing shades, getting a tan...and without a top on.

I know it's legal and all to go topless here, and I realize she's the MILF of the century, but I have to draw the line somewhere. No one was *in* the store buying stuff—they were out gawking at her! Including Liam. Traitor.

Someone complained to the police—not about the indecency thing, but due to the people blocking the sidewalk and part of the street. So she had to go back inside, and since we had the “No Shirt, No Shoes, No Service” policy in effect at *Curio Killed the Cat*, she had no choice but to put her tube top back on.

I, for one, was grateful for it.



Liam

I can't say I had any problem at all with Maura Mare working at the store.

In fact, I suggested to Madam Curio that we were officially overstaffed, and that perhaps Briar could find work elsewhere. Then not only would she save money on the cost of a full time employee—as Maura in turn would work for free—but we had the added bonus of bringing in higher profit due to more sales. Perhaps Maura could even work on the bank manager for another loan.

And without Briar around, perhaps we could even keep regular customers.

She said she'll consider my proposal. I'm hopeful she'll remember.



Lilith

“He’s cute.”

That had become my mother’s favourite phrase all my life.

“I’m counting inventory,” I said, ignoring whomever she seemed to think I should be dating this time in favour of staring at the same row of Black Cat Oil that I’d been staring at for ten minutes.

“It’s the same as it was an hour ago,” my mother said as she plucked a bottle from the shelf and looked it over. “I don’t think anyone buys it. The new agers are probably turned off by the dead cats in them.”

“They *aren’t* dead cats.” I reached up with one hand to rub my temple. Another headache seemed on its way.

“I think that’s what they used to have in them. That’s what Legba told me, back in the day, but he was always making things up. Can’t trust a man to tell you the truth when he’s trying to get up your skirt. He’ll say anything to impress you. Not like I found dead cats impressive...”

“No cats are harmed in the making of any of our oils, okay?”

“Why is it called Black Cat Oil then, if you don’t have oil from black cats?”

“Because it contains their hair.”

“Why? What does it do?”

“Why don’t you ask Briar? She’s the one who makes it.”

She set the bottle back on the shelf. “Because she’s talking to the cute guy.”

I looked over at last and sighed. “That’s Sebastian. He’s a client of hers.”

My mother’s eyes sparkled.

I knew that look. I didn’t like it. “He’s already spending a lot of money. He’s off limits.”

“But he’s so...very pretty. Exotic. I quite like Asian men.”

“The fetishizing of an entire people is racist and deeply offensive, Mom.”

“You take that humourless feminist thing way too seriously sometimes, dear. You need a date.”

Curio Killed the Cat

I rolled my eyes. “Can we not discuss this anymore, please? I have a headache.”

“You didn’t eat today either.” She frowned, all motherly concern suddenly. “Is something wrong?”

“Well, I might not have a job in another week, and I only have about three months of living expenses saved up with no future job prospects...” *And my mother living with me.*

“Oh!” Her eyes lit up again. “Maybe you’re sick because you’re pregnant!”

Of course she didn’t listen to a thing I said. “I’m not pregnant, Mom.”

“And you never will be until you get a date.”

“I just had the most fantastic idea!”

I glanced over my shoulder to see Briar approaching us. Part of me welcomed the reprieve, but I knew nothing good ever came from Briar’s “fantastic” ideas.

“I thought *maybe* it might be a good idea to siphon off some customers from *The Magical Pentacle*. Like, without me putting a closed sign on their door or telling religious people that they perform abortions there.”

This can’t be a good idea, I thought, but before I could suggest that she take more positive tactics, my mother jumped in.

“What were you thinking?”

Briar turned to face Mom and I was officially out of the conversation. *Perhaps I can slip back into the office...*

“Well, I thought that *they* don’t have a succubus there working the customers, so *you* could head over and infiltrate. Pretend to be shopping, and then convince the other customers to come here and shop instead. What do you think? They always get way more traffic than we do.”

“Excellent idea!” And without even consulting me, my mother was already out the door.

“Are you sure that was a wise idea?” I said. “What if Wilhelmina—”

“We pulled double today what we usually do in a day,” Briar said. “Besides, it got her to leave, right?” She slung her arm over my shoulder and led me from the shelves. “You can have a cup

Skyla Dawn Cameron

of tea, relax, and we'll talk about doing that Cut and Clear on the bank guy, okay?"

Briar definitely had her moments of kindness, and I was infinitely grateful for it.





Chapter Fourteen: Legba and the King of Cups

Briar

We put a big, official “Closing Sale” sign on our front window.

I couldn’t bear to do it. I whined and sobbed and tried to beg my way out of it. Lil and Liam took over for me, and I watched sadly.

I was such a failure. Crappiest hoodoo chick ever.

Sure, I grant that it’s hard to use magic to keep an entire business from closing down. At least by myself. Maybe if Liam had helped, it would have worked, but he couldn’t influence people because he was a whiny little bitch like that. Morality. Huh, that never did anything good for anyone.

We’d had a small increase in sales with Lil’s mom helping us, but not enough for the bank to justify giving us money. That meant we had to have a big final sale to pay off Madam Curio’s creditors and our own wages.

The door opened and the bell rang. I glanced up and smiled as a familiar face I hadn’t seen in years came into the shop.

He walked with a cane, but that’s where the stereotypical image ended—he wouldn’t dare wear a straw hat anymore, and I was pretty sure his suit was Armani.

“Miss Briar Malik,” he said in a deep voice that seemed to reverberate through the room with a Louisiana accent.

“They tearing down this place to build a crossroad?” I said with a grin.

“Just passin’ through and thought I’d greet you on the way by.”

“Don’t suppose you could make me...like...really skilled at marketing or something while you’re here, could you?”

Papa Legba shook his head and made a “tsk” sound. “If you want those kind of favours, Briar, you have to go through the proper channels.”

I frowned a little. So he wasn’t hanging around in Toronto to see *me*, and he wasn’t there to help. What the hell? Spirit like *that* shows up, with *his* kind of power...surely there had to be a reason.

“So is there something I can help you with?” I asked. “We have some nice Florida Water.”

He gave me a look that suggested he saw right through me.

“Well, what am I supposed to say?” I said with a sigh. “My life sucks. I can’t get my boyfriend to come back and I’m about to lose my job and...I just feel stuck.”

He gestured over his shoulder. “Didn’t I see a whole row of Road Opener over there?” he drawled.

“A stupid road opener isn’t going to help—”

“You sound blocked, Briar. Maybe you can clear the blocks on this path, or maybe you need to try another direction—I don’t rightly know. But this path right here isn’t opening and you’d be a fool to keep on tryin’ to move when it ain’t open.” He pulled a twenty from his pocket and slapped it on the counter. “Now you get yourself a mojo hand, wash your floors, and burn a candle.”

I took the twenty and held my tongue—my only grumbling would be in my head—and went to pick up what he’d suggested. Guess I knew what I’d be doing for the next hour.

It’s really hard to argue with someone like Legba.

I rang up the items, but he refused his change, so I slipped it in my pocket. Sure, we had a “take a penny” jar, but no one put anything in there and I wasn’t about to start.

“You’re not here to dispense wisdom,” I said. “And it’s not to say hi to me.”

“Puttin’ some faith in people wouldn’t hurt you.”

Yeah, right. I’m pretty sure it actually would hurt.

Curio Killed the Cat

The office door opened. A huge grin of white teeth split his face. I glanced over my shoulder to see Lil and her mom joining us.

“Maura Mare,” he said as he walked to her, took her hand, and leaned forward to kiss her knuckles. “A pleasure.”

“How wonderful to see you!” Maura said. “Tell me, are you free for dinner? We have so much to catch on.”

“I was hopin’ you’d say that, Maura.”

Maura took his arm as they walked out the front door.

“I *knew* he didn’t come here to see me,” I mumbled. I gathered up the road opener supplies and started toward the back office. “I’ll be back to do cash in an hour.”

“What are you doing?” she called after me.

“Something useless.” I closed the door behind me.

I had a small alter set up at the very back of the office. Liam never treaded there, and I set up a privacy screen just to keep his judgmental Wiccan eyes off my stuff.

I went through the motions, tried my damndest to concentrate, and eventually got so frustrated staring at the candle that I got up and left it there. I grabbed the mop and bucket, got some water, added some road opener ingredients, and took to scrubbing the floors. Lilith looked at me strangely because she knew I loathed to clean, but again...

It’s hard to say no to someone like Papa Legba.



Wilhelmina Raven (aka Billie Humphrey)

The closing sign on the window of *Curio Killed the Cat* had left Billie Humphrey positively giddy.

She would never ordinarily describe herself as giddy. She had a reputation to maintain, and giggling like a stupid school girl would ruin everyone’s perception of her. But after taking a brief walk down the street and seeing those delightful words on the

window, she was practically skipping around her store and humming to herself.

“Don’t you feel a little bad?” that kid Stone said from his seat behind the cash register.

Billie glanced over her shoulder at him, hand poised on the package of chime candles she had been facing up. “For?”

“Their store closing.”

She rolled her eyes and went back to facing. “Of course not. They brought it on themselves.”

“It’s not their fault their boss lost all her money.”

She straightened the candles, then shifted her full attention to Stone. “And where did you hear about that?”

“Friend from school who hangs out there,” Stone said with a shrug. “I don’t think you should be glad all these people are going to be out of work.”

“I’m not,” she said. “Just that one of them will be.” The replica 1900’s telephone on the wall rang, and Billie answered it. “Hello?”

“About a week left,” a familiar male voice said on the other line.

Billie smiled. “Good. The sooner all this is taken care of, the more I’ll be able to relax.”

“I’ll be keeping an eye on things later today,” he continued. “I need to double check everything is in place. There’s one more meeting to seal things.”

“I’ll pass the news on to Quentin,” she said. *No more Briar, no more Curio Killed the Cat*, she thought with a smile as she hung up. Could the world possibly get any better?



Briar

I leaned on the counter and gazed sadly at the reverse letters in the window pronouncing our demise.

Curio Killed the Cat

I bet that damn Billie is doing her happy dance, I thought. And I bet she looks like a total spaz while doing it because she has no rhythm.

The bell over the door jingled. I didn't raise my head right away—the sight of customers depressed me now. Well, I mean, they always depressed me 'cause I knew I'd have to be nice to them, but now they really depressed me because there was so little time left for them to give me their money.

“Do store wide discounts include psychic readings?”

“Yes, but...” I glanced up.

The guy was pretty. Very. I spent my time moping around Devlin so I didn't typically concern myself much with pretty boys, but...damn. Smooth skin, fine bone structure. Looked a little rough around the edges. He had a few more tattoos and piercings than I had, which always gives someone coolness points with me.

If I had a type, this guy was it.

“But?” he said as he approached. His movements reminded me of that of an animal. A predatory one. Compact, toned muscles moved beneath a fitted black T-shirt. I had a sneaking suspicion I was going to turn into a silly girl in a moment.

“But I'm really bad at psychic readings,” I said.

“I'll pay full price then if you'll at least give it a shot for me?”

I gazed into a pair of dark brown eyes for a moment. Gold ringed their irises. I'd never seen anything like that before—it was infinitely awesome.

“Oh,” I said, as I realized I'd been silent for a few moments. “Right. Sure.” I gestured over my shoulder and started walking to the small private room where we did readings. It was little more than a large closet, but then we rarely used it.

I paused in the doorway to switch on the light, and I was very aware of him directly behind me. A shiver rolled down my spine.

“Take a seat,” I said as I quickly moved forward. I grabbed the stack of tarot cards wrapped in black cloth on a shelf by the door and sat on one of two chairs at the table in the centre of the room.

He took the other.

“So,” I unwrapped the cards as I spoke and started shuffling, “what’s your question?”

“What’s your name?”

I stopped shuffling and my lips curved into a smile. “You didn’t need to pay for a reading to get that.”

“Just wondered.”

“Briar.”

He extended his hand. “Toby.”

I reached out as well and his fingers clasped mine for a moment. My gaze went to the tattoo on his inner forearm: a paw print. Before I could remark on it, he released my fingers and sat back in his chair.

“Your question?” I prompted again.

He ran his hand back through his short, bright red hair, revealing about a quarter of an inch of dark brown roots. “Well, it’s a weird question.”

“Girl or money?”

“Huh?”

“That’s what it always comes down to when a guy walks in here. Either it’s about a girl, or about money.”

“It’s about work,” he admitted. “I travel a lot and I’m in Toronto...looking for something.”

“Something?”

“*Someone.*”

“I have a suspicion this work isn’t exactly legal,” I said. “So it’s probably best if you don’t give me a whole lot of details.”

He flashed me a grin. “I admit to nothing, of course.”

I lay the deck face down on the table in front of him. “Shuffle it three times and cut it three times.” He did so and handed the cards back to me.

One at a time, I set the cards down in a spread and looked them over. Saints, I hated readings. There was a little voice in me that gave me a thread and tried to lead me through the cards, but all the other voices in my head seemed to drown it out. Too many voices.

“In most cases, the cards are metaphorical, but here,” I gestured to The Tower, “I think it’s meant literally. I see a very tall building. Your search should be the downtown area.”

Curio Killed the Cat

“That’s it?” he asked.

