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Chapter Two: Family Meeting

Lilith

Although Madam Curio didn't seem any less cheery than usual, dread weighed heavily upon me as I watched her perch her short, portly frame on the stool behind the counter. It seemed this meeting would be held in the main shop rather than the office, so I stepped up and took charge.

“Liam, put on a pot of tea,” I called as I moved toward the door. “Briar...” My gaze went to Briar Malik. She leaned on her elbows on the counter, chin in her hands as if she was unable to support it. Her dark eyes moved in a sideways glance to meet my own and I suspected she wasn't eager to do...well...*anything* to lighten the situation at that moment.

“Just stay there, then,” I said instead. My attention snapped to Alastair. He hovered in the corner of the shop, black clothes helping him to fade into the shadows. He probably expected we'd just let him stay there—he seemed, some days, to be a part of the furnishings and was all but glued to Wicca bookshelves. But this felt far too important to allow a customer—no matter how loyal—to remain on the premises. I opened the front door and gestured for him to exit. Alastair's eyes widened, but I remained firm.

His shoulders curved into a slouch and he dragged his feet out the door. Just as he exited, I swung the door closed and turned the sign on the front, letting customers—should we actually receive any—know that we were “out to lunch.”

Liam returned with a tray of aromatic tea, and he poured a cup for Madam Curio. Briar slipped off her flip-flops and stood up straight, then slid onto the edge of the counter facing our boss. I set my clipboard down next to her and waited while Madam sipped her tea. Spindles of long gray hair escaped her casual bun and brushed her cheeks as her head bobbed up and down to some unheard music. Although she'd called the meeting, she didn't seem ready to discuss what was going on.

“Can you tell us what Mr. Adamski said?” I asked.

“Did you miss the rent again?” Briar asked. I sent a sharp her look way immediately, but she stared back as clueless as could be and didn't deign to apologize.

“Oh, it looks that way,” Madam said.

There had to be more going on; Mr. Adamski wouldn't merely show up for the sake of collecting rent. Not when the back steps needed fixing and occasionally water leaked in the bathroom. No, he'd send an angry letter if we were late paying.

“It seems,” Madam Curio took a sip of her tea, “that we've run out of money.”

Liam, Briar and I exchanged glances.

“There was a finite amount?” Briar asked.

Our boss nodded.

“Are we not making a profit?” Liam asked, blonde brows pulled into a frown.

Briar burst out laughing. She sobered and sighed dramatically as she realized no one had joined in. “C'mon, that was funny.”

“How long have we been out of money?” I asked gently.

Madam Curio still didn't seem upset or at all bothered by the circumstances. Though it was nearly noon, a strong odour of whiskey surrounded her—it wouldn't entirely have surprised me if she had partaken of certain ‘spirits’ already that day.

“Well, I had a letter from the bank in the spring.”

“It's only July,” I said. “We have plenty of time to—”

“Sorry, dear. I meant the spring before that.”

I tried to keep my expression calm, but that wasn't the easiest of tasks when presented with such information.

"If we aren't making a profit, how is it the place is still in business?" Liam asked.

"Oh, I've just been paying with my lottery winnings."

"You won the lottery?" Briar said, echoing my thoughts and no doubt Liam's as well.

"Oh yes," Madam Curio said with a smile. "About eight or nine years ago."

"How much?"

"Fifty-three million."

Not one of us said a word. Not even Briar, and she had a comment for everything.

"So Howard is looking at closing the shop," she continued, again looking quite unperturbed.

I forced my voice out calmly. "How soon?"

"Three weeks to come up with owed payments plus interest."

Three weeks. I gasped audibly. Liam backed up slowly until his rear hit the edge of the counter, and he slouched against it, his expression one of shock.

"Three weeks," Briar whispered. "But...this is heavy stuff. It can take me up to twenty-eight days to manifest a decent money spell!"

"Of course you'd make this about you," Liam said.

"I don't see you coming up with a solution!" Briar shot back. "So we go to the bank and get a loan. I'll do a major honey jar or something, and—"

"You can't *coerce* someone into giving us money—"

"No, *you* couldn't 'cause you're incompetent with anything that doesn't involve some lame blessing—"

"Would you two stop it?" I whispered. Madam Curio might not have been bothered by their quarrelling, but it certainly wasn't helping the situation. We had to approach this logically. Every problem could be solved; we merely needed to discern the solution. "Three weeks seems rather...abrupt. Isn't this a process that would take much longer, normally?"

