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### Chapter Three: After Hours

#### Lilith

Spirits were fairly low around the shop after our employer's announcement. I spent the afternoon in the office going through bills, balance sheets, and trying to come up with a solution. Briar and Liam bickered out front—which wasn't particularly out of the ordinary—regarding the use of something in spells. I believe it was valerian root. I closed the door so their voices fell to a low murmur, and returned my attention to the books. No answer came to me, however, and I felt more depressed than when I'd first heard about the financial difficulties.

I closed the shop earlier than usual. Briar and Liam didn't disagree with me regarding the choice, and Madam Curio didn't return to the store, so she didn't have any say in the matter. She commonly left me to run the store in her absence, and this was one instance where I was glad of it.

My small apartment in downtown Toronto was cool to my entrance, even though it was July. I'd always been like that, though—I craved the heat, the warmth. When cooking, I often stood too close to the stove. As a child, my babysitter would worry about my safety when I tried to curl up next to the oven. And then one day she saw my mother do the same while baking blueberry muffins, and she understood where I got it from.

I didn't, however, appreciate smog and humidity, so I turned on a few fans around the living room to increase the air flow. After changing out of my work suit and into a pair of light linen pants, T-shirt, and cardigan, I prepared dinner. Just as my steamed rice and vegetables were ready, the telephone rang. I sat at the kitchen table, cordless phone in hand, and pressed the receiver to my ear with a barely audible sigh.

"Hello, Mom."

"How did you know it was me?" my mother replied.

"You're the only person I know who calls my landline rather than just email me."

"Oh, the bloody computer again. Just a fad, I tell you. I can't see anyone really using those. You don't get phone calls because you don't get out and meet people. You should have a man phoning."

"All right, Mom." I chewed on a bite of rice. With anyone else, I wouldn't dare eat during a conversation, but when speaking with one's mother, sometimes it's best to keep one's mouth occupied.

"Had any dates lately?"

I winced a little. She called me at least two or three times a week, and this was almost always our conversation. "No."

"You really should. It's not healthy to go that long without sex. Not for humans and especially not for us."

I considered making mention of my vibrator, but I blushed at the thought. That would go too far with her. She might have given birth and raised me during the sexual revolution of the 1970's, but she herself grew up in the 1910's. Some things were taboo still.

"I met a brutally hot man the other day. Definitely your type—"

And now she not only thought she knew what my "type" was, but had a potential date already in mind. It seemed best to terminate the conversation immediately.

"You know, Briar from work is on her way over—we're going out. To a...club of some kind. I really ought to get ready."

“Of course, dear. I’ll call you later.”

I swiftly hung up. I’d never, ever go out with Briar anywhere—even if she did ask me—and I suspected my mother knew that, but perhaps wishful thinking on her part allowed her to believe the lie.

I felt movement around my legs, and reached down absently to pet my Russian blue cat, Bill. He purred in response. We found Bill wandering out in front of the shop a few years earlier, and he’d taken to me right away. I had never thought of myself as a cat person, but I brought him home anyway.

*The shop...*I had to do something about the shop. Although we didn’t make much money, I loved that place.

I took my plate to the polished wood desk across the living room and turned on my laptop. Briar was online, which came as little surprise, but before speaking to her, I opened a word document and began to brainstorm. We had to bring in customers...and quickly at that.

### Briar

I spent my first hour at home obsessively checking email. If I lost my job at the shop, that meant I’d be without a regular paycheck, which meant I could very well be without an apartment sometime soon. Obviously, that would sucketh to the nth degree, so I scoured my inbox to see if I had any paying private clients. No such luck. Perhaps the fact that I was a total bitch who yelled at most of her clients for their constant stupidity meant I wasn’t getting any referrals.