“Well, I told you I was a shitty reader. And the cards are less focused on your question, and more focused on you.” I tapped a red painted fingernail on the King of Cups. “I think this is you.” *Someone who’s hiding something, who holds power over others, has his own agenda...* Yeah, that was definitely the vibe I was getting from Toby. “You need to solve this problem of yours with diplomacy rather than force. So whoever you’re after...try being nice.”

“Novel concept, sweetheart.” His hand moved across the table and he touched The Lovers next to the King of Cups. “And this? Am I expected to get lucky while in town?”

I was blushing. I knew it. I didn’t normally blush—that was unheard of. But maybe I was just out of touch after years with Devlin, and then months missing him. I was used to flirting, sure, but...this was all together different. Minutes would tick by with my gaze locked on Toby’s and I was left fumbling to form actual thoughts. Granted, he was probably a total man-whore, but the desire to care was lost on me.

“If you take my advice and do your job right, you likely *won’t* be in town long enough for that,” I said instead of going ahead and jumping his bones right away.

“Okay, what else do you see about this building?”

I looked over the cards again. Lots of swords. “Um...it’s going to be challenging. And I’m getting the overwhelming sense it’s not going to work out for you right away.” I glanced up at him and shrugged apologetically. “Sorry.”

“That’s okay. We done?”

Though I wildly scrambled for some other reason to keep the pretty guy in the room with me, I drew a blank. “Yep.” *Did that sound too disappointed?*

The cards remained in their spread on the table—I figured Liam could clean them up later. It would give him something to bitch about, and he loved a reason to complain. I stood and left the room, with Toby close behind me. Out in the main store, I saw Ally near the cash register. He swiftly moved out of my way—I’d yelled at him enough times for getting too close to the money.

Sebastian was out there as well, sitting on the barstool pulled up to the counter. His stare flickered between Toby and me.

I stopped abruptly and turned. “Anything else you’re interested in?”

“I have my eyes on a few things,” he said without taking his gaze off of me.

Shit, I was blushing again.

“How about good luck charms?” He moved a little closer so he was looking down at me and I felt goose bumps on my arms. “Have any of those?”

“Still planning to get lucky?”

“It seems to be in the cards.”

I desperately wanted to keep him. We could put him in the back office—there was lots of room. I’d take him for walks and everything. Maybe Lil would let me keep him...?

“There’s a display of stones by the cash register,” I said. “Try something from there.”

He paced past me with smooth, languid steps. Sebastian sat in front of the polished stones, but a brief look from Toby sent him scrambling to where Ally stood.

“I’ll give you the clearance sale discount ’cause I’m so bad at reading,” I said as I rang him up.

“Nah. I think you told me exactly what I needed to know. I like this one.” He set a polished stone on the counter.

“Moonstone,” I said with a nod. “Good choice.” I wrapped it up in tissue paper while he dropped some bills on the counter. “Good luck with finding your building.”

“Good luck with your clearance sale, Briar.” He gathered his package, and with one final smile, he left.

“Who was that?” Sebastian asked as he returned to where he’d been sitting.

I tilted my head to the side and watched Toby’s ass disappear through the door and out of view. “A customer. A very pretty one.”

“Well, yeah, sure, if you’re into conventionally attractive men who hit on you.”

“And lucky for me, I am.” My senses seemed to return to me at last. “Wait, what are you doing here? We were supposed to be

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good for another couple of weeks before nudging Noelle with a reconciliation spell.”

“Oh, yeah, right. Well, girl from work went to the vegan place next door for lunch and she saw the closing sign. It’s true?”

Great. Ruin my perfectly decent afternoon by reminding me of that. “Yeah. The end is nigh. Our last day is officially Friday.”

His eyes widened. “That’s...so soon. I can’t believe it.”

“Yeah, you’re telling me. We’re coming back in on Monday to pack up whatever is left and clean the place up. Liam’s in the back room going through all our paper records.”

“That sucks. I wish I could do something. If I had a million dollars...”

“Even fifty-three million wouldn’t necessarily help.”

“Still...I’d buy you a monkey. Haven’t you always wanted a monkey?”

I shook my head at the bad joke. “Back to Friday...we’re doing the bar scene that night to get drunk and forget about the fact that we’re out of jobs. We’re inviting some of the other shop owners around here and the regulars—wanna come?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ally open his mouth, and I raised a hand to stop him. “You’re invited too, dummy.”

“Sure, I’ll be there,” Sebastian said. “And if I see anyone who needs to hire someone—”

“Yeah, I know.” *Like anyone is going to be eager to hire a failed rootworker to work retail or something.*





Chapter Fifteen: Diary Wars

Letters of Love by Alastair Nightshade

Liam, My Love.

I worry that when the store closes, I will never see you again and the thought makes me cry five million tears into an ocean of regret that I've never shared with you the deep, yearning passion that I feel for you. I wonder where you'll work next, and if I'll be allowed to gaze at you from afar there too. I hope it's not McDonald's. My sister works there and she always smells bad when she gets home, and while I can't imagine your wonderful scent of herbs and candle wax ever disappearing, I know I must prepare myself for this fact should it come to pass. But know that even if thou must work at a fast food restaurant, I shall always be there, ready to purchase the potatoes you have so magnificently dipped in hot oil to make French fries.

*Forever and ever and probably ever yours,
Alastair.*

Alastair Nightshade gazed longingly across the store at Liam, who spoke to a customer. The customer said something, and then broke into a laugh at her own joke. Liam smiled politely because he was just cool like that, and oh how Alastair wished he could be that calm. Instead, he fumbled with what to say and felt like a total fool.

Something moved in the front window. Alastair's eyes darted to see what it was, and spotted that stupid blonde teen girl peering in at them. She'd been with the protesters before, and now she spent all her time hanging around the store. Her gaze met Alastair's and her face went red. She pulled out her notebook and wrote furiously for a few moments, then turned and left.

Hmph. Wierdo. Ally brushed some of his long black hair from his face and pulled his hand back to see some of the make-up he used to make his skin even more alabaster had made it onto fingers. Curse it all.

Footsteps on the hardwood alerted Alastair to someone's approach, and he looked up to see Liam. Behind him, the customer walked towards the door with bags of her purchases.

No one else in the store. We're alone.

Alastair's heart hammered in his chest.

Liam pursed his lips for a moment, as if pondering his words. "So our last day is Friday," he said at last.

Alastair nodded. Or at least he thought he did.

"Lilith is having us invite the regular customers to...some kind of social event afterward." Liam's mouth twitched a little. He didn't seem fond of what Lilith had planned. "I think it involves alcohol. She asked me to ensure you know you're invited."

Alastair nodded again.

Liam was about to walk away when he stopped and turned back to face Alastair. "You've been very loyal to the store. Thank you."

Alastair nodded once more.

Skyla Dawn Cameron

He spoke to me. Again! As Liam walked away, Alastair pulled out his notebook and wrote yet another love letter. Surely this was a sign! They were meant to be.

Such a pity that tragedy seemed to be bringing them together.



Sara Gosling

I'd been standing outside of Jesus' heathen store for an hour and thirty-seven minutes.

The sign on the window said they were closing. I was so conflicted. I didn't want him to be out of a job!

Only two people had gone in the shop to buy something in the time I'd been standing out there. I wanted to go inside, but the hermaphrodite was hovering around. Ugh. It wouldn't go away. Even when Jesus/Liam went next door to get salad for lunch, the hermaphrodite hung by the door, being all creepy and immoral.

He/she/it stared at my Lord like *a lot* and it was way weird. It had a black covered notebook with that star symbol of the devil. I was pretty sure he was like way evil. Maybe he was Lucifer. *I* think Lucifer would look like an Emo hermaphrodite. So "Ally", which is what that hooker called it, followed around Liam but never said anything to him and I was pretty sure he was in love with him, only not really because hermaphrodites and gay people don't know how to love, they only have evil sinful lust.

Everyone knows that a storm is gathering, and sinners like gays and lesbians and genderless abominations are trying to teach children like me that it's okay to sin against the bible and that all people are equal. I do think that yeah, all people are mostly equal, at least when they're white, but sinners like that aren't *actually* people, so I don't think anyone needs to be tolerant of them.

Curio Killed the Cat

Love is only between a man and a woman and Jesus. And God. And probably the Holy Ghost. It's like...a polygamy thing, only not bad. Maybe polygamy wouldn't be so bad, though, because I would totally marry Jesus/Liam *and* Zeke from school, although I didn't think Zeke was that great anymore because he wasn't divine or anything like that, but just a flawed human. Flawed humans fell for the charms of slutty girls like Kerri McLeod, so I knew Zeke would never be good enough for someone like me who was holy inspired to continue the bible.

I saw Ally writing in its notebook. I should try to get a hold of it. Then I could burn it like we did Harry Potter and that Judy Blume book at my youth group.

I hadn't yet told anyone from my youth group that I was spending my time at a supposed sin den. I didn't think they could handle it. Not yet. One time I told them I heard the voice of God while eating corn flakes and he told me not to keep eating them, but I did, and I started choking, but no one believed me that I actually heard Him speak. But it *must* have been God, because who else would I hear telling me that I was about to choke on my cornflakes? It so wasn't my dad. That's what Lizzie said, but she's nothing but a slut who tried to seduce my brother one time while we were camping. *No one* holy would ever try to seduce Josh because he was gross.

Liam went over to talk to Ally. I got up on my tip toes to stare through the letter "C" pasted on the window. I couldn't tell what they were saying! Darn it!

As Liam walked away from it, I ran to the door and burst inside.

The hermaphrodite's fake looking blue eyes were staring at me. I stuck my tongue out at it, and walked to where Liam was putting stuff on a shelf.

I stood beside him for a few moments, gazing up at him, clasping my diary—which I'd been chronicling his daily activities in—to my chest. I was ready to explode. I had to say something, and bazillions of thoughts were in my brain, but I chewed my lip in silence. My *first* official words to the Lord incarnate had to be really, really special...

I love you. No, that was way obvious. Of course everyone loved Jesus, except for gay people and heathens in other countries.

Your Dad is my favourite author. Aw, but he probably got that one a lot too. My mom made my brother and I read the bible all the time when we were kids and I think we read just about every version of except for the Mormon one which was kind of like fanfiction, which I also wasn't allowed to read, but one time, online, I *did* read some based on that old show Davey and Goliath. It was totally gross.

Your hair is like a golden halo! No, that was lame too. Of course he knew what his hair looked like. It was so shiny. I *really* wanted to touch it...

I knew that I'd be divinely inspired to say something as soon as he turned around to face me...but...he didn't turn around. He still kept rearranging stuff on the shelf.

"I'm your biggest fan!" I suddenly blurted out.

He paused and looked down at me. His face scrunched into another of those most holy scowls. "Do I know you?"

"I'm so sorry your store is closing! If any of the praying that I did—which was way before I saw how awesome you are—did anything to bring about the place closing, I am *so* sorry and I hope you forgive me because I don't want to go to hell for making you jobless."

"Um...okay then. I..." He gestured vaguely over his shoulder. "...have to go back there. To do...something. Ring the bell at the counter if you're buying anything."

Surely he was going back there to talk to his father, God, about what a great Christian warrior I was.

"What are you even doing here?"

I spun around to see Ally behind me.

"None of your business. I belong here more than you do!"

"You were picketing in front of the store calling everyone devil worshippers!"

"Yeah, well, you *are* a devil worshipper! You're unholy and made of evil wickedness." It wasn't getting out of my face. It was even *more* annoying than my little brother. I had to make it go away...

Curio Killed the Cat

I stormed past him to the barstool where he'd been sitting and snatched his evil spell book from the counter.

"What are you doing? Hey!"

I flipped open. Pages and pages of calligraphy. Words like "yearning" and "forever" and "heart" and "torrents." My gaze settled on the familiar line that started each and every page.

"Holy—'Letters of Love'? By 'Alastair Nightshade'?" Each and every letter was addressed to Liam.

"Give that back!" It tried to take the sinful book from me, but I pivoted back out of its reach.

I couldn't *believe* what I was seeing! "I'm going to show the Lord *all* your immoral thoughts and—"

It reached forward to snatch the book from my hands. Instead of its journal, though, I realized it had grabbed mine.

"Give that back!"

Ally held my diary high above its head and opened it. "'The *New* Chronicles of Jesus'? Are you insane?"

"Gimme!" I folded his book closed and whacked him with it.

"Give *mine* back first!"

"No, you first!" I whacked him a few more times before he held up my diary in defence and started trying to hit me back.

Clearly I wasn't getting anywhere, so I reached forward and grabbed a lock of his ungodly black hair and tugged.

The bell over the shop door sounded. "Hey, hey, kids!" The hooker from the other day stepped between us. She grabbed me the arm and pulled me away. The Japanese or Chinese or Oriental—or whatever they're called—guy with her grabbed Ally to pull it away from me. I figured the guy caught hermaphrodite disease or something like that for touching the thing.

"What the fuck?" the hooker said.

I shrugged her off of me. "Don't profane in the house of the Lord."

She rolled her eyes and looked at Ally. "Hmm?"

"She stole my diary! And pulled my hair!"

"It stole *my* diary!"

As if they'd timed it, both the hooker and the Oriental grabbed the books from us and handed them to each other, and then back to each of us.

Skyla Dawn Cameron

I glared at Ally. He glared at me.

