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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 about five 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.

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—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 was 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 scanning 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 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 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 had in class when it was in session.

“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 said, pausing 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 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 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...

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