I surfed over to The Magical Pentacle website, where Bille Humphrey a.k.a. Wilhelmina Raven had her ugly mug plastered all over the main page. How could so many people be willing to take advice from someone wearing that much black eye shadow? Sure, I wore black eye shadow now and then, but to draw attention to my eyes...not to blind myself. Yet her site drew way more visitors than [www.CurioKilledtheCat.com](http://www.CurioKilledtheCat.com), which really pissed me off. Nothing I’d been taught

from a long line of rootworkers ever gave details on spellcasting to increase internet traffic. Unfortunately.

When I'd convinced Madam Curio—and Lilith—to let me open the website a couple years earlier, I had originally thought the darker spell work—like controlling magic and the like—would draw more people in. No such luck. They all seemed to be stuck on the light and love from the new age movement, and Billie pedaled that quite well.

Just as I was about to sign off, a message popped up from Lilith about all of her ideas to generate sales in the store. I glanced through them, then put it out of my mind and left the laptop. Her heart was in the right place, but getting me to okay spell discounts didn't feel like a productive use of either of our time, 'cause I cringed at the thought of charging any less.

I went to my *Santa Marta la Dominadora* alter in the corner of my living room and lit a candle. I knelt there and closed my eyes, making my petition.

Tears burned a little in my eyes. I let myself think of him once a week, when doing my petitions, and that was it. I always kept it together and pushed him from my mind, except during these moments when the hurt was all too real.

*Bring him back.*

## Liam

My coven gathering ended late in the evening. I was distracted thinking the entire time about the troubles at the shop, and I suspected people noticed. But no one in the circle spoke about it. I felt a lot of disappointment in myself for just going through the motions like that. Perhaps some meditation before bed and a cleansing might settle me a little.

“Liam.”

I paused in the doorway of the community center to see one of our high school students from the Wiccan Youth Group, Madison, approach.

“What is it, Maddie?”

She gazed up shyly from beneath long golden lashes. I shifted a little, uncomfortably. Some thirty-one year olds might accept the attention of a seventeen year old girl, but I wasn't one of them.

"We're having a meeting after school tomorrow," she continued. "With some new members. I wondered if..." She paused and chewed her lip as her face coloured slightly.

"What do you need?" I said kindly.

"I wondered if maybe you could join us? As a guest speaker? To talk about the impact the craft has had on your life and your personal struggles? They'd love to hear from an actual priest and maybe you could inspire them." She sucked in a deep breath after pushing all her words out at once, and then her shoulders tensed as she awaited my response.

"I'd love to."

Her face beamed like sunlight. "Yay! That's great!" She clasped her hands together. "I'm so excited! The meeting is at my house. You have my address, right?"

"I—"

"I'll text it to you tomorrow. Oh, I'm so happy!"

I bid her goodbye before she could say much more. I certainly didn't look forward to a room full of teenagers all night—I got enough of that working with the likes of Briar Malik during the day—but perhaps it would mean good P.R. for the shop. And perhaps gain us a few more customers.

As I left the center and started towards my car, a shadowy figure came to view in the parking lots. It stepped forward and stopped by my vehicle. Streetlights shone on her long red hair, and I recognized Wilhelmina Raven.

The psychic from *The Magical Pentacle* had shown nothing but contempt for me in the past, and I wasn't sure why she would show up at my coven meeting. She had her own circle, after all—with more members and prominence than my little group.

"Wilhelmina," I said curtly as I fished my keys from my suede jacket.

"Liam Ashby." She leaned on the car, directly in front of the driver's side door.

“What can I do for you?”

“Good question.” She stood straight and her expression took on a serious look. “A little birdie told me that your store is having some...financial difficulty. In a word, you’re broke.”

“And where did you hear that?”

“I’m psychic, remember?”

I didn’t think she found out from her supposed supernatural abilities, but I didn’t argue for the sake of expediency. “And what, pray tell, is your point?”

“My ‘point’ is that your talents have long been wasted there...and Quentin has a proposition for you.”

I remained silent for a moment, weighing the options before me. I didn’t trust Wilhelmina in the least, but mention of Quentin Nicholas—her boss and owner of *The Magical Pentacle*—had me intrigued.

“I’m listening.”

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