“Anyone not buying anything, get the hell out of the store *now.*”

I had ten dollars left over from the bus ride. I plucked a candle from the shelf and walked to the cash register. My mom would probably freak out and say I was worshipping the devil or something, but she was always freaking out over something. Ugh, mothers suck. Except for the holy virgin mother of Jesus, of course.





Chapter Sixteen: The Chapter Before the Karaoke Chapter

Lilith

I never got drunk.

Not during my “rebellious” teen years, which mostly consisted of studying a lot and never going out anywhere. Not when out with “friends,” which very rarely happened anyways. I usually had a bottle of wine in my apartment because I enjoyed a glass now and then with dinner.

But I sat in the bar on the Friday night after our last night of work and managed to finish three cocktails in the first half hour.

We had a booth, plus another table pulled over with an additional half dozen chairs. A few shop owners from the area had dropped by, as did some customers. My mother didn’t join us, as she had gone goodness knows where with Legba. I’d received a text message from her saying she’d give me a call later. I was caught somewhere between relief that I’d have a break from her and annoyance that she hadn’t stuck around to at least see how things were going. The cocktails weren’t assisting me in determining *which* feeling was more prominent, but perhaps another margarita would help.

Briar had visited my apartment twice in the past week, which was very unlike her. I was surprised she knew where I lived. But she claimed to want to do a floor wash and a tranquility spell to get rid of negative energies surrounding my stalker from the bank. I suspected it was because she wanted a good look at my

apartment before she suggested we become roomies. Though I abhorred the thought of having to live with her, I hadn't totally eliminated the possibility. If my options were living with Briar and paying my rent, or living alone and on the street, I was leaning more towards the former.

Though, of course, that could have been the cocktails talking.

Liam sat in the corner of the booth with a glass of Perrier. I had no idea what his plans were now. Briar made her business everyone else's, but Liam kept to himself for much of the time. I didn't even know where he lived.

Briar laughed loudly, drawing my attention to her. She and Sebastian sat in a pair of chairs nearby. He chuckled as well. Whatever their joke, apparently it was funny.

She caught my eye and turned to face me, her face animated. "Sebastian just had this great idea."

"I wouldn't say it's *great*," he started.

She patted his shoulder and her hand lingered there. "Yeah, it *is*. Okay, so we're going to go back to the shop and look for records of Alicia. There's gotta be something with her address. So then we're going to break in—"

I shook my head. This wasn't going to end well.

"—and we'll go when she's not there, and then Sebastian's going to get on her computer and—"

I raised my hand. "Please, don't tell me anymore. I don't want to be charged as an accessory."

"But she took all the money you guys raised," Sebastian said, leaning back and resting his arm on the back of Briar's chair. It was a rather intimate gesture that wasn't lost on me, but I didn't remark as neither of them seemed aware of it.

"Yeah," Briar said. "Bitch deserves it. And his idea is *way* better than mine."

"I like yours," he said. "We should do both."

Briar beamed at the compliment. "It was pretty funny."

"And is it also illegal?" I said with a sigh.

"Maybe in some provinces. We're going to get her address and sign her up for evangelical propaganda from Pat Robertson and stuff, and maybe issues of The Watchtower."

Curio Killed the Cat

That sounded vaguely familiar. “Didn’t you—”

“Do that to Liam one time? Yup.” She finished off the last of the beer in the glass in front of her.

The pitcher of beer near them was all but empty, much like my own glass.

I vaguely recognized the bartender who was supposed to be waiting on our table—I suspected he might have shown up at one of the protests outside of our shop once. Whether he avoided us now because he didn’t want to serve us, or because he was embarrassed that such a moral, upstanding servant of the Lord would make a living selling something sinful like alcohol, was beyond my knowledge and caring.

I slid to the end of the booth seat and rose, glass in hand. “I’m getting another drink. Orders?”

“Um...” Briar swung her head around to look up at me. “Another pitcher. Maybe two.”

“If it’s two, you’re coming with me to carry one.” I had no desire to spill alcohol all over my white blouse.

“And nachos,” Sebastian said. “Please? Pretty-please?”

“Uh, I’m jobless now.” She held out her hand. “Money?”

He pulled two twenties from his pocket and deposited them in her hand. “Not jobless. You still have me.”

She grinned and walked ahead of me up to the bar to place our order.

As I followed, my step actually paused. Could that really be... “Are you singing?” I asked.

She looked back at me, dark eyes huge. “No. I don’t sing.”

“Then you were humming.”

“Was not. Anyways, I’m drunk, kinda. I’m allowed to sing while drunk. Shut up or I won’t buy you a drink.”

“You were planning to?”

She waved around the pair of twenties. “Sebastian is. He won’t mind.”

I ordered a daiquiri. We each sat on a barstool while we waited.

“You have a really nice apartment,” she blurted out.

Here we go. “When are you moving in?”

“Huh?”

“I figured that’s where this is going.”

“Oh. Yeah.” She averted her gaze and turned to look at the bar counter top. A long fringe of black hair fell over her eyes. “I was thinking about it. Your place is nicer than mine. You have a spare room—”

“Office.”

“Right, but that’s spare. Sort of. Okay, so I know I drive you nuts, and I’d probably end up plotting your death ’cause you’d do something insane like iron your jeans—”

“I don’t wear jeans,” I said with a sigh.

“Well, whatever, but...wait, how the hell can you not wear jeans?”

I looked around for the bartender. Where was my drink?

“Okay, so anyways,” Briar continued. “The point is that you’re one of my best friends. Well, only friends, but even if I had others, you’d still probably be one of the best. I know I’m a screw-up but you’ve always been really nice and patient with me and I’m pretty sure you’re just, like, the best person in the universe.”

I thought for sure she spoke in jest, but then I caught a look at her eyes. They shone a little with fresh tears waiting to be shed.

“You’re really drunk, aren’t you?”

She nodded. “Yeah, but I mean it.”

I patted her arm. “If you can’t keep your apartment, you can live with me.”

“Really?”

I’ll regret this in the morning. “Really. But you still have to get a job and pay rent.”

I thought she was about to hug me. I wasn’t sure what I’d do if she did—that would be quite unsettling, I was sure.

“I had been trying not to think about it much ’cause I was hoping Devlin could come back, and then he could pay half my rent.”

The bartender returned with our order. I gestured for him to take everything back to our table, then put my hand on Briar’s shoulder to keep her there for a moment. “You never did tell me what happened.”

Her shoulders sank and she sighed heavily. “Yeah.”

Curio Killed the Cat

“Do you want to?”

“We got in a fight.” She folded her arms on the counter and stared down at the shiny surface. “We always got in fights. I think we picked them over stupid things for the sake of the make-up sex. That was always fun.

“And then he came home one day and we just went at it, like usual. And he said...he met someone. Nothing had happened, but he was interested in someone else. First time that had happened the nearly four years we’d been together. And he...” She bowed her head and rested it on her hands. She mumbled something, but I could hear it.

“I’m sorry, but pardon?” I prompted.

Briar swung her head up so quickly, she probably made herself dizzy. “He said he didn’t feel like I really wanted him. I was always distant. I think I was like that because he never believed the hoodoo work, even though I’ve been doing it for like fifteen years now. But all he was looking for was for me to give him a reason to stay. To get out of my own head for a moment and listen to him. He was honest about what was going on, and he wanted to get it worked out.”

“And?”

“And I told him to get the fuck out. I swore at him, I cursed him, I threw his things into the hallway. He said he didn’t feel like I loved him, and I said, ‘Why the hell would I?’

“He left. I came home from work the next day and everything was gone. I thought...I don’t know. That we’d get through it. That there’d be make-up sex and things would go on as usual. And I didn’t see him again. And I’ve fucking Goofered him, and intranquilled him, and let me tell you, St. Martha and I are going to have a long talk on her feast day because she hasn’t listened to a single one of my petitions. And nothing’s worked.”

“At the risk of bringing your hoodoo wrath upon me,” I said. “Have you thought about...moving on? At least temporarily? If he’s hurt, it’ll take time for him to come back, even if he wants to. Isn’t that what you always tell clients?”

“Oh, yeah.” She rolled her eyes. At least she didn’t try to hit me with her barstool. She whirled around in her seat to face me. “That’s the *best* part of all this. I did! I completely forgot about it,

too, but a few months after Devlin left, I had this brilliant plan. I'd just draw someone else new into my life. Someone to distract me from obsessing over the reconciliation work I was doing on Devlin. And, lo and behold, twenty-eight days later it manifests. I'd completely forgotten, until I was having one of my rare moments of cleaning the other day and found the spell remnants in a package under my bed." Her eyes brimmed with more tears. My concern rose, as I'd never seen her like this before. "So along comes Mr. Distraction. We get along great and for the first time in months I'm excited in the morning because I think maybe I'll get to see him, and...and it's like I finally stopped crying. I'd forgotten what it was like, you know, to not be depressed and hate my life all the time, and..."

"And?"

"And he doesn't want me either." Her voice broke and she looked away.

"He's still focused on getting his girlfriend back," I said. She nodded, and I was glad that I didn't have to pretend I didn't know she was talking about Sebastian. "But he needs your help. Couldn't you...not help? Goofer him, or what have you, instead?"

Her bottom lip trembled. I had no idea such vulnerability resided in her. "I don't want to have to make people love me," she said in a soft voice.

My heart broke for her. Sometimes she just seemed like a big kid who maybe *did* realize how socially awkward she was, but didn't know how to fix herself.

"Maybe it'll turn out okay," I said. "Maybe—"

"Briar!" Another figure broke between us, and I recognized Sebastian himself.

She blinked back her tears and quickly grinned. "Uh, girly talk. We sent you nachos, now go away."

"You don't understand—she's here."

"Who's here?" I asked.

He glanced at me, then back to Briar. "Noelle."

"Who?" I felt like I was missing a big secret.

"His ex," Briar explained.

"Noelle is here with her new boyfriend. They just walked in."

Curio Killed the Cat

Briar was off the barstool in seconds, glancing around the bar. “Where?”

Sebastian pointed out two figures near the door. I squinted, but had a difficult time seeing that far away without my glasses, which I’d left at our table. What I did notice, however, was Briar’s face rapidly turning pallid.

“Briar?” I said. “What’s—”

“That’s Devlin,” she said in a low voice. Her gaze went briefly to Sebastian, and then to me. “Devlin’s new chick is Sebastian’s ex-skank.”

Oh...dear.





Chapter Seventeen: The Karaoke Chapter

Briar

I couldn't take my eyes from Devlin and Noelle.

The strawberry blonde hair we found in Noelle's trash...here was a full head of it. I didn't sense anything when we first saw it, nor when we did the spell. Saints, I was off my game...

And Noelle. I hated her with something beyond fiery passion.

Neither of them had seen us yet. The doors were well on the other side of the room, and they went straight for a booth in the corner, arms around one another.

Devlin. *My* Devlin. He was...smiling. Chuckling about something as they whispered back and forth.

I couldn't figure out what I felt. Anger? Hurt? Devastated? Oh, all of it. And I couldn't tell if the sudden queasiness in my stomach was the beer, or the horrible turn the evening had taken.

This couldn't be happening. How was it even possible? Of all the people in the entire metropolitan area...

I snapped to attention and turned to Sebastian with an accusatory look. "You knew!"

Guilt hit me when he finally looked back at me, equally as shocked. "What? No!"

I believed him, but my brain didn't want to. Or maybe that was my mouth. I wasn't sure they were attached to one another that night. "How could you not? You had to!"

Curio Killed the Cat

“I told you, I never saw the guy! And even if I *did* know it was him, why would I think to find out if his ex-girlfriend was a hoodoo person who worked at an occult store, and then ask her to break them up without *telling* her it was her ex-boyfriend we were talking about?”

“Stop being logical and confusing with me while I’m drunk!” I looked back at Devlin and Noelle sitting in the booth. “She’s evil. Devlin doesn’t like skanky people. He likes awesome people. She’s...just evil. I bet she put a spell on him. Saints, I bet she’s a succubus or demon or something!”

“Hey!”

Oh, right, Lilith was still there.

“Sorry, Lil,” I mumbled.

Someone tugged on my arm, and then I felt myself being led away, back towards our table. Lilith forced me down on my chair, then went back to the bar to bring Sebastian over as well. He couldn’t take his eyes off of their booth either.

“I can’t believe this,” he said. At last he looked over at me. “How can this be happening? I think I’m going to be sick.”

Those were exactly my thoughts. I shouldn’t have been blaming him—there was no way he knew.

“What are we going to do?” he asked.

“I’m going to make a doll-baby with her hair and I’m going to drown it and set it on fire and cover it in D.U.M.E. oil and—”

“What’s D.U.M.E.?”

“Death Unto My Enemy,” Lilith said with a sigh as she sat down with us. She took a long drink of her daiquiri. “And you’re not doing that, Briar.”

Like hell I wasn’t. Bitch was going down.

“You can’t kill her,” Sebastian said.

“Why not? She’s evil.”

“But I love her.”

I nearly snapped at him. Maybe I wasn’t totally drunk after all because I still had some self control left. But why the hell did everyone like her so much? Her boss. Her exes. *My* exes, apparently. What the hell? *I* was totally cuter. And also not a slut. Everyone should be liking me.

Skyla Dawn Cameron

I grabbed the pitcher and filled my large glass with beer, then downed about half of it. Maybe things would get funnier.



Sebastian nearly fell off his chair laughing.

I couldn't for the life of me remember what I said. But it was probably funny. I'm really funny.

