



© 2009 Skyla Dawn Cameron

Chapter Four: Desperate Times

Briar

This sign is god awful.

Lilith had picked up a sign kit at Staples and made it herself at some point the night before. And she sure as hell wasn't a designer—the thing was hideous. Now, I wasn't a designer either, but then I was the kind of person who had enough sense to hire someone else.

Lil would have pointed out that we couldn't afford to pay a professional, though. And she'd be right. But still, ugly is ugly, and bright yellow with orange stripes is *ugly*.

The sign slipped. Damn, why couldn't I get it straight?

"Stupid sign," I muttered.

The hot July sun had sweat dripping from every inch of my body, but determination drove me on. Barefoot, I balanced on my tiptoes and hung the sign from the hook over the front window. I couldn't actually see it that far above me, so I worked blindly, lifting and dragging it back down and hoping it caught on the hook. At last I felt a tug. I released the corners of the sign and dropped my weary arms. Okay, so it was crooked. Whatever.

"Reconciliation spells twenty percent off?" a voice said from behind me.

I glanced over at the random Chinese guy watching me. Friendly dark brown eyes met mine, so I looked him up and down. My age, a little above my height. Short, messy black hair topped his head, and he looked like a walking Old Navy display with layered shirts and cargo pants. He leaned against the wall outside the shop door and crossed his arms over his chest, drawing my gaze to the simple white lettering over his black T-shirt.

What wouldn't Jesus do?

Awesomeness. Never saw that at Old Navy.

"Yeah," I said in answer to his question. "My co-worker's idea. But I raised the prices by ten percent before I put that sign up, so not really." I knew I should probably chat up the cute potential customer, but I was hella hot and my arms hurt, so I wandered back inside. Two fans on either side of the room blew warm air and I stood in the cross breeze, closed my eyes, and enjoyed it.

The door opened behind me and closed again. I cracked open an eyelid to see the guy from outside browsing the shelves near me.

Lilith and Liam weren't around. I was pretty sure Lil went to a meeting about a bank loan she seemed to believe we could get. Or hoped. I thrust a mojo bag in her hand before she left to make her—and our cause—more attractive to whoever she'd be dealing with, but the saints know she wouldn't be doing anything to encourage that strategy. Liam had the task of printing and distributing flyers—another of Lilith's strategies from last night—and apparently that would take him the whole day because I hadn't seen him yet that morning. I glanced at the customer again. *Guess it's time for me to be all service industry-ish.* Customers have the worst timing.

Although not cooled off yet, I dragged myself to the cash register and leaned on the counter. At least the hardwood kept my feet cold...maybe that would work its way up my body *eventually*.

Ally materialized from the shadows and pulled a stool up to the opposite side of the counter, where he sat down. "Where's Liam?"

"Distributing flyers."

"For the store?"

“Uh, duh?”

“When is he coming back?”

“Why—are you going to ask him out?”

Beneath the white make-up, his face coloured. His skin tended to get a little blotchy red, which looked ridiculous on an Emo-boy.

“No,” he said in a whiney voice. “Shut up.”

Everyone knew he had a crush on our resident Wiccan priest. And although Liam occasionally swung that way, everyone knew he didn’t like Goths. Hated, more like it—he turned his nose up at any “posers” in the magic(k) using community, including kids wearing black capes who thought they were vampires. So Liam ignored poor Ally. Lilith felt bad for him. I mostly thought it was funny.

“That’s not why I come here,” he continued.

“Sure you do. That’s why you never buy anything.”

“I buy stuff! Sometimes...”

I rolled my eyes. “Sure.”

The newbie came up to the counter. “So how much are spells?”

“It all depends. What do you want? Reconciliation?”

He nodded. “So what does the cost depend on?”

“How much work I have to do. I’ll do a regular strength spell—good for a lot of situations—for one-fifty.”

“Hundred?”

“Yep.” I waited, but his expression didn’t change—he still seemed interested. I continued. “That one takes a couple of days. For something stronger, you’re looking at double that. It’s good for most other cases. Now, in the case of major work, you’re looking at five hundred or so.”

“Minus twenty percent?”

“Damn. Right. So yeah, minus twenty percent.”

“What if I want to break someone up too, along with the reconciliation? Is that covered?”

Twisted little bastard. My kind of client. “That’s a whole other spell. And it’s not twenty percent off.”

“What about revenge? Do you do that?”

“And it harm none,” Ally began.

“Liam’s not here to see how well you suck up, so stop.” I turned a little so my body was angled toward the customer and away from Ally. My fingers brushed through the fringe of dark hair on my forehead, still damp and sticky from my time outside. “It’s all doable. If you can pay. But you should know that as fun as it all is, if it won’t solve your problems, you’re better off doing something else. So what’s your issue?”

Elbows on the glass counter, he leaned forward, close enough that I could see his long black eyelashes dust his cheeks when he blinked.

Ally slid his stool closer, perhaps attempting to be casual, but the legs scraped loudly across the floor. Me and the new guy each gave him a look.

“What?” he said innocently.

“Go away.”

Ally pouted but grudgingly did so. I watched him disappear in the direction of the dream interpretation books.

“So my girlfriend and I broke up,” the client said, singing a song I’d long known the words to. “And she’s dating someone new. Because she’s a slut.”

“And you want her back why, exactly?”

“Well, I did kinda love her.”

“Kinda?”

He shrugged.

Same old chorus. “Why did she break up with you?”

“She didn’t. I kicked her out. ‘Cause she cheated on me.”