“Oh, yes—there’s something around here somewhere...” She stood and set her teacup on the stool seat behind her. A set of drawers—two of which were locked—lay under the counter near the cash register. She stooped and unlocked the second one, rifled through the papers within, and finally retrieved a few crumbled pages. Her face beamed as she stood straight and turned my way. “There they are! I thought maybe I had lost them.”

I accepted the sheets and my nervous stomach churned as I read the print. It was a notice of eviction. Dated four months ago, at that.

“You didn’t tell us?” I tried to keep the accusatory tone out of my voice, but in truth I was hurt. I knew she didn’t share all of the business side with her employees, but something of this magnitude certainly seemed like the sort of thing she would tell us.

Or at least tell *me*.

“I didn’t want to trouble you with it,” she said, smiling kindly. “We’ll sort something out. Now, you know, I do have to get down to the deli today—they have those lovely macadamia nut cookies. Would you like any?”

We barely shook our heads before she left.

Briar broke the silence. “I bet she’s going to a bar.”

I opened my mouth to suggest otherwise, but I wasn’t entirely certain myself.

“Three weeks,” Liam said. “We’ve got three weeks to find another job. I don’t believe this.” He shook his head sadly, fingers raking back through his hair. “Three weeks.”

“That’s only if he actually closes the place,” Briar said.

“And you think he won’t?”

“I think he’ll try, but I came up with this great new spell—”

“Would you just stop messing with these things!” Liam snapped. “The Law of Three states that—”

“You wanna know where you can shove your Law of Three?”

“Enough!” I snapped suddenly. They both paled and went silent, and I immediately regretted my outburst. When I spoke again, my voice came out cool and

relaxed—far from how I actually felt, of course. “We need to start actively bringing in customers. Start advertising your services, maybe do readings again—”

“But I *hate* readings,” Briar said before I could even finish the thought. “You always get the stupid people in, expecting tea leaves and crap. And I *suck* at Tarot.”

“You really do,” Liam agreed.

“Shut up—so do you. Besides, there’s Quentin’s crew down the road—they’re opened up to all kinds of readings. And they lie like a broken magic carpet. Telling people what they want to hear; now *that* is doing business.”

“Well, we’d better start getting competitive,” I said.

The bell over the door chimed again and we looked over to see Alastair peek his head in the doorway. “I saw Madam Curio leave. Can I come back in?”

I sighed. No sense upsetting one of our few regular customers. “Yes, please come back in.”

“And please buy something,” Briar said under her breath.

I gave her a look.

“What?”

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Not long after Madam Curio left and Alastair returned, the bell over the door jangled again. I felt the usual thrill at the hope of another customer, but that swiftly deflated when I recognized the...unexpected visitor.

Alicia Rutherford was somehow related to our employer, though no one knew quite how. Daughter seemed unlikely, since Madam Curio didn’t have children—that we’d heard of—which seemed to rule out the possibility of granddaughter as well. Niece seemed possible, as well as likely, given her age of late thirties to Madam Curio’s late sixties.

“Hello, Alicia,” I said with a friendly—if not forced—smile.

She threw back her head of short dark hair as she strode forward. “Is *she* here?”

I took “she” to mean Madam. Part of the reason we didn’t know how they were related was because Alicia didn’t refer to our employer as anything but “she” or “her”.

“Just missed her,” Briar said, coming from behind me to stand at my side. “On her way to Union Station, I think, so—”

“I’m *not* doing that again,” Alicia snapped.

I reached up to pinch the bridge of my nose, a headache already starting. Briar and Alicia weren’t exactly what one would consider friends, and Briar used every opportunity she could to make life difficult for the other woman. The last time, their clash came about when Briar tricked her into looking for Madam Curio down the street, and then moved her car to behind the building. She brought it back, but only after Alicia had phoned the police. After being slapped with a warning for filing a false report, Alicia had gone out of her way not to return to the store. I didn’t find myself overly saddened by that prospect.

“She’s gone out, and I don’t know when she’ll be back today,” I said. “Can I take a message for you?”

“Tell her it’s important she give me a call.”

“Hey,” Briar leaned on the counter and looked up at Alicia innocently, “did you know she won the lottery? She’s like a multi-millionaire. Or was.”

Alicia rolled her eyes. “Very funny. When you get fired one of these days, I’m going to throw a party.”

“Well, am I invited?” Briar asked.

“No.” With that, Alicia swung back around and stomped towards the door.

Briar turned to me, “She doesn’t even try to come up with comebacks anymore.”

“You really think she doesn’t know anything about the lottery?” I asked, my gaze still lingering on the door.

“Of course not. She’s too stupid to lie.”

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