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Chapter Seven: Noelle Is Another Word For Skank

Briar

Sebastian and I sat ducked down in the cramped space. We wouldn't have had to, except that Liam wouldn't let me take his car myself, and mine was...unavailable. Sebastian didn't have one 'cause Noelle apparently used to drop him off places, and now he took the TTC everywhere. The Wiccan wasn't pleased, but didn't do a whole lot of complaining now that I was the only one bringing in money.

"Ow!" I whispered as I felt an elbow in my side.

"Sorry," Sebastian whispered back. "It's...cramped."

"Just watch it when I'm trying to take the picture. What time does she leave work again?"

He shifted and tried to manoeuvre his wrist around where he could see it. "It's too dark to tell," he said when he tried to look at the watch.

"Eight fifty-seven p.m.," Liam said, his voice seeming far too loud.

"Shhh!" I said.

"Why are you whispering?" he replied. "The only ones in here are us."

"'Cause I need to concentrate."

"For a photo?"

"Shut up."

“Why can’t you just ask her for one if this is a protective spell?”

Actually, pay or no pay, the only way I could get Liam to help was to tell him we were doing protective magic. I was surprised he believed me, but maybe I was just unaware of what a great liar I am.

Or maybe he didn’t want the truth.

“I don’t want the spell to influence her,” I said. “If she knows what we’re doing, she might overthink it.”

“I think she’s coming!” Sebastian whispered.

I snapped to attention and pointed the camera at the front door of the restaurant.

A short young woman with kind of frizzy dark hair stepped out of the restaurant dressed in the green blouse and black skirt all the female waitresses wore. I zoomed in and started snapped photos, but paused.

“That guy there with her,” I pointed to the older man linking arms with her, “is that him?” If so, we’d be set with a photo of him too. *Best way to kill two birds with one stone...without actually killing any birds.*

“That’s her boss. Quick, take more before she gets in the car!”

I lifted the camera and snapped a few more. “You sure she’s not doing her boss?”

“Pretty sure. That’s awfully skanky.”

“But you *did* say she was a slut.”

“Doing your boss, though? That takes slutty to a whole new level. He probably likes her, though. Everyone does.”

I sighed and tried to focus on my task. No use arguing with him—not since he was paying me and all. Who was I to criticize him for being an idiot?

Noelle’s boss walked her to her car, then returned to the restaurant. Okay, so maybe she wasn’t doing him after all, but it seemed pretty damn weird to me that he’d walk her to her car on a brightly lit, busy street.

After Noelle drove off, Sebastian and I turned back around in our seats. I met

Liam's gaze in the rearview mirror.

"This doesn't sound like someone you want to protect."

"Can you drop us back at the shop?" I said. Although I didn't directly answer his question, that must have told him what he wanted to know. Liam shook his head, sighed disapprovingly, and did as I requested.

Sebastian left the car first. Before following, I caught Liam's gaze in the mirror.

"I'm sorry about mentioning Devlin the other day, Briar," he said. "It was wrong of me."

"I don't care about your threefold bullshit, so forget about it."

"And I want to help the shop too, but...but don't pull me into this kind of thing again."

I bit back a comment about his misplaced sense of morality. It wouldn't do any good—not for either of us.

"I'll see you tomorrow."

"Late?"

"Probably."

Sebastian waited for me outside of the shop and I pulled my key out of my pocket as I walked to the door.

"You bring all your clients back here after hours?" he asked with a crooked grin.

"Only ones who pay me overtime. There aren't a whole lot of them, though." The key slid easily in the lock, but stuck a little at first. I smacked the middle of the door with my ass and that seemed to get everything in place—the door opened easily after that. "So how is it you can afford me?" We stepped inside and I flipped on the lights. I'd never felt anything but safe in Kensington Market, but I still locked the door behind us. "Trust fund kid?"

"Nah, I was more like a latchkey kid. I work in computers and rent a crappy place. Lots of disposable income."

I headed toward the laptop in the back office. The swivel chair sank a little when I sat...and then a little more...and a little more after that... *Stupid chair*. I pulled myself up to the desk, though by this point my ass was practically dragging on the floor and the edge of the desk therefore came up to my chest. I paused there for a moment, gazed at the laptop, then looked up Sebastian.

He covered his mouth to keep from laughing at me.

“Okay.” I snapped down the top of the laptop and carted it out to the main room. “We’ll work out here.”

“There’s a message blinking on the phone,” he called after me.

“Hit ‘Play.’”

The machine beeped in the other room and Sebastian joined me.

“Ms. Mare,” said a smooth male voice on the machine—one I didn’t recognize, but that wasn’t a surprise since he called for Lil. “I just wanted to apologize again for the other day. I hate that we had to meet under these circumstances, but I did obtain a pair of tickets to *Requiem*, and wondered if you’d be interested in attending. I purchased the best I could find, but if you’d prefer something better I could—”

“Yeah, you can stop that now,” I said to Sebastian, rather than return to the office and do it myself. “Lilith can get it tomorrow.”

“He seems really interested in your friend.”

“Yeah, well, she’s a succubus,” I said with a sigh as I slipped the camera’s memory card into the laptop. “She tends to have that effect on men.”

