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Chapter Five: Praise Jesus, Not Satan

Liam

I sat behind the cash register in near silence, listening to the Celtic flute playing over the room's speakers slightly louder than usual. Normally Lilith opened the store in the morning, but in the two days since Madam Curio announced our impending closure and subsequent job loss, Lil had been stressed. She spent half of the day on the phone, begging for money and trying to solve things. The rest of the time, she obsessively cleaned. Lilith clearly needed a break, so I took over opening this one time.

And I sincerely hoped she didn't show up any time soon.

Briar ducked in the front door about ten minutes after she was scheduled to. She slammed it closed, the bell jangling violently, and pressed her back to the wood while panting. Big brown eyes looked larger than I'd seen them before and they stared directly at me. Her shaggy hair wasn't bound back as usual, but hung in wet chunks because presumably she'd just hopped out of the shower after falling out of bed half an hour ago. The dark clumps stuck to her cheeks and she brushed them back from her face.

"What. The. Hell."

I could pretend I didn't know what she referred to, but that would make me a liar, and I'd rather not stoop to her level.

I sighed heavily. “They’re still there?”

“Yes.” She walked forward at last, dropped her oversized, patchwork purse on the counter, and pulled herself onto the stool in front of me. “How long have they been there?”

“A few were outside before I got here,” I said. “Three or four?”

“It’s more like a dozen now. They’ve never bothered with us before. Why can’t the bug the hassle free clinic or something?”

“Because then it wouldn’t be considered a ‘hassle free’ clinic anymore, I imagine,” I said dryly.

The door opened and closed again. We both glanced over to see Lilith enter, and my stomach tightened a little. She must have been hot and miserable in her dark gray suit, but she kept her head up and not a single light brown hair fell out of the tight bun that held it. Her skirt swirled around her knees and her heels clicked on the tile as she walked across the room. She passed us without sparing a glance and disappeared into the office. Moments later she returned and stopped next to Briar and me.

“Why are there protesters outside?” she said in a cool, calm voice. Her sharp gaze moved away from me, thankfully. “Briar?”

Briar’s jaw dropped. “I didn’t do anything!”

Lilith cocked her head to the side and raised her brow skeptically.

“I didn’t!”

“I think they’re here because of the flyers that went out yesterday,” I said quickly. It didn’t seem fair to let Briar get in trouble over it, and maybe Lil wouldn’t question—

“We’ve had flyers go out periodically,” Lilith said. “And *The Magical Pentacle* down the road send them out once a week.”

“It seems that they ended up in the lockers of the Christian High School.” I spoke with care, hoping not to upset her too much.

“And how did they get there?”

“It seems they were misdelivered.”

“How could they possibly be misdelivered? You had very specific, simple instructions to follow.”

As well as a diagram, I thought with annoyance, but I didn’t say anything. “I...outsourced.”

“You what?”

“Outsourced.”

She looked at Briar again. “How could you take them to a Christian school?! Why?”

“I didn’t!” Briar said.

“I met with a group last night,” I said. “So I outsourced because I felt it was important to get the flyers out as soon as possible. There is a kid from a local Wiccan Youth Group who runs errands for me, so I asked her to deliver the flyers. It appears she believed she could just deliver them anywhere.”

“And this kid goes to a Christian High School, doesn’t she?” Lilith asked.

I nodded.

“This is so awesome,” Briar said.

Lilith and I each looked at her.

“Because it’s not my fault,” she added. “I mean, protesters suck and all, but at least I didn’t do it. This time.”

“So because Liam decided to outsource, we now have a dozen Christian teenagers and their parents protesting out in front of our store, scaring customers away when we actually are in desperate need for them.”

“You don’t know they scared anyone away,” I said. “Maybe—”

“Alastair is hovering across the street, afraid to come near the door.”

“He doesn’t buy anything anyway,” Briar said. When we gave her another confused look, she elaborated. “I’m just looking on the bright side today. Shut up.”

“I’ll see if the police can do something about this,” Lilith said as she started toward the phone.

“It won’t do any good,” I said. “Freedom of speech means freedom to protest, and they’re allowed to as long as they’re on public property. Which they are.”

“I can call anyway—”

“I already did.”

Lilith sighed. She slipped her glasses off for a moment and swept her fingers over her tired eyes. “Where is Madam Curio?”

“She called and said she wouldn’t be in today.”

“Of course.”

“Oh, and a Mr. Mclean called.”

Confusion clouded her eyes as she pondered the name, then they widened. “Scott Mclean? From the bank? What did he say?”

“He just asked you to call him—”

Lilith bolted for the office and closed the door behind her.

“I thought the bank thing didn’t go so well,” Briar said.

I didn’t think so either, but perhaps Lilith had just seen the meeting through a more dire lens.

