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## 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 peak 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 but more money for me. 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 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.

“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.”

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 couple of weeks, 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, 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 of tea, relax, and we’ll talk about doing that Clear and Cut on the bank guy, okay?”

Briar definitely had her moments of kindness, and I was infinitely grateful for it.

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