“Nice. So if you did the dumping, why hasn’t she taken you back?”

“Probably because I cut up all her clothes. But it seemed like a really good idea at the time, before I knew I wanted to reconcile.”

I stifled a chuckle, having done that the odd time myself. “Always fun. Set anything on fire?”

“No.”

Amateur.

“Just ran her favourite skanky dress through the shredder at work. So she’s kind of mad at me.”

“Uh huh. Now, go over for me again what exactly your goals are for this one?”

He counted off his list on his fingers, one item at a time. “I need them to break up and for something bad to happen to the new guy. Then I have to get back together with her and live happily ever after.”

“Except she’s still a cheating slut.”

“Well, yeah.”

“We can do something to make her remain faithful.”

“Really? You can do that?”

“Yeah. If you can pay.”

“This stuff really works?”

That’s usually where we lost people. I couldn’t legally promise any results. “Actually, everything in this shop—including goods and/or services—are sold as curios and for entertainment purposes only. I do, however, guarantee that I’m *much* more effective than the palm reader at The Magical Pentacle down the street, though I can’t legally guarantee anything.”

“Okay. Good enough for me: you’re hired.”

My eyes widened a bit. “Really?” *This is way too easy.*

“Yep. Any cost.”

Sweet! New client! I extended my hand. “I’m Briar Malik and I’ll be your spellcaster.”

He clasped my hand and shook it, giving me an easy, lopsided smile. “I’m Sebastian Xiao, and I guess I’ll be your customer.”

“Awesome. Half your cash up front. And I might need to do a credit check.”

Letters of Love by Alastair Nightshade

My Dark Magical Lord. Liam.

Today your golden hair looked like sunlight, shining across the dark, lonely valleys of my heart, only not like real sunlight because it's the mortal enemy of my kind. So metaphorical sunlight. Or something.

In the vivid, relentless dreams of my restless sleep, I envision you coming to take me away from this cold, cruel world. But alas, dreams are all I have, for you will not grace me with even one kind glance. Oh how I long for—

“What are you writing?”

Alastair Nightshade glanced up to see the she-harpy Briar so close that she practically peered over his shoulder.

“Nothing.” He crossed his arms over his faux leather hardcover notebook. “Go away.”

“Buy something,” she shot back, and then she moved past him to set some bottles on the shelf nearby.

Harpy.

Lilith

I folded my hands on the desk before me and waited. The bank had a very sterile, clean smell and feel. Designed to make people uncomfortable, I imagined. And uncomfortable I was. I didn't want to be there, begging for money. I shouldn't have had to be, but I didn't think it would be...“responsible” of me to leave this up to Madam Curio, in case she didn't show. *Or* in case she inadvertently offended the bank employees. No, I seemed the best person for the job.

The door to the office opened suddenly. I stood and turned to face a smiling clean-cut man in his late thirties. He extended his hand. I greeted it with my own. Our eyes met, and I got that little familiar tingle when confronted with an attractive man. Another succubus quality—we naturally wanted to use our sex appeal to obtain things we desired, and I had to fight to keep my nature at bay. Normally I succeeded, but that task became more difficult when an attractive man came into view.

“Thank you so much for waiting.” He gave my arm a forceful pump.

I slipped my fingers from his grasp as quickly as possible, as the physical contact made concentrating on business difficult. He moved to the chair behind the desk and I took my seat once again.

My throat went dry. Why hadn't I brought water? Of course, it wouldn't be appropriate to down a bottle of water at a meeting with the bank, the plastic cracking in my grasp and huge gulping noise echoing in the room. Still, I wished I had *something*. If only this man—my gaze went to his name plate—Scott Mclean would offer me something...

I could make him, an internal voice reminded me. It would be simple. Take off my glasses. Bat my eyelashes. That sex appeal other women thought they had? I didn't think. I *knew*. All part of my demonic genetics.

But I was better than that. I'm not that kind of demon and woman. Never had been, never would be.

“My name is Lilith Mare and I'm representing the interests of the owner of *Curio Killed the Cat*,” I said, reaching for the portfolio beside my chair. “And—”

“Yes, I see that.” Mr. Mclean’s dark blue eyes went to the file folder on his desk, which he flipped open. As he scanned the pages, his brow furrowed. “You’re looking for a loan.”

“Just a small one,” I said quickly. “Until—”

“This business hasn’t made a profit in the past six years, which is exactly how long it’s been in business. We expect new businesses to take a loss in the first five, but...” He looked down at the papers again, then back at me where he gave a wan, half smile. “Not to this extent.”

“I realize that, but—”

“And I can’t see any justification for loaning such a substantial amount for a failing business.”

“I know—”

“Even under vastly different management, my answer would have to be the same.”

I felt myself pale. “Your answer?”

“No.”

No.

His expression pained. “I’m very sorry—you seem like a lovely person. But the numbers... It just doesn’t make financial sense.”

I forced my lips to move, not into pleas or promises, but a weak smile instead. No financial sense. Of course.

“I understand.” My voice came out soft, the chilled air strangling it. “Thank you for your time.” I clutched the portfolio folder tightly in my hands, occupying them so that they didn’t shake too badly, and I rose.

“I’m very sorry, Ms. Mare,” he said again. “I don’t mean to—”

I paused at the door and glanced back at the handsome Scott Mclean. “It’s your job. I understand that.” Before he could say another word, I stepped out of the office and hurried for the front of the bank.

I hope Liam has more luck with the flyers.

Read more at www.CurioKilledtheCat.com!