I started laughing too. "Saints, I am *so* funny!" The table was getting closer and closer. Then my head hit it and it occurred to me that maybe *I* was the one moving rather than the table. "I'm so funny," I said with a sigh. "Why doesn't anyone like me? People are sutos...stu...sup...*supposed* to like funny girls. Everyone knows that. Funny girls are in. Everyone likes Tina Fey. I'm funny like Tina Fey. Why does no one like me?"

Everything in front of my vision was dark. Maybe I'd passed out or something...

I felt a hand on my forehead, brushing the hair back. I blinked, suddenly able to see, and glanced up to see Sebastian looking down at me. He smiled. I liked it when he smiled. It made me smile too and I didn't tend to smile a whole lot.

"I like you."

I sighed. My heart ached a little, and I knew I was definitely a little bit on the way to be kind of in love. It definitely wasn't acid reflux 'cause I hadn't eaten anything at the bar.

"So don't feel bad," he continued.

"I wish you did," I said as a delayed answer to his first comment.

"You're *way* funnier than Tina Fey. Plus you can do magic. Tina Fey can't do magic. Well, comedy magic. But hoodoo is *much* awesomer."

"Did you mean magic with a 'k' on the end?" I asked, frowning. "Because that's not cool."

"I mean it like magic."

"Yeah, but..." I held onto the table and pushed myself into a sitting position. The world tilted a little when I did and I struggled to focus. Although my powers were great and

Curio Killed the Cat

wondrous, I wasn't positive hoodoo was responsible for there being two blurry Sebastian's in front of me. "In your head, when you were saying the words, did you have a 'k' on magic? Like magick? Because that's something lame the Wiccans and new agers do. They suck. They're not funny like me and Tina Fey."

"I promise there wasn't a 'k,'" he said. He reached forward and clasped my hand that rested on the table. "I don't want you to be sad. There's no 'k.' 'Kay?'"

I wanted to kiss him. He said he liked me. And that there was no 'k' on magic. Surely that meant—

"Briar."

That voice was very disapproving-sounding. I didn't want to look at its owner, but my body wasn't listening to my mind and I looked at Lilith anyway.

"You have mom-face," I said.

"Pardon me?"

"Mom-face. It's the face my mom makes before she says something mom-ish and judgmental to me."

She gave me a stern look but didn't say anything. I turned back to Sebastian, but couldn't remember what the hell I'd been thinking in the first place. Well, besides the fact that he was really cute and I enjoyed looking at him...

Several metres from us, some forty-something woman sang a country song badly into a microphone next to the karaoke machine. It wasn't until the chorus that I realized she'd been massacring that song from Grease that the blonde girl sang in her friend's backyard, when she saw the guy's head superimposed on the kiddie pool and then randomly threw the pink paper in it. I was always like, "WTF?" during that part because I totally didn't get the metaphor.

I watched the scary lady singing in 80's stretch jeans for a few minutes. "She's really bad."

"We should totally sing something," Sebastian said.

"Saints, yes! We can dedicate it to Devlin and the skank—"

"Noelle."

"Same thing—and it'll be awesome." The country song was nearly over, so Sebastian and I started to rise.

Skyla Dawn Cameron

“Briar!” Lilith had mom-voice down pat to go with her mom-face.

“I’m not doing anything stupid,” I said, anticipating her warning. “I’m doing karaoke. Nothing bad can come from karaoke.”

Sebastian got near the stage before me and went through the song catalogue. I couldn’t focus my eyes long enough to read much, so I was glad he was prepared to pick us a song.

“Okay, I’ve got it,” he said.

“What?”

“The most obnoxious song on the planet, but it’s *totally* how we feel.”

When it was our turn on stage, I took the microphone first and tried to compose myself. I stood under rather bright lights and was suddenly very aware of all kinds of people staring at me. Of course, Devlin and Skankerella weren’t.

“We’d like to dedicate this song to two very special people in our lives,” I said, gripping the microphone tightly in both hands and gazing seriously into the crowd. “Well, they’re not in our lives anymore because they suck and one of them is skanky. But anyways—”

The opening keyboard of Hoobastank’s *The Reason* started.

He was so right! The song was obnoxious *and* perfect.

We sang loudly. Badly and loudly, in fact. We took turns during the verses, or as well as we could without always remembering the order of the lyrics *or* remembering to look for them on the screen, and belted out the chorus together. Sure, we might have sucked as badly as stretch-jean-country-lady, but we were doing it for love. That was the important thing.

I glanced at Lilith the odd time. She just shook her head and ignored us. What a killjoy.

About mid-way through the first chorus, Devlin and Skankerella looked over at us. I almost burst out laughing and missed my line when I saw the look of shock and horror on their faces. Priceless. But then Sebastian tried to hog the whole microphone and I forgot about them for a few moments.

When it was my verse again, I got to be the mike hog, and I met Devlin’s gaze. I missed it so badly. For months, the only time

Curio Killed the Cat

I could see that gaze was in my head when I did a spell. And because I tried to do spells on him so rarely, I never saw him and I missed him all the more. But here he was, real. And looking at me like I was on crack, but that was better than nothing.

Our song ended. We managed to leave the stage without being booed off. The experience had been cathartic—I felt all refreshed.

“That felt good,” Sebastian said as we walked towards our table.

“Karaoke and beer. Solves everything. Wish I’d figured that out prior to spending all my time and money on hoodoo supplies.”

He put his arm around me, and I felt torn. I leaned into him slightly, enjoying the contact, but in a way, it just left me empty. No one ever put his arm around me, or hadn’t in months, and my brain had trouble processing it. I closed my eyes and expected to breathe in the scent of Devlin’s aftershave; instead I got soap. I didn’t fit quite the same way under his arm, and it was a little awkward.

I missed Devlin.

“I think your hoodoo solved everything,” he said.

“Oh really?”

“Yeah. I mean, what are the odds that they’d end up here, tonight, at this time? Noelle didn’t come here with me ever. Did you and Devlin go here?”

I shook my head.

“See? You did it. And you did spells to break them up, so they already don’t want to be together. Now they’re going to realize how much they miss us and come back to us. Problem solved.”

He sounded so sure of himself. I wish I was that sure...

Sebastian sat down. I didn’t. Across the room, I saw Devlin and Noelle standing to leave. No, no, this wasn’t good. If they stayed, they could get drunk and possibly break up while Sebastian and I glared at them.

I started moving towards the exit, Devlin and Skankerella as my target. Lilith jumped up and stepped in my path. She reached for my arm, gentle but firm.

“You don’t want to do this,” she said.

I pulled my arm away. “Yeah, I do.”

“Briar—”

She didn’t follow when I ran towards the door.

Devlin glanced over his shoulder and saw me approaching. He rolled his eyes, whispered something to Noelle, and then he stayed behind while she went out ahead.

When he turned to face me, I felt like I’d been physically slapped. I’d never seen him look so hostile, and I felt my confidence slip away.

“What the hell, Briar?”

“I just...” Fuck. What had I been planning to say? Oh, yeah, right. I hadn’t planned anything. Because I’m stupid.

“What?” he repeated.

“I...I miss you.”

He sighed.

“And I’m sorry. I love you and—”

“So you stalk me? Is that it?”

“Well, no.” *Maybe kinda...* “Unintentionally—we thought we were stalking the skank and—”

“Her name is Noelle.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s actually ‘dirty slut.’”

“So you hooked up with her psycho ex-boyfriend and—”

“He’s not a psycho! And she cheated on him! Apparently with you. Or if it wasn’t you, I hope you got her tested for S.T.D.’s ’cause *enw*.”

Devlin opened his mouth to say something. I was losing him. I knew it.

“But...” I cut in. “But I love you and...I just want you to forgive me.”

“And what’s that supposed to achieve? Me forgiving you?”

Why was everyone asking such hard questions while I was drunk?

“Does that mean we’re supposed to get back together?”

“W-well...”

“*You* made your choice,” he said coldly. “It’s over. Deal with it.” He stormed out of the bar and I couldn’t think of what else to say.

Curio Killed the Cat

Dejected, I wandered back towards our table. Lilith still had Mom-Face but at least she didn't say "I told you so."

I slumped down in my chair. "That wouldn't have happened to Tina Fey."

"It's okay," Sebastian said. "It's Friday. We can do reconciliation stuff—that's what you said before. We'll go do it right now and then tomorrow—"

I was sick of hearing it. Sick of all of it. "I liked you better when you were plotting against Alicia."

"But—"

I stood again. "I'm going to get a drink."

"But you have beer here," Sebastian said, raising my half finished glass.

I ignored him. I had the harder stuff in mind.





Chapter Eighteen: Sour Whiskey

Briar

“And the reason is *yooooooooo*...and the rea....son...hmmm...” I hummed along to myself, my head on the counter.

I had one double shot of gin, and then our regular bartender recognized me and refused to serve me any more since I was so drunk. I thought I’d been laying there for twenty minutes or so. I was sobering up and it wasn’t fun. The desire to go home was strong, but then I remembered my empty apartment and my enthusiasm to leave waned.

A bunch of people from our table went home. I was pretty sure Sebastian and Lilith were still there, but I was ignoring them. My maturity abounds.

“I’m not a perfect person...” I couldn’t remember most of the lyrics to that song so I continued jumping from verse to chorus and back to the first line again.

“Whiskey sour.”

I recognized that voice nearby. Couldn’t place it, though. A boy voice. I liked listening to it...

Frowning, I sat up and looked around. A guy had the seat to my left. Unnaturally red hair cut short...eyebrow ring...I knew him. There were a pair of fresh scratches on his cheek, and after studying him for a moment, I remembered him.

“King of Cups.”

Okay, I didn’t actually remember his *name*.

Curio Killed the Cat

He glanced over at me. A smile came over his lips—a slightly predatory one. “Briar.”

He remembered my name, though. I was made of fail..

“I’m trying to remember your name but I just keep thinking ‘that pretty guy from the other day.’”

“Pretty?” He picked up the glass that the bartender slid in front of him. “I don’t know if that’s a good thing or not.”

“I think it’s a good thing. A very good thing. There are far too few pretty boys around.”

“As much as I love the adjective ‘pretty’, let’s use Toby.”

“Oh! Right! Hi, Toby.”

“Bad night, babe?”

“Did you guess that based on my inebriation?”

“You’re sitting at the bar by yourself.”

“So are you.”

“Yeah.” He shook his head and raised the glass to his lips. “Bad night.”

“Did you sing bad karaoke in front of your ex and make an idiot of yourself?”

“No.”

“I win.”

Toby finished his drink. “No karaoke in front of an ex. I think I might have preferred that.”

“Right.” I rolled my eyes. When would they give me more gin? “You should have been here half an hour ago.”

His glass was half full of ice now, and he absently stirred it with one of those red plastic sword thingies that they put in cocktails. I wished I had some so that I could stab certain people in the eyes with them.

“So it looks like I’m not going to get what I came to Toronto for,” he said.

“Didn’t find the building?”

“Found it. My...quarry eludes me,” he said carefully. “Guess your cards were right.”

I glanced at the table we’d all been occupying earlier. Few people were left. Sebastian sat alone. Probably moping over the slut. And the slut was off with my boyfriend. Ex-boyfriend. I hated everything.

The words left my mouth before I realized what I was doing. “Let’s see how right they are.”

He met my gaze and held it steadily. My mind was racing. So was my heart. *Bad idea, bad idea...* Stupid decision, so maybe I wasn’t sobering all *that* much...

I waited for the inevitable sting of rejection. It never came. Instead, he pulled a five from his pocket, left it on the bar, and then turned to me. He opened his mouth to speak, but I leaned forward suddenly and kissed him.

Lips against lips, that long awaited physical contact with someone, was welcome. Though I initiated it, his hands moved to my head and he pulled me closer.

I breathed in sharply when our lips parted.

“Where?” he asked in a low voice.

“My place is close.” *I can’t be doing this...* I flirted a lot, but I didn’t take strange men back to my apartment. I didn’t have one night stands. This wasn’t, me, but...

But I didn’t want to be me anymore. And I didn’t want to be Tina Fey either.

He gestured to the door. “After you.”

I was glad I was going first. With him behind me, I didn’t have to look at him, and then I wouldn’t chicken out. But then maybe it would be *good* if I chickened out...

My gaze darted to the people remaining at my table, and then away as we walked passed them. I felt a hand on the small of my back; I missed that kind of intimacy.

Though my feet felt heavy, I pushed on, out of the bar and outside to wait for a cab.



Lilith

“Did she just leave with some strange guy?” Sebastian gaped at the door.

Curio Killed the Cat

"It...seems that way." That didn't seem like the *Briar* thing to do. "I've never seen him before."

"I think he was in the store a few days ago. He bought stuff."

"Maybe she knows him, then," I said. "Maybe he's an old friend, back in town."

"Maybe he's a serial killer," Sebastian said. "We should follow them. Make sure they're okay. And then we could arrest him. Citizen's arrest because he's a serial killer. I bet there's an A.P.B. or something on him. We should call the cops." He picked at his nachos. A layer of broken corn chips lay across the platter with cheese and veggies that had been sitting there for an hour. At least he hadn't reached for the phone, so I knew he wasn't serious about the police thing.

"Briar can take care of herself," I said. *I hope.*

"Why is it all the girls went home with stupid douche bags tonight? First Noelle, and now Briar."

