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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.

“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 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 the kid who emigrated from India 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.”

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 in the door 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. *Duh, Briar.* “I really should sleep anyway.”

“Maybe we could—”

“Gimme a call later this week,” I said, continuing to backtrack 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 up there 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 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 forget 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.

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