Before we could discuss much more, the door to the office opened again, and Briar and I turned to see Lilith glaring from the doorway. Her pink lips parted, as if to speak, but no words followed as she seemed to be considering something.

“Good news?” I asked, though her expression said something far different. I wasn’t surprised when she shook her head.

“He just asked me out on a date.”

“The bank guy?” Briar asked.

Lilith nodded. Her gaze settled on the root-worker. “Why would he do that, Briar?”

“Okay, yeah, that’s my fault,” she said. “But it wasn’t to get him to date you, just give you money. He didn’t, perchance, offer you money to date him, did he? Because that would still count—”

“Briar!”

“Well I had to do something!”

Lilith raised her hands, a request for silence that Briar followed. “I don’t care! If you want to *help*, do a floor wash to either attract new customers or drive away the protesters. Otherwise, please don’t bother.” She returned to the office and shut the door behind her. Even though she was fuming, she still didn’t actually slam it.

“Nice work,” I said dryly.

“Don’t start,” she snapped. “At least it worked. Sort of. The money would have been better.”

“Maybe it didn’t work because you’re messing with things you shouldn’t. You can’t affect people’s wills—”

“Oh, I’ve got news for you on that front,” she said with a smirk. “I can and I *do*.”

“And how are things working out with Devlin?”

Her mouth snapped shut and eyes darkened at my words. I felt a twinge of regret over the statement. Briar could cast all the spells she wanted and give love advice to stupid customers who ate it up, but she couldn’t reconcile herself with her ex-boyfriend. A sad irony she didn’t talk about, and we rarely mentioned.

“If *you* want to sit back and cast your weak little spells and pass judgment on the rest of us, that’s fine,” she said, sliding off the stool and glaring at me. “But at least shut the fuck up about it.”

I did feel bad. Such a blow was beneath me, and I knew that would come back to me in some way, someday. But I saw plainly the reason *why* her attempts to return her lover Devlin to her would fail: everything came back to a practitioner threefold. I tried to tell her that. All the time, in fact. But she didn’t listen.

Briar stomped in the direction of the sound system, where she played with the dials on the radio until she came to a hard rock station, and then cranked the music up.

The noise annoyed me, but she probably needed something to distract her so I didn’t complain. Instead, I moved from the cash register to peer out the front window. There were nearly twenty of them out there now. *And* they brought signs. “Praise Jesus, Not Satan” and “Thou Shalt Not Suffer A Witch To Live.” I sighed and turned my back to them. Maybe they’d find something better to do later.

Briar

The protesters actually *did* seem to be successful in scaring customers off, for the place was even quieter than usual. The odd time—while slumped over the counter and staring at the clock—I caught sight of people walking by, peering inside, but the shouts regarding eternal damnation usually frightened them off. By the end of the afternoon, the only person who had come into the store actually did so with the sole purpose of saving my soul. I solved that problem by pretending to talk to an imaginary devil on my shoulder who I claimed instructed me to sacrifice tender Christian flesh to my dark lord. The pimple-faced teen girl left pretty quickly after that, no doubt to plant a pipe bomb at an abortion clinic or something.

The shouts and jeers outside grew even louder suddenly. I glanced toward the door to see the protesters swarming someone. Pity this was Toronto and not the US or something where a shop owner could pull out a gun and threaten to shoot troublemakers. Of course, I doubted that really happened anywhere outside of the movies, but still, it would be fun.

The door opened, and I half expected to see another cross-bearing teenager. My new client from the day before, Sebastian, surprised me.

“They didn’t scare you off?” I asked.

He jerked his thumb over his shoulder as he closed the door behind him. “What the hell?”

“My sentiments exactly.”

“Have you phoned the police?”

“They’re entitled to their lame ass opinions, even if it means scaring away customers.”

“They can’t threaten you, though.”

“They haven’t—”

He gestured over his shoulder again. “‘Thou Shalt Not Suffer A Witch To Live.’”

“That’s a threat?”

With a mysterious smile, Sebastian pulled out his cell phone. “It certainly sounds like it to *this* concerned citizen.”

I sat up straight and watched, a smile slowly spreading across my face as he dialled the phone.

“Hi there.” He grinned at me as he spoke into the receiver. “I’d like to file a complaint of harassment and threats...”

* * *

Although the protesters weren’t removed from the front of the store, they were required to change some of their signs. The police made them turn “Thou Shalt Not Suffer A Witch To Live” into “Thou Shalt Not Suffer A Witch To Own And Operate A Curio Shop In Kennington Market in Peace.”

Unfortunately for them, they had to write the additional words on the back. Now it just says, “Thou Shalt Not Suffer A Witch,” and really, who can blame them for that? Witches can be whiney.

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