I'd reached my limit on drinks awhile ago, and had been drinking only water since to avoid getting any more than buzzed, therefore it was easy to hold my tongue. I avoided any mention of how *he* could have been going home with Briar if he'd been more observant.

"You should probably get a cab home," I said. "I think our 'party' is pretty much over."

"Do you think..." He glanced at me. "I should just get over Noelle?"

I sighed heavily. I disliked being asked for love advice. I never knew what to say. "You should follow your heart."

"That's...kinda cheesy."

"If you love Noelle, I'm sure Briar would be happy to keep working with you on getting her back." *And if she's going to be moving in with me, some work will equal rent money.*

"Well..." Sebastian seemed to be chewing on his words. "Okay, do you think you can like more than one person at once?"

These kids were killing me. I wished I had some of Briar's ability to speak without thinking or caring.

Before I could think to answer tactfully, a voice interrupted me.

Skyla Dawn Cameron

“Look into my eyes...”

We both turned to see the figure singing on the stage.

“You will see...”

Alastair had the microphone in a vice grip. Sweat had clumped some of the make-up on his forehead. His eyes were huge, unblinking, and dominated his head as he sang in a nasally voice.

“What...you mean...to-ooo meeee...”

I'd have been embarrassed for him, but Briar had used up most of my cringing for the night. I turned back to Sebastian.

“I should probably go home,” he said.

And so should I. We both rose, and I took Sebastian outside to make sure he reached a taxi safely.



Briar

The King of Cups tasted like Whiskey Sour.

I kept calling him that in my head. Sometimes I'm bad with names. Considering we were walking up the steps to my apartment to hook-up, I figured I'd better make an effort to remember *his*.

Toby...right, that's his name.

Inside my apartment, my gaze went immediately to my phone. The light on the cradle blinked, so there was definitely a message there.

I wanted to check. It could be Devlin. It could be...well, probably someone *other* than Devlin. But...

Toby reached for the light switch before me and flicked it on, flooding the living room with light. I felt self conscious suddenly. All the beer had worn off and the situation was getting awkward *really* quickly.

Curio Killed the Cat

I set my keys on the coffee table. I opened my mouth, to offer him a drink because I wasn't sure what else I was supposed to do.

Hands grasped my shoulder, and he spun me around and kissed me. Caught off guard, I took in a rough breath. His fingers sank into my hair possessively and the kiss deepened. Different lips than Devlin's, different technique, different everything.

But I adjusted to the change quickly. I twisted my arms free to strip off his shirt, and then kicked off my shoes. My hands settled on his chest, feeling the taut, quivering muscles there, and my fingertip brushed a nipple ring. That was hot.

A growl of desire sounded in his throat. I backed up towards the bedroom. He followed, yanking our clothes off as we went. The back of my knees hit the edge of my bed. His fingers dragged down the zipper of my jeans, then grasped the top and peeled them down. I fell back on the bed and lifted my legs for him to pull off the rest of my jeans. The remainder of his clothes followed, and he stood at the end of bed, very naked.

"There are condoms in the jewellery box on the dresser behind you," I said.

Toby gave me a crooked grin and made no move to get one. He moved forward, hands running up my legs, and crawled towards me. His lips found my knee, then my inner thigh, as one hand travelled higher.

I leaned my head back and sighed—the physical contact felt so good and I ached for more.

"Behind you," I repeated.

"Aw, I'm clean—I promise, sweetheart. Want a note from my doctor?" His fingers played over my panties. "I'll get you one."

I grinned. "I'm not worried about something your doctor would be looking for." I placed my foot on his chest and firmly pushed him into a standing position. I stretched my leg out to keep him at bay and his back hit my dresser.

"Honey," he began. "Really, I'm clean—"

"I'm a little more concerned about catching lycanthropy," I said.

A beat of silence, then, "Huh?"

“You’re a werewolf.”





Chapter Nineteen: Wherein Some Characters Hook Up

Briar

Dark brown eyes ringed in amber stared back at me. Silence grew long and heavy.

Toby grinned suddenly and gave a chuckle. I found it a little dry and unbelievable.

“Really funny, baby.”

I raised a dark eyebrow, questioning him. “Am I?” I kept him firmly in place with my foot on his chest. He was stronger than me, sure, but he didn’t make a move.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Oh, please.” I rolled my eyes. “Paw print tattoo? Moonstone? Your eyes? The way you look at me and move? You’re *totally* a werewolf!”

“I...no, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.”

More silence.

“That doesn’t bother you?”

It wasn’t a “yes”, but at least he wasn’t trying to play me anymore.

“To each his own—I’m just not interested becoming one. Got enough problems—I don’t need to turn into a snarly beast at the full moon. Once a month is already enough.”

“I don’t snarl.”

“I bet you do.”

“You can’t catch it—”

“You think I’ve never met a werewolf before? Please. One comes in regularly to buy silver amulets, and he talks to me non-stop about picking it up from this werewolf girl he knew who thought they’d be together forever. They split up six months later. He’s still a werewolf. Now, I don’t expect to see you past six hours from now—I don’t want anything lasting, including lycanthropy.”

The conversation seemed to have waned his enthusiasm—and desire—so I walked my feet down his torso, hooked a foot on either side of his hip, and drew him forward. I held his gaze firmly. Though a lone wolf, I suspected he was an alpha and the average person would look away from his stare. But not me. I challenged him.

I leaned back on my elbows and arched. “Now, are we going to get started, or do you want to argue some more?”

He grabbed a condom from the jewellery box and climbed on top of me. His lips found mine and he hardened again. Minutes later he was ready.

Fingers grasped my panties and fabric ripped as he tore them from my body. I forgot everyone else. I forgot *everything* else. I wrapped my legs around him, lifted my hips to meet his, and gasped as he thrust in me.



Lilith

My heels clicked on the pavement as I walked to my apartment. After sending Sebastian home in a cab, I went through my purse and found that I didn’t have enough cash to take one myself. But my place wasn’t far and I welcomed a walk in the warm June wind.

The street was near empty. Although streetlamps lit the sidewalk, it still felt dark and isolated. I glanced at my watch while I walked. It would be after two before I got home.

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I heard the low rumble of male laughter and voices ahead of me.

My back stiffened. I knew not to look scared or nervous, so I kept calm. I just wanted to get home without dealing with misogynistic stupidity. They stood several doors down, smoking in the doorway of an apartment.

The tone in their voices changed as they saw me. My step faltered for just a second.

I'm nearly home...nearly.

I gripped my purse tightly and continued on.

The group of men left their spot and started walking towards me. All three had their eyes on me, and as they whispered, there was no mistaking the intent: whatever they planned, I was their target.

They formed a line across the sidewalk. Several feet from them, I started moving towards the edge of the sidewalk.

They in turn moved to block me.

My throat went dry. I wish I had some special powers beyond seduction. I could bat my eyelashes and tell them to move, but I wasn't entirely sure that would work.

It was clear I wouldn't be ducking past them. My gaze darted to the buildings behind them—my place was so close.

The alley next to me led directly to the next block—I could take that. It was dark, sure, but if I walked—or ran—fast enough, three drunk thugs wouldn't catch me.

As they neared me, I decided that would be the best course of action. I made a hard right and turned down the dark alley, my step quickening.

And then I stopped.

A temporary orange fence was set up about halfway down where there had been some drilling. I'd seen the workers earlier that day, but completely forgot about it on my way home—they'd been fixing pipes or something. And apparently weren't done yet.

I turned to see three figures at the mouth of the alley, facing me, ready to close in.

Oh...dear.

I squeezed the strap of my purse, took a deep breath, and started forward.

Upon reaching them, my smile was forced, but I held on. “Excuse me, please.”

They didn’t move.

“It’s pretty late,” the tallest one said. Though lighting was dim, he seemed young. The drunken groups of idiots I would see harassing women a night often were still in their twenties. That actually gave me a touch of hope that this wouldn’t end badly—they likely weren’t actual predators. Just...stupid.

But that mob mentality was dangerous, I reminded myself. I couldn’t drop my guard at all.

“Did you get lost?” another one said. His light eyes were heavy lidded—if he’d been just a little drunker, perhaps he wouldn’t have been able to stand.

I kept up the smile. “No, just turned around. If you’ll excuse me—”

I started to walk again. They bunched in front of me.

To say I wasn’t scared would be a lie. I didn’t like to not have control in a situation. I straightened my spine and refused to look scared.

“I have to get home. Please let me through.” I tried to push through them, but then the tallest of the three grabbed my arm and pushed me deeper into the alley. I let out a surprised squeak, which I regretted immediately because it likely fuelled them on.

The shadow of a fourth figure played against the brick wall to my left, and I felt my stomach drop with dread. I didn’t have a chance...

One of my attackers shouted out in protest as the fourth figure grabbed him by the shoulders and threw him into a group of trashcans. I jumped as the metal cans clattered to the ground under his weight.

The others turned to my sudden saviour. Although I’d tried to use the reprieve to hunt through my purse for something, my attention was drawn to the man again and I tried to get a better look at him. His face and build weren’t familiar to me. I’d put him...roughly in his thirties, but then the alley wasn’t brightly lit and I was a poor judge of age once someone lost the youthfulness of twenty. He had dark hair that fell to an inch above his shoulder. His gaze darted back and forth between the

Curio Killed the Cat

two men about to leap at him, and then for an instant, it settled on mine. I felt something...strange come over me. A chill. Or tingle. I wasn't sure what it was, but for a moment, I felt even my breath escape me.

I expected something...heroic, I suppose—a sudden roundhouse kick or punch or something. But it never came as there was the unexpected *whack* of something hitting his head, and he slumped to the ground. Belatedly, I realized the one he'd tossed in the trash had gotten back up, and now he stood over the stranger's body, a trashcan lid in his hands.

They'd all but forgotten me now—with a laugh, the tall one slammed his foot into the gut of the man on the ground.

I could make it past them now, true. And call for help...

The man who who'd attempted to help me pulled himself onto his hands, but then one of the others stomped on his back, slamming him back into the ground.

I fumbled around in my purse until I found what I was looking for. I yanked out a can of pepper spray, ran forward, and squeezed the nozzle, waving it wildly and hitting all their eyes in turn. My other hand pulled out my cell phone and I started dialling.

"I'm calling the police," I said. "Get out of here!"

Shouting and rubbing at their eyes, they backed away, and soon I heard their steps fade down the street.

I knelt next to the stranger. "Are you okay?"

He pulled himself into a sitting position and reached for his head, then flinched. "I'll live." His eyes met mine and I felt that same strange feeling, like something had stolen my breath.

As he sat up straighter, light hit his face and I saw an ugly, bloody gash on the side of his head.

Immediately, I reached for him. "That doesn't look good—"

He jerked away and I stilled my hand, just an inch from his face.

He glanced at my hand, and then at me. "It's fine."

"I'm sorry," I said quickly, returning my hand to my side. "But it doesn't look fine. Do you want me to call the police?"

"No."

"Can I at least take you to the hospital?"

He began to rise, wincing as he moved. “No, I’ll be okay.”

I hope he doesn’t have broken ribs... I loathed the idea of letting him go home to possibly die of a concussion, but as I watched him walk away, I feared that was exactly what would happen.

“Wait!” I stuffed the pepper spray back in my purse, grabbed my cell phone, and rose to chase after him. “I...”

He stopped and turned to face me. He stood several inches over me, and gazed down to meet my eyes. There was a calm, gentleness to his expression that simultaneously both relaxed me and made my heart beat faster.

“I have a first aid kit,” I offered. Well, it was closer to a hospital supply cupboard, but then I felt it was always good to be prepared. “In my apartment. It’s right around the corner.”

He smiled, faintly. “You’re not worried I’m a serial killer?”

I wasn’t. Though I had a fairly good instinct for people, this trust went beyond that. But in spite of what my gut was telling me, I figured I ought to be practical.

I held up my cell phone and snapped a picture of him, then sent it to Briar. “I’m sending this to my friend,” I said as I texted her. “Should anything happen to me, the police will have a photo, so don’t try anything.” I smiled, quickly, lest he think I was actually scared.

“I get the sense you could take care of yourself anyway.”

“Perhaps, if someone steps in and distracts whoever is after me.” I slipped the phone back into my purse and extended my hand. “I’m Lilith.”

He took my hand gently and smiled, but didn’t offer me a name.

“It’s just over here,” I said, leading him out of the alley. I glanced at him as we walked. His dark shirt looked too big for him—the arms were long enough, but the body of the shirt seemed more than a size too large. “So were you on your way home, or going to work or something?” We stopped at my apartment building and I unlocked the security door.

“Just out for a walk.” Another vague smile. “You?”

“Home from a...social gathering. Sort of a goodbye party with people from work.”

“Who’s leaving?”

Curio Killed the Cat

“We all are.” I sighed heavily as we started up the stairs. “The store is closing.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

As am I.

We walked the rest of the way in silence. Rarely did I have anyone walk behind me up the stairs, and I suddenly felt very self-conscious in my skirt. Although it just covered my knees and was straight and simple with only a modest slit that showed nothing, a blush still crept into my cheeks.

I unlocked the door to my apartment and began turning on lights as soon as I stepped inside. “Please, have a seat. I’ll just...get some things.”

My mind seemed to be all over the place. I opened one cupboard, only to remember I wanted something else, so I went to another. Eventually I had some gauze, tape, and disinfectant in hand, along with a bowl of warm water and a fresh cloth.