“Oh.” That “oh” hung in the air for a few beats longer until I met his gaze. “Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“They exist?”

“Um, if they didn’t, my ‘yeah’ would have been a little stupid, right?”

“Huh.” He pulled up the barstool Ally usually occupied and sat across from me. “Never really thought about that kind of thing before. Maybe Noelle’s a succubus. ‘Cause she’s slutty and all guys like her.”

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t suggest that around Lilith. She doesn’t like stereotypes and she’ll kill you.”

He paled a little. “Really?”

“Oh, no. She’d probably just give you a stern talking-to. It would be totally pathetic...okay, here’s your skank.”

We glanced over the pictures and selected one that showed her the best. The wireless printer near the cash register spit out the photo and I took a pair of scissors to crop it into a more manageable size.

“So you don’t think Noelle’s a succubus?”

“Probably not.” I pulled some supplies from the shelves as we spoke and brought everything back to the counter. “They’re pretty rare. Your girlfriend—ex-girlfriend—is probably just a slut. Um, sorry—I guess I shouldn’t insult her.”

“It’s okay. I won’t fire you.”

You wouldn’t be getting a refund anyway.

“Do you mind me asking...what exactly it is that you like about this girl?”

He folded his arms on the counter and gazed down at the beat-up surface for a few moments, perhaps really considering my question. If he was smart enough to make a lot of money with which to hire me, he must have a good reason for liking the tramp.

“She was just so different,” he said thoughtfully. “She’s been to all these places and she’s done so much. Being with her is more interesting than being alone, I guess.”

“Which is probably what half of Toronto has said,” I muttered. Almost immediately after the words flew from my mouth, I kicked myself for it. *Stop alienating customers, dammit!* “That was bitchy of me. Sorry.”

He grinned. “But it was funny. So it’s okay.”

“Really? Wasn’t too over the top?”

“Nah. Came really naturally. I’m glad I got a funny voodoo girl.”

“Hoodoo.”

“Sorry. So is this going to get her back?”

“This is going to open her up to our next spells.”

“Which are?”

Jesus, where was Lilith when we needed a diagram or flowchart? “Break-up her and the new guy, then bring her back to you.”

“Oh, right. Aren’t we going to do bad things to the guy too?”

“Later.”

“Okay.”

He was so agreeable. I wondered if he had any other well-employed friends he could refer...if only everyone could be so easy to deal with.

The spell didn’t take long. I try not to make them take too long with clients anyway—the longer it takes, the more they stress. Sebastian seemed fairly easy going, but who knew what his energy was going to do to fuck things up. I stuffed the photo—and other things—into a jar, which in turn I stuffed into the freezer in the office’s mini-fridge. I returned with a bottle of cheap whiskey and a pair of Styrofoam coffee cups.

“Here’s to a job well done,” I said as I poured the drinks.

“You keep whiskey back there?”

“My boss does. Every few days I stumble across something half finished. Total alcoholic.”

“So your shop is going to close down?”

I frowned. “I hope not. I don’t have a lot of job opportunities.”

“Can’t you do a spell?”

“I’ve yet to come up with one to keep me from getting fired from most places.”

“Ah. Well, if things don’t work out with Noelle, I’ll hire you again.”

What an idiot. “Even though—in this hypothetical scenario—I utterly failed in the task you hired me for?”

He smiled faintly, dark eyes softening. “Sure. Everyone deserves a second

chance, right?”

I pressed the cup to my lips and downed the mouthful of whiskey without answering.

“You don’t think so?”

“I...” *Saints help me, I’m such an idiot.* I added the remaining drops of scotch to my cup. “I should probably be honest with you. I’m a complete and utter failure. Before you ask for your money back, really, I’m good at what I do. I reconciled my neighbour and her ex a few weeks ago, and not only had he left her, but he was in an entirely different country—with no plans to come back. I can win small sums of money, court cases...I can do curses, cleansings, bad-ass enemy tricks...”

“But?” he prompted with a nudged of his cup against mine.

“But I can’t get my boyfriend back.”

“How long as he been gone?”

“Four months.”

“Put his stuff through a shredder at work?”

I chuckled. “We don’t have one.”

“What happened?”

I hated that question. Any time someone heard you and your guy split, they either ask it or they want to. And I never knew what to say. How the hell does anyone answer that question? Some vague, “it didn’t work out” was probably in order, but I could never leave it at that.

“Was he a skank?”

Laughter left my lips again, which was a welcome change from the tears a conversation like this would normal bring up. “No. I don’t even know what happened. One day we were together, one day we weren’t. I like to think I was just too awesome for him, but I don’t get it. Fuck, I probably seem like such a useless rootworker now. Can’t even Goofer him back. Now, I don’t blame you for wanting to fire me.”

“Nah. Actually, I think you’re the perfect person to be doing this for me.”

“And why’s that?” *I knew it: he’s an idiot.*

He held my gaze steadily when I looked up at him. “Because you know what *this* feels like. So you’re going to do your best to work all this out for me so that I live happily ever after.”

Maybe he wasn’t so stupid after all.

“And everyone *does* deserve another chance.”

Tell Devlin that.

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