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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.”

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 gaze 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.”

“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 goofed 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 mess. 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 knew 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."

Briar was off the barstool in seconds, glancing around the bar. "Where?"

Sebastian pointed out two fingers 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.

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