I found him sitting on the couch, holding up the edge of his shirt to inspect where he’d been kicked. A dark bruise was forming.

“Do you suppose anything was broken?” I set the items on the coffee table and sat next to him.

“No, I’m fine.”

Sometimes I had the overwhelming urge to shake a man who just said “I’m fine” to everything when clearly he wasn’t fine at all. Instead, I took a few moments to slip off my jacket and put on my glasses before responding. “I wish you’d stop saying that. A doctor should check you out.”

“I heal quickly.”

I soaked the cloth in the water, then gently applied it to the cut on his temple. “Apparently not quickly enough. This doesn’t look good, but I don’t think you need stitches...”

He avoided my eyes while I cleaned the wound. The air around us was heavy and tense. I couldn’t lie to myself—I found him attractive. So there was the usual demonic pull of my succubus powers, but I’d always been able to keep that at bay fairly easily. But this close proximity had me barely able to breathe.

I applied the disinfectant, and thankfully, the wound seemed to have stopped bleeding. “Can you look at me? So I can see if you have a concussion?”

Hazel eyes glanced up at me, framed by long dark lashes. For a moment I stared, forgetting what I had been looking for.

And then I remembered we were supposed to be there to ensure he wouldn't go home and die later.

He breathed in sharply through his nose when I touched his face and tilted his head back so that the overhead light shone into his eyes.

“I don't think you have a concussion.”

He cast his gaze downward again and I ran my fingertips to smooth some hair away from where it had fallen over the cut. His eyes closed, perhaps involuntarily, as he seemed to lean into my hand.

“Any other scrapes?” I asked.

That seemed to return him to reality. His own hand moved over mine, holding it for a second before pulling it away from his face. He set my hand on my knee. “Thank you, but I should go.”

“Right.” I smiled quickly. “It's late. And you...probably have something to get to...”

As he turned away from me and moved to rise, I felt something clutch my chest again, like I couldn't breathe.

Without thinking, I reached out to grasp and turn his face towards me, and kissed him.

Just as I felt his lips move to kiss me back, cold reality struck me suddenly, violently. This wasn't some cheesy romance novel—I couldn't be *kissing* a complete stranger in my apartment.

I pulled back suddenly. “I'm so sorry, I don't know...I mean, I had a few drinks earlier, but I'm certainly not drunk, but I don't know...I apologize.”

He rose abruptly and started for the door. “I have to go.”

“Right.” I was at his heels, ready to lock the door behind him. It was too weird a night—I needed a few aspirin and to head straight to bed. “Thank you for helping me and—”

He spun suddenly to face me, and then he was kissing me. Rationality was totally lost. If this was a cheesy romance novel, count me happy to be in it. He backed me up against the wall by

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the door, strong fingers raking through my hair, and then down to my shoulders.

I had to be dreaming. This couldn't be real. I knew it couldn't be—maybe I'd been knocked out back there in the alley and all this was some dream as I lay there, possibly bleeding to death. Or maybe I'd just died and gone to some strange sort of heaven...

He leaned heavily against me, lips travelling over my throat, and I felt the bite of teeth grazing my flesh. My body ached for more—to tear off our clothes and ride him until sunrise, or to wrap my legs around him and get started right there against the wall.

A protest nearly left my lips when he paused to stare into my eyes for a moment. He pulled off my glasses, and I didn't argue because I didn't need them at this proximity, and then brushed from my face several long strands of hair that had escaped their binding.

“Who are you?” I asked, searching his eyes.

Another searing kiss was my answer. Hands travelled down to yank my blouse from where it had been tucked in my skirt and jerked open the front. A few buttons hit the floor.

Our lips parted again for a moment, and once again, I looked into his eyes. “You're not human,” I said.

“Neither are you,” he whispered back with a faint smile.

That sent a chill through me—very, very few could tell at first glance that I wasn't a human. But that gave me no clue as to his identity, and I failed to care when he kissed me again.

It was stupid and irresponsible, but I didn't care. I'd been alone for so long that I welcomed the feel of another body with me, in me, and...

He pulled away from me again, face flushing and eyes guilty. “I'm sorry.”

“It's—”

“I should go.”

“But—”

And this time he was gone before I could even register what had happened. I stood there on shaky legs, back heavy against the wall, and panting for several long moments, my mind racing.

What on earth was going on?



Liam

I sat at the bar and lifted a glass of clear, carbonated liquid to my lips and drank.

My cell phone vibrated on the counter next to the paper coaster, but I didn't answer. I figured it was Wilhelmina...again.

Guilty thoughts plagued my mind. I wouldn't speak of them to anyone, but...goddess, I wished I could.

Everyone else had gone home, mostly after embarrassing themselves on stage. Still, a few patrons remained—mostly the heavy drinkers, it seemed—so I remained since the place was still open.

“Perrier?”

Mostly everyone was gone...

I glanced to my left to see that kid...the Goth one. Lilith had said his name earlier, but I'd forgotten it again.

“Gin and tonic,” I said. “I stopped drinking Perrier about an hour ago.”

“Oh.” The kid sat there in silence.

The bartender returned. I finished my drink and ordered another.

“I'll have a gin and tonic too, please,” the kid said in an irritating, nasally voice. He casually pushed his half-finished bottle of Perrier to the empty space beside him.

What a weirdo, I thought as I took a sip of my new drink. Goddess help me, though, I would probably end up missing the kid and everything else now that my store was closed.

Probably.

Briefly.





Chapter Twenty: Morning After

Briar

The digital alarm clock on my bedside table blinked 12:00 am.

Power must have gone out at some point during the night. Didn't know what caused it, but now I had no idea what time it really was.

Wasn't sure if I cared, either. My head was a little sore. I was probably dehydrated from drinking so much. I spotted a half empty bottle of water next to the clock. Couldn't remember how long it had been there. Also, didn't care. I grabbed it, screwed off the top, and drank the warm, stale water. Better than nothing.

My gaze travelled over the empty side of the bed next to me. Well, I didn't really expect him to hang around. Hoping, maybe, but since when did my hope ever turn out well? I laid flat on my back, let my head sink into the pillow, and gave my body a good stretch. I ached. Good, fun aching, but aching nonetheless.

The front door opened and closed suddenly. I grabbed the sheet strewn across the bed to cover me—I didn't know who the hell would just be strolling into my apartment, but I was pretty sure I didn't want them to see me naked.

Minutes later, a familiar figure appeared in the doorway. He flashed me a crooked grin. "Good morning, sweetheart."

"Toby?" *Oh, hey, I remembered his name! Score!*

He walked over with a paper bag in hand, and a tray with two coffees. "Wasn't sure you'd be awake." He sat on the bed

next to me, balanced the tray on his knee, then leaned over to kiss me.

“I thought you were gone for good.”

Toby held the tray towards me and I took a coffee. “You didn’t have much in the way of breakfast food around.”

I propped the pillow against the headboard, pulled myself into a sitting position, and leaned back. The coffee was hot, but brought a welcome jolt of energy. “I’m not usually a breakfast person. I’m bad about skipping meals.”

He pulled four wrapped packages from the paper bag—sandwiches or bagels or something—and took two. “Well, I like a good breakfast. I have a big appetite.”

“Yes, I remember.” I took another sip of my coffee.

“Do you?”

I glanced over at him and rolled my eyes. “Oh, please. I wasn’t that drunk. Of course I do.”

“You’re taking the werewolf thing really well, for a girl,” he said.

I wasn’t about to even touch the “for a girl” comment. “It freaks people out?”

“Usually. And if not, it’s ’cause they’re groupies. That gets kinda weird.”

“Promise I’m not a groupie.” I took one of the wrapped packages, folded back the paper, and tore a piece of bagel to munch on.

“That’s refreshing.”

“Oh, right.” I rolled my eyes again. “I’m sure it’s really tough having women all over you all the time.”

“It’s not without its pros,” he admitted. “Still. So.” He nodded toward the coffee in my hand, ready to change the subject. “Good surprise?”

I don’t think either of us really thought he was talking about coffee, and I hadn’t decided yet how I felt. On one hand, I wasn’t looking for anything beyond the previous night. I was still heartbroken and miserable. On the other, it at least felt good that *someone* wanted to stick around.

“I could get used to someone bringing me breakfast in bed,” I said instead. “When are you leaving?”

Curio Killed the Cat

“I have to be at the airport in an hour. Gotta deliver the bad news.”

“Is someone going to break your kneecaps? Is that why you’re hiding out here?”

“No...” He took the coffee and bagel from me, and set them on the side table, then climbed on me. With a deep kiss, his fingers clasped the bed sheet and he drew it away from me.

I decided I was definitely going to make him late for his flight.



By the time Toby left—late for his flight, of course—it was afternoon. I finally fixed the alarm clock, took a shower, and then checked my messages. The one on my landline that I *hoped* maybe could have been Devlin turned out to be a telemarketer trying to “give” me a free plane ticket to Hawaii.

The two messages on my cell phone had me curious. Both were from Lilith. The first was a photo of a beat-up guy, and a message that I was to take it to the police should anything happen to her. The second was from a few hours later and she said she was fine. I called anyway.

“Hello?” she said as she answered.

“So I don’t have to call the police.”

“Oh. Briar. Hello.”

“Explain?”

She breathed in deeply, then exhaled. “I ran into some trouble on the way home last night.”

“Trouble from the hot guy whose picture you sent me?”

“No. But I’m fine now. Thank you for checking in.”

“Whoa, whoa—you don’t get off that easily. What happened?”

“Can we perhaps discuss it another time?”

“Why...cute guy still there?”

“Briar!”

Saints, she was uptight. “Just kidding.”

“I’ll have you know, no, I’m cleaning.”

“Cleaning what? The place was spotless when I was there like two days ago.”

“I’m washing the walls.”

What a nut. “Okay. Glad you survived. See you Monday?”

“Of course. Goodbye Briar.”

She sounded weird. I didn’t know what her problem was—maybe she got really hammered the night before and now she had a hangover. But I was too tired to push, so I hung up.

I finally got dressed, and then started thinking. Always a dangerous thing... But Toby bought me breakfast, so maybe I could pick up a late lunch for Lil and go visit. She’d probably think I was still trying to come live with her, but in all honestly, I just *really* wanted to know if she was actually washing her damn walls...



Lilith

Someone buzzed my apartment.

I had a momentary flash to the man from the night before. I wish I knew his name...or *what* he was...or anything, really. My head told me that wasn’t him at the door, but my heart hoped for something else.

“Yes?” I said over the intercom.

“It’s meeee!”

Once again, my brain was right.

I hope she doesn’t have her suitcases with her, I thought as I buzzed her up. Of course, knowing Briar, she probably didn’t own suitcases—she’d have a garbage bag of her clothes.

She reached my door just as I opened it. After kicking off her shoes—a gesture that both surprised and pleased me because for once she wasn’t tracking dirt inside—she strolled into the living room and sat on the couch. She set a bag on the coffee table.

“I brought lunch,” Briar declared with a grin.

Curio Killed the Cat

“Thank you, but I’ve already eaten.”

Her eyes grew wide, as if I’d actually hurt her feelings. “But...lunch. I thought it would be nice. I got cabbage rolls and perogies. They’re fresh.”

My previous assessment of her being a large kid seemed to be apt. I offered her a smile. “I’ll get some plates.”

It wasn’t that I didn’t appreciate the gesture, and I hated the idea that she’d think me ungrateful. But I hadn’t really thought about food at all that day. My head was still whirling from the night before.

“Were you actually washing your walls?” she asked as she served the food onto the plates. It did smell wonderful, and my stomach rumbled a little.

I gestured to the bucket and sponge tucked on the other side of the room and pictures resting on the floor while the walls dried. “Yes.”

“So anything good happen after I left last night?”

“Well...I put Sebastian in a taxi and went home myself.”

“Did he say anything after...um...seeing Noelle?”

I didn’t think that’s what she’d intended to ask, but I pretended to take her words at face value. “We...discussed, briefly, him potentially moving on. I think you set an example for that.”

Her face reddened. “Oh.”

“Sebastian said the man was a customer?”

“From a few days ago. Toby. He’s gone back to...wherever he came from. I think he said Cleveland. He didn’t look like a Clevelander to me, though.”

“And what do Clevelanders look like, exactly?”

She shrugged. “Not like him. He looks more like...L.A. Or somewhere like that. So who was the hottie you sent me a picture of?”

“I...” It was my turn to blush slightly.

“Oh, saints, did you hook up with him?”

“No!” That answer came out a little more abrupt than I usually spoke. I took a deep breath and lowered my voice before continuing. “I was on my way home and was...threatened but a few people. It wasn’t a safe situation. He tried to help me.”

“And got the shit kicked out of him? ’Cause that’s what it looked like.”

“He was hit a few times, yes. But he more or less saved me—or at least distracted them long enough for me to save us both. He wouldn’t go to a hospital, so I brought him up here to make sure he was okay.”

“And *then* you hooked up with him?”

“Really, Briar. I’m not that irresponsible.”

“Hey, I’m not irresponsible!”

I winced. I shouldn’t have been so careless with my words. “I didn’t mean—”

“If I were irresponsible, I’d be turning into a werewolf right now.”

I paused and pondered that statement for a moment. No matter how I turned it over in my head, I couldn’t make sense of it. “Pardon me?”

