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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.

“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?

“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 Papa 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.

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, and 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."

"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.

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 guards 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.”

“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 I.

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 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.*

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