“Toby. He’s a werewolf. And you know how lycanthropy is spread...it’s the gift that keeps on giving, like herpes.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but couldn’t fathom what to say to that, so I closed it again.

“You *do* know how lycanthropy is often spread, right? I mean besides the bite?”

“Yes, I gathered.”

“Oh, good. I *so* didn’t want to have to explain that to you.”

I considered pointing out that just because I didn’t date much, that didn’t mean I was a nun, but I refrained from commenting on that.

“So what was your guy’s name?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

“He didn’t tell you?”

I shook my head.

“Wow...that’s kinda sexy.”

So at least I’m not the only one who thought so...

“And he just disappeared into the night?”

“Yes.”

“Huh...” She munched on some perogies for awhile. “You know...” Her gaze slid to mine and lips formed a sly grin. “We could bring him back.”

Curio Killed the Cat

“Briar, I’m not—”

“Not you. *Me*. Just a little something to draw him back in your life. Nothing coercive. I promise.”

“I don’t know...”

“Do you have a witness sample? Anything he...wrote on, or touched, or...hey, have you got any semen?”

“I *didn’t* have sex with him, for goodness sake.”

She shrugged. “Fine, but when we get him back here, do yourself a favour and get some semen. Soak a string the length of his penis in it and—”

“Blood,” I quickly interrupted her. “I have blood.”

“Oooh. Kinky.”

I reached for my temple; a headache was definitely starting. “From cleaning the head wound.”

“Oh. Okay, that’ll do. Where?”

“I’ll get it,” I said, thinking that perhaps an extended walk to the kitchen trash receptacle would lend me time to reconsider what she was proposing. I didn’t like the idea of bringing magic into things, but...

But my morals aren’t helping me in this.

I’d barely slept. I couldn’t, for some reason. I just...had to see him again. I had to solve this mystery.

Just as I collected the blood-soaked gauze from the waste basket, I heard a phone ring in the other room. It was Briar’s.

“Ooh, Sebastian,” she said with a grin. She held up the phone for me to see. “Text message. I apparently need to call him ASAP. He used many exclamation points...”

Her attention averted, I was actually glad for the reprieve. I wasn’t sure her plan was such a good idea...

She dialled his number, pressed the phone to her ear, and a moment later was all smiles. “What’s up?”

I hung back, just out of the living room. I knew that she didn’t mind me there—indeed, if she did, she would have just asked me to leave, or go herself. But I still didn’t feel comfortable intruding.

“Uh huh?” she continued. She looked genuinely happy—I supposed whatever Sebastian said was good news. “Just tell me. What’s so great...”

The change in her eyes was almost imperceptible at first. A quick blink, and it was as if a different person looked back. Slowly her smile fell.

“That’s great.” Silence followed as she listened to the voice on the other line. “Yeah. No, that’s really awesome. Well, *dub*, I am the best. It’s almost like you’re surprised.”

She kept up the super happy voice, but when she blinked a few more times, I thought I caught the faint glint of tears on her eyelashes.

“That’s pretty much it, then, unless you have something else come up. Yep, we’ll—well, right now I’m kinda busy with Lil. Have fun though. Yeah, later.” She hung up her cell phone and gazed down at the coffee table blankly for a moment.

I stepped into the living room with slow steps. “Briar?”

She still didn’t look up at me. “Seems I’m like the very best hoodoo woman ever. I got Sebastian and Noelle back together. Imagine that.”

“Briar...I’m sorry.”

She shrugged casually and smiled up at me. “Whatever. That’s what he hired me for. I made good money. We should celebrate or something...though maybe not just in case I end up singing and drunk again.”

“We could do something else,” I offered. I hated the idea of her feeling so bad and being alone with her thoughts. “My treat.”

“Nah.” She rose, hooked her thumbs on the pockets of her worn jeans, and fidgeted for a moment. “I should probably go. You have to go back to your wall cleaning...and I have to drown and burn a doll-baby...” She went to pick up her shoes.

“You can’t do that,” I said as I started after her. “She didn’t—”

“Bitch deserves what’s coming to her,” Briar said. “How many other relationships do you think she’s destroyed? Boyfriends she’s cheated on? What goes around *doesn’t* come around, Lil, unless someone brings it. And believe me, it’s gone around and around and now it’s headed *straight* for her. I have a bottle of D.U.M.E. Oil I’ve *never* used. That’s about to change.”

Curio Killed the Cat

I wanted to stop her, but I knew it was of little use. She might be lazy around the shop, but when it came to something like this...she was quite determined.

Briar had the door open and she was about to head into the hallway, when she glanced back at me. “Oh, here, hand me that bloody thing—I’ll take care of your boy too.”

“I...” I held back. “I don’t think so. Not right now.”

She shrugged. “Suit yourself. But if you change your mind, let’s go with a Thursday or Friday, okay?” And with that, she left.





Chapter Twenty-One: Goofer Dust Swing

Briar

I often worked in silence.

Some rootworkers listened to music that set the mood. Typically, songs with lyrics weren't a good idea because they could ruin your focus.

But I was in a music mood. Some days were just like that. The sky was overcast and my apartment seemed unnaturally dark. I had all my goodies out to work with: fabric to sew up a doll-baby, some of Noelle's personal effects to add to it, Spanish moss to fill it with...then I had a variety of oils, incense, and sachet powders. Finally, I had my mortar and pestle, along with the makings for Goofer Dust. Hadn't made that in awhile, but I'd used my last batch on Devlin and Noelle's break-up spell, and now that Saturday afternoon's activities definitely called for some more.

So I put on the blues. It was definitely a blues-y day, and I sang along while I dragged the needle and thread through the fabric to make the doll-baby.

"You stole my man, you no good rat..." Such a scarily appropriate song. I wasn't sure what man I wanted to sing about now. I was a little glad that Toby didn't stick around, 'cause saints knew the skank likely would have seduced him too. She was definitely evil. "Don't you know you can't get away with that..."

I stuffed the doll-baby, then sewed several strands of Noelle's hair into the head. I smiled at my work. All done.

Curio Killed the Cat

The baptism was over quickly, and I was satisfied the doll was fully tied to Noelle. I actually had to get out my notes for baptising a doll—I hadn't done it in a long time. Contrary to what Lilith and Liam likely thought of me, I didn't spend all my time cursing people. Even someone like Billie, who clearly hated me and plotted my downfall, wasn't worth it to go to the trouble of making a doll. I tried to hotfoot her out of town, sure, and that worked when we were teenagers, but then we ended up working down the road from one another as adults. Couldn't get rid of her.

Noelle Jean, though, was under my skin. I hadn't ever really met her. But...something was off about her. All one had to do was look at how these guys acted when she was around. Devlin got all weird and mean, Sebastian turned into a puppy following his master.

“Why, you should be dead, you no good rat,” I sang. It was a rather upbeat song for being about plotting against some home wrecking tramp.

Just as I'd gathered the ingredients to make Goofy Dust, I heard a knock at my door.

I hated people disturbing me during a ritual. I used to have a sign on my door that said, “Do not disturb: Ritual in progress”, but then some stupid teen girl down the hall would always knock and ask me what kind of ritual. She was a “white witch” apparently. I asked if that meant she was a neo-pagan Wiccan, and she blinked a few times in confusion. Of course, I then sent her to Liam, because I knew she'd make him want to pull his hair out.

I put the doll-baby on my altar with the rest of my items and covered it all with a black cloth. No sense in letting guests see what I was up to, even if they wouldn't be around too long.

Someone knocked again.

“I'm coming!” Saints, people were so goddamn impatient...

Even my thoughts ceased when I opened the door.

I stared at Devlin for several long moments, trying to process the sight of him in my—in *our*—hallway again. My hand slipped from the doorknob to hang uselessly at my side for a moment.

Words escaped me. That was a very rare occurrence for me.

And then Lil Johnson's song in the background, about that "no good rat," snapped me back to reality.

"So you're here because she broke up with you?" I steered my eyes to him and crossed my arms at my chest. "You know, she'd probably keep both of you around."

"Don't start."

"Don't tell me what to do."

"Briar—"

"No, I'm not going to be your back up chick just because that skank dropped you—which, by the way, you shouldn't be surprised about—"

"I'm here because I miss you."

That silenced me.

"Can I come in?"

It felt weird that he was asking. I nodded and stepped back, then closed the door behind him.

"I..." He paced past me, raking his hands through his hair. "I can't stop thinking about you. It's been...non-stop for months. Every waking moment—hell, even the sleeping ones. It's constant, Briar."

Okay, so maybe all my intranquilling *did* work...

"And then I saw you last night..."

My memory was hazy, but it wasn't *that* hazy. "And you said some shitty things."

"What was I supposed to think?"

"Uh, that I was drunk and I was pouring my heart out to you?"

"We went home last night and..."

The word "home" and the implication it was with *her* had my blood on fire.

"...and we got in a huge fight...'cause I realized I was just hiding. I love you. I've only ever loved *you*."

Saints, I'd wanted to hear these words for...ever, it seemed. Since the moment he walked out the door.

"I was just sick of all the fucking head games." He slumped down on my couch.

Curio Killed the Cat

I slowly followed and sank down next to him. “I should have told you to stay.”

“We needed the time apart anyway.” His hand slid over mine. Such a familiar gesture—he’d done it a million times before.

This was what I wanted. But...why didn’t it feel right?

“When I left—when I was walking down the stairs and out onto the street, I just kept picturing you following me. I thought...I thought I’d hear your voice, and turn around, and there you’d be.”

“You know I have way too much pride for that. *Had*, that is. Apparently I’m not above standing on stage singing and chasing you through a bar *now*.”

“I’m just glad that you missed me. I didn’t think you would.” Devlin squeezed my hand.

My brain inadvertently flashed to the night before. *I don’t want you to be sad*, Sebastian had said when he took my hand.

“I think we have a lot of talking to do,” Devlin continued, though I only half heard him. “But I think we can get this to work.” When I didn’t respond, he reached over and brushed some hair from my face. “Briar?”

I *like you*, he’d said, with noted emphasis on the word “I” as he moved the hair from my eyes, and I looked up at him from where my head rested on the tabletop.

“Briar?”

I looked over at Devlin. “I’m over you.”

“Uh...what?”

I felt tears in my eyes. They stung. Saints, I was sick of crying. “You broke my heart.”

“You broke mine.”

“I know. I know I wasn’t entirely *there*, all the time. I was a shitty girlfriend sometimes. Locked in my own little world. But this isn’t elementary school and ‘you hurt me first’ isn’t a good defence.” I leaned back on the couch and gazed up at the ceiling, thinking, processing, and realizing. “Maybe I should have gone after you when you left, but maybe *you* should have given me more than thirty seconds to absorb it. You said you were

interested in someone else. Do you have any idea what that felt like?”

“I was just trying to be honest.”

“Well, so am I. That hurt. A lot. If you’d come back in a few days, maybe we could have been able to talk. But you didn’t. And for all these months, I just kept thinking that all I wanted was for you to come back. For things to be like they were. But they’re not going to be the same.”

“No, we need to start over—”

“I don’t think I *want* to. This is all I’ve been wishing for, praying for, for months now...but I just realized it’s not really what I want. I’m over you.”

He propped his elbows on his knees and his head sank into his hands. I felt a sting of regret, of pain for hurting him. I still loved him. And maybe it was wrong of me to use all those spells to bring him back, but I was starting to wonder if they made that much of a difference in the first place. This was Devlin. *My* Devlin. Of course he wasn’t really going to forget about four years just like *that*.

“I thought that you...” He looked up at him, eyes rimmed with red. “I thought you said, last night, that...”

“I did miss you. And it hurt more than anything ever has...and I had a choice. I never realized it before today, but I did choose something. I moved on.” With a deep breath, I rose and stepped towards the door. “You probably should get ‘home’ to Noelle.”

“I’m not going back to her.”

Right, that’s what they all say. “Then I hope you find someone who makes you happy. And preferably isn’t skanky.”

He stood as well, walked to me, and put his arms around me in an embrace. I hugged him back. It registered in my mind that it would be the last time I’d likely ever hold him, but I didn’t feel the sadness I expected I would.

“I’ll see you?” he whispered against me ear.

I smiled. “Hopefully not at any karaoke bars.”

I watched him leave my apartment for the last time, feeling strangely optimistic. It would be easy, familiar, to chase after him and fall into old patterns, but that wasn’t what I wanted.

Curio Killed the Cat

I *had* made a choice, at some point, over the past few months, although I didn't realize it at the time. I didn't want any more drama and hot, angry make-up sex. He'd always judged the hoodoo—I didn't want to be someone who looked down on me. If I did, I'd date Liam.

No, I wanted to be happy. I wanted Sebastian.

But I wouldn't do any spells. No more goofing or intranquility stuff. No petitioning St. Martha.

I was just going to talk to him. I'd tell him how I felt. And if he didn't want me, then fine. But no more moping and being fixated on the drama. I was a changed person.

But *first*...I really had to finish cursing that doll-baby of Noelle.





Chapter Twenty-Two: Closing Day

Briar

For the first time in my five years of employment at *Curio Killed the Cat*, I got to the shop before my shift was scheduled to start. In fact...I couldn't remember a day when I got there *on time*. So early was good. I was definitely turning over a new leaf.

Of course, my leaf was still Sebastian-less. I kept Saturday as my revenge day and did a number of horrible things to the Noelle doll-baby, and then tried to get a hold of him twice on Sunday. No call back, but I hadn't given up yet. Since I was nearly officially unemployed, I'd have all kinds of time on my hands. I'd see him eventually. Even without the client/spellcaster relationship, we were still friends. We had more evil against Alicia to plot. So we'd sit down, have a beer, and I'd tell him how I felt. Welcome to the new and improved Briar Malik: honest and no shame.

"Hey!" I called to Lil as I came in.

She was putting together some boxes to pack away the extra stock. Of course, she chose to do so in a pencil skirt and heels, so it wasn't exactly easy to kneel down and get the boxes unfolded and taped.

"You weren't kidding when you said don't own jeans, right?"

She gave me a look. That "Lilith" look. It was part bossy, part parental, and one hundred percent something I was going to miss.

Curio Killed the Cat

“Our last day isn’t an excuse to dress badly,” she said.

“Aw, I’m going to miss you, Lil.”

“I’m pretty sure you’ll still see me.”

“Oh, right, when I crash on your couch.” I grinned. “Just ’cause I was drunk doesn’t mean I don’t remember that.”

“Any luck on finding a new job yet?”

“Nope. I’ll keep trying to get new clients, though.”

“I may...I may have some work for you.”

“Uh oh. Hard work?”

She smiled. “Hopefully not. I think I’ll take you up on your offer to find...the man from the other night.”

“Oh! Cool!”

“But it can’t be anything...forceful. I don’t want to make him come back. Just...assist our paths in crossing again. I just feel as though I need to determine...who he is, I guess.”

“Sure thing. But I’ll make that a freebie ’cause we’re friends. So I think I’m going to keep the Curio site going. I’ve been getting some clients through there, and maybe I can kinda run the store, like, privately through eBay.”

“That’s good initiative. I’m proud of you.”

“Yeah.” I hopped on the barstool. I knew I should probably start helping with the boxes, but since I was in on time, I figured I had a good ten or twenty minutes before I needed to be working. “I’m all new and improved. Have I mentioned that? I kick ass now.”

“Do you?” She struggled with the current box for a moment, then sighed. At last, she lifted it and set it on the counter and started taping the bottom from there.

“Yeah. I think I realized it when Devlin came over on Saturday.”

She stopped what she was doing. “What?”

“Don’t you mean ‘pardon?’”

“Briar—”

“Okay, so yeah, Devlin shows up, and he’s all like, ‘I miss you so much, and let’s get back together, and I broke up with Noelle.’ And then *I’m* like, ‘I love you too, but I’m over you now.’”

“You’re over him now? Just as of two days ago?”

“No, stupid, I’ve been coming to this for awhile. No more drama and stuff. I’m new and improved.”

“You’ve said that. How about you improve by handing me another box?”

I supposed I could maybe help. I picked up a few boxes and started unfolding them. “Any sign of Liam?”

“In the back sorting files. Have you...spoken to him lately?”

Lil was getting forgetful in her old age. “About the law of three or my customer service skills?”

“Seriously, Briar.”

“When have I *ever* had a serious conversation with him that didn’t turn into an angry debate about his self-righteous beliefs? Why?”

“I’m not exactly certain.” She frowned. “Something is wrong. He’s been growing more and more distant these past weeks, and then he specifically asked if you and I could have lunch with him today so that he could tell us about something.”

“As long as he doesn’t get to pick the place. And where’s our illustrious leader?”

Lilith paused her task to look at me in confusion. “Who?”

“Madam Curio. Does she even know we’re packing up today?”

“She’s supposed to be by later with the landlord.”

“Why is he coming—so that he can cackle about our lack of jobs?”

“I highly doubt Mr. Adamski *cackles*,” Lilith said with another sigh.

“I bet he does.”

A figure stepped out of the shadows by the book cases. Startled, I jumped. “Dammit, Ally! Don’t you have school?”

“I’m here to help.”

“Scaring me isn’t helping.”

He went back to the corner to sulk.

The bell over the door rang. There was a big “Closed” sign on it, so I wasn’t sure what customers would be coming in. My eyes lit up as they settled on Sebastian, however.

“You’re here! Don’t you have work?”

Curio Killed the Cat

“Took a personal day.” He lifted one of the empty boxes and flashed me a grin. “I’m here to be manly and carry things for you.”

I jumped off the barstool, walked over, and poked my index finger into his stomach. “I can totally carry more than you.”

He dropped the box back on the floor. “Yeah, good point.”

“I’m glad you’re here—there some stuff I wanted to tell you.”

“Oh, me too!”

Him too. He was smiling, so it must be good news. It was probably, “You’re wicked hot, Briar, and I’m madly in love with you.”

I might have been new and improved and mostly shameless, but I didn’t want to confess everything in front of Ally and Lil. “C’mon.” I grasped his hand and dragged him towards the back office.

Belatedly, I remembered that Liam was in there, and I found him standing over the filing cabinet. He looked over at me. “Oh. I wasn’t sure if you’d be in today.”

“It’s our last day. Of course I would be.”

“Briar...” He sighed and walked over to me. “I realize we haven’t always...gotten along terribly well. But I want you to know that—”

“Yeah, okay, can we maybe do this later?”

“I was about to apologize for years of my less than desirable behaviour towards you.”

“That’s great, but you still have to go, ’cause I have to talk to Sebastian for a minute.”

He looked ready to say more, but at last shook his head and left the office.

“Okay.” I closed the door so it was just the two of us. “So—”

“Me first?” he asked.

I nodded. I was looking forward to a declaration of undying love.

“You better sit down for this.”

The only chair was the crappy office one that sank when people sat on it. “I’ll stand.”

“Well, I told you I made up with Noelle. She came by Saturday morning and wanted to get back together.”

I was going to be really happy when he got through this part of the story.

“But I made it very clear that I was still hurt and had some issues,” he continued.

And then she died horribly, I finished for him in my head.

“So last night she was...like...you know.”

I so didn’t want to know.

“But I made it very clear I had some boundaries. She cheated on me. I’m not going to sleep with her.”

That made me smile. “Good for you.”

“I mean, I can’t do that kind of thing now without a major commitment.”

“And that’s when you kicked her to the curb?”

“No, that’s when we got engaged.”

Silence. Heavy, heavy silence. I wasn’t sure if I was hearing correctly.

“You...what?”

“We’re engaged! Can you believe it?”

I sank onto the edge of the desk. “I can safely say...no.”

“I know.” He paced back and forth in front of me. “I can’t believe it either. But I wanted a commitment. And that’s it. No sex ’til we’re married.”

“And...when will that be?”

“I dunno. Soon, probably. I don’t want her to cheat on me again.”

Boy brains were infinitely bizarre.

“Isn’t this exciting?”

If he asks me to be a bride’s maid, I’m going to beat him with the chair.

“If you trust her—” I began.

“I do.”

“Even though you have a lot of evidence to the contrary—”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“And you think this is really the best solution—”

“Well—”

“And you’re happy...”

Curio Killed the Cat

There. I'd planted enough suggestions in his head. If he didn't see what a monumental mistake this was...

"I am. I think. I mean, I am. It's what I wanted. Mostly."

What he wanted. Wonderful. "Great. That's super." I started toward the door. "I have to go pack now."

"Well, hey, what were you going to tell me?"

I hesitated. I still wanted to tell him. I mean, he was engaged now, no matter how fucking stupid it seemed. But...I still thought he should know.

I played over the words in my head. How to phrase it. What exactly to say. I couldn't chicken out now...

You helped me realize that I... No, that was lame. If I hadn't met you, then I'd still be moping over Devlin, and...nope. I'm actually smiling, and it's because of you. That had potential...

"Okay, the truth is—"

The office door opened. I was about to snap some angry comment when I saw it was Lilith. Colour had left her face and she was frowning.

"What's up, Lil?"

"You...you need to get out here."

Oh, saints, who died? "What...?"

"Please."

Fine then. Ruin my declaration of love moment.

Sebastian followed me out of the office into the storefront. Liam stood by the cash register, arms crossed over his chest and staring across the room at Madam Curio and Adamski. Ally still hovered in the corner. Another older, shorter man stood in the center of the room.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Oh, good news, dear!" Madam Curio said. "Everyone still has a job."

"I...uh...what?"

"Exactly what she said," Lilith said in a low voice. "But no one has explained further."

"I had an offer to rent the space," Adamski said. "Someone with far better credit. Debts are being paid off in instalments, and the store is remaining open."

My gaze went to the strange old guy. “So who the hell is this?”

“Your new superior,” he said. “And I’d admonish you to choose your phasing carefully.”

Great, new old boss with attitude.

“Fine. And who might you be, kindly old man?”

“Quentin Nicholas,” Liam said before the man could answer.

“Why do I know that name?” I asked with a frown.

Lilith sighed. “Because he owns *The Magical Pentacle*.”

I spun to face Liam. “Traitor!”

He gaped at me. “Excuse me?”

“*You* said to Lil that you needed to talk to us about something. And she said you’d been distant. You had something to do with this!”

“I was offered a job at *The Magical Pentacle*,” he said. “Wilhelmina came to me about it, trying to get me to leave this store before it closed. But I didn’t.” He glanced at Lil and then back to me. “I didn’t like lying about it, however. I was going to tell you.”

“I still don’t believe you,” I said. “How else would you know *that* guy?”

“I met him years ago. I didn’t know about this, Briar.”

“The only ones who knew about this arrangement were Mr. Nicholas and Ms. Jannessen,” Adamski said.

Saints, they were talking about a whole lot of people I didn’t know. “Who’s that?”

“Your former boss.”

My gaze flickered to Madam Curio, who was still smiling. She seemed quite delighted. I figured she was drunk.

“Yes, that’s me,” she said. “This is so exciting. We’ve been discussing this for a few weeks now in secret, but I didn’t want to get your hopes up.”

So I shouldn’t have accused Liam of being a traitor...apparently my boss and the landlord were.

“Just the three of us knew about it,” she continued.

Heels clicked on the hardwood. “And me.”

Curio Killed the Cat

How I neglected to notice Billie Humphrey was there—even out of sight—was beyond me. She'd apparently been hanging out behind a bookshelf, but I should have sensed her evil presence or smelled her bad perfume or something.

“What’s she doing here?” I asked.

“There’s going to be a bit of a staff change,” Quentin said.

Billie had a satisfied smile on her face. I totally wanted to lay the smack down.

“Staff change?” Lilith said before I could comment with a bit more in the way of profanity.

“Yes,” he said. “Effective immediately, Wilhelmina Raven will be transferring to *Curio Killed the Cat*.”

Billie looked just as shocked as I felt. She stomped across the floor. “What?”

Quentin responded calmly. “You’ll be transferring to *Curio Killed the Cat*. Lilith Mare will be promoted to management at *The Magical Pentacle*.”

We all glanced at one another.

“But you said Briar would be fired and I’d get to run—” Billie started.

“Of the existing employees, Ms. Mare is most qualified to move to management position. She’ll run *The Magical Pentacle* while I oversee this shop to see if it can turn a profit. As for terminating employment...well, it’s far more cost effective to keep current workers than train new ones.” He glanced over the boxes for a moment. “So unpack the stock, everyone. First thing tomorrow morning, the transfer will be in effect.” Without another word, he left the shop, leaving a roomful of stunned people in his wake.

Billie’s jaw had all but hit the floor, and I wished I could enjoy it more...but I couldn’t. Eventually she stalked after Quentin, shouting in his wake about how he’d promised her this and that.

“Well!” Madam Curio turned to us. “Isn’t that great news?”





Cast



(Sebastian, Briar, Lilith, Alastair Nightshade, Wilhelmina Rave, Liam)



Briar



Lilith



Liam



Sebastian



About the Author

Skyla Dawn Cameron is a full time author living in Southern Ontario where she writes up a storm and dreams of becoming world dictator.



Her debut novel, *River*, was released to critical and reader praise alike, and she finally got the damn sequel done and released. Her second novel, *Bloodlines*, begins a hot new urban fantasy series, and is currently available from Mundania Press.

Skyla moonlights as “The Marketing Whore” and is the author of several chapbooks that aim to encourage writers to shamelessly self-promote their work. She also dabbles in art but isn’t nearly as good at that as she likes to pretend she is.

Feel free to drop her an email any time at skyla@skyladawncameron.com—in fact, do it right now ‘cause ten bucks says she’s checking her inbox as you’re reading this. Her home on the web is located at www.skyladawncameron.com where readers will find all sorts of goodies including newsletters, community forum, contests, book previews, free fiction, and more.

Her serial fiction websites are located at www.curiothekilledthecat.com and www.apocalypsenovel.com





Other Works

Mundania Press – www.mundania.com

River

Wolfe

Bloodlines

Hunter (coming 2010)

Lineage (coming soon)

Exhumed (coming soon)

Oblivion (coming soon)

“Whiskey Sour” in Bad-Ass Faeries 2: Just Plain Bad



Indigo Chick Press – www.lulu.com/indigochickpress

Catharsis

The Marketing Whore’s Guide to Shameless Self-Promotion

The Marketing Whore’s Guide to Creating an eSerial

Children of the Apocalypse - Part One: The Beginning

Children of the Apocalypse – Part Two: The Immortal



Other

Nothing But Red (nothingbutred.wordpress.com)