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CHAPTER NINE: CARNIES

LIAM

I had been cautiously optimistic about the prospect of a psychic carnival, and was incredibly surprised to see it falling together in such a relatively short amount of time. The afternoon unfolded smoothly, which shocked me considering Briar had a hand in nearly everything. I expected something to be unfinished, but instead the Goddess took pity on us, and it all came together well.

Half a dozen tents dotted the grounds we'd been permitted to rent, with a rope circle around it. Bright balloons—purchased in bulk from the dollar store and blown up by my Wiccan Youth circle—were tied along the rope fence. Volunteers walked the perimeter to ensure no one slipped in without paying, but the people running the booths checked for stamps on the hands of visitors to ensure they had paid.

Maddie had a tent set up where she was teaching meditation to the people who came by. I wasn't sure what qualified her, but I went along with it. The Goth kid who hung around the store worked the cash register, taking twenty dollars from each person who came.

“Looks pretty good, doesn't it?” Briar said with a grin as she stopped beside me to survey everything. At least two dozen people had paid so far and were visiting the tents.

“I admit, it’s a good turn out so far.” I may not appreciate Briar’s methods, but I admired her effort. “Where are the protesters?”

“They received an anonymous tip that a woman was aborting her octuplets that she got pregnant with during a pagan orgy.”

“You didn’t really send them to a clinic—“

“Oh, god no. I stuck a sign on a building that said, ‘Abortion on Demand: The Tenth One’s Free.’”

“What building?”

Wilhelmina Raven aka Billie Humphrey

“Murderer!”

Something smacked the front window.

Wilhelmina glanced up sharply, dark eyes focused on the street beyond the glass. “Blessed Be” was written in big white letters directly on the pane, and she couldn’t make out what was happening out there.

“I don’t know what crystal to pick,” the teen boy in front of her said.

She put on a fake smile. “Just find the one that speaks to you the most.”

The idiot felt just about every damn crystal in the shop and he clearly had *no* idea what he was doing. At last he settled on one and pulled it from the pile. Billie was determined to spray everything down with Lysol later—goddess knows what germs the boy carried.

“Remember, it will absorb negative energy, so you’ll have to cleanse it at least once a month, preferably on the new moon.”

“How do I cleanse it?”

“Rainwater blessed by a priestess is best.”

“But...I don’t know where to get that.”

She smiled coolly. “We have some right here.” *For \$4.99 per half ounce*

bottle.

“Murderers!” Something struck the window again.

After showing the customer to the blessed water and pointing out the fabulous bulk order deal, she stomped to the front of the store and yanked open the door.

An egg narrowly missed her head, splattering on the open door beside her. Two dozen people stood outside, waving signs that declared Billie and her coworkers to be murderers.

“What in goddess’s name is going on here?” she demanded.

She received no answer through the din of shouts. Stepping forward, and avoiding another flying egg, Billie turned and looked up at the shop.

A huge sign hung from the top, over *The Magical Pentacle* sign.

Billie’s eyes widened for a moment in horror, then narrowed again as the identity of the prankster became clear to her.

“Oh, goddess damn her!”

Liam

Briar couldn’t stop grinning as she told me.

I winced. *I guess I should expect another visit from Wilhelmina soon.*

“And then I started a rumour that they performed abortions there so that they’d have babies to sacrifice to their dark horned god.”

“You realize that by saying these things, you’re hurting the Wiccan community as a whole? Including me?”

She looked genuinely confused. “So?”

“Briar—”

“Oh, whine whine, love and light, blah blah. You should come to the dark side already.”

“Yes,” said the Asian guy who had been hanging around her a lot. He came up

beside us with a platter of chocolate chip cookies. “We have cookies. Join us.”

Briar took one and bit into it. “Vegan friendly. Hell, they’re even made with carob.”

I grudgingly took a cookie. “So you really think all this,” I swept my free hand in the direction of some of the tents, “will make a difference? That we’ll make enough money today to pay for the bills?”

“Probably not,” Briar admitted. “But we have a plan, don’t we, Sebastian?”

“Yes,” the guy said. “This will hopefully increase your customer base. Generate some interest. And if you can take a chunk of money to your landlord, that might buy you more time. And you’d be showing a profit, which would increase the likelihood of getting a loan from that guy at the bank.”

“You mean the guy stalking Lilith?” I said.

“He isn’t stalking her,” Briar said. “You two shouldn’t be so dramatic.”

“He’s been two feet away from her for the past hour.” I nodded to where Lilith stood with a clipboard outside of the tarot booth, where admittedly I was supposed to be doing readings. Not far away from her, waiting in the line with others waiting for their cards read, stood a man in a suit whom we all surmised was from the bank. I’d seen him pay an extra twenty dollars to attend, and he’d attempted to approach Lilith ever since he arrived. She, of course, ignored him, but that could be due to other distractions...

Which included her mother running an actual kissing booth.

Maura Mare could have been the sort of woman you’d almost mistake for Lilith’s older sister. Her eyes crinkled when she smiled, and a few silvery strands sparkled among the light brown hair at her temples, but with a seductive smile and an air of youth around her, most would think her to be under forty. She wore her age—which could have been approaching a century for all I knew—quite well.

She wore a simple lacy tank top and pair of jeans, soft hair grazing her shoulders. The makeshift booth had been hastily prepared just after she arrived when half a dozen young men offered. I blushed to think that even I’d jumped in, but there

really was no denying who Maura was. One look in your direction, and you felt yourself drawn to her. Lilith could do the same thing, I supposed, if she ever felt inclined. I was rather glad she didn't, as I wasn't sure I could deal with that day after day.

Lilith chewed at her bottom lip and watched the line up of boys and men, ready with a ten dollar bill in hand for a brief kiss. A sign proclaimed Maura a "real" succubus, and surprisingly, no one had once questioned it. Or perhaps not surprisingly. Demons walking around was hardly common knowledge, but for the carnival goers, it seemed to be just part of the fun of the day.

Lil caught my eye and promptly stomped over. I knew what was coming, and walked to meet her, face resigned.

"You're supposed to be doing tarot readings," she said immediately.

"On my way now," I replied.

"Do me one more favour, and I'll replace you at the booth with Briar sooner rather than later."

I halted my step to hear the conditions of that promise.

"Tell *him* that it will never work out and he should leave me alone."

"Maybe—"

"I don't care if he's a nice guy," she cut in. "I'm not interested."

With a sigh, I nodded, and prepared to let him down as easily as I could. I didn't like the idea of manipulating the cards, but if it would get me out of doing readings sooner...I'd agree to just about anything.

Lilith

"You should have kept the money as cash longer," Briar said as we walked back to the shop after depositing the money raised into the bank. "I like the cash part."

"You sound like Anya," I mumbled.

"Who?"

Of course, Briar never watched TV. I wasn't sure if she even had cable. Urban fantasy fiction was my guilty pleasure that I rarely mentioned, but perhaps the positive outcome of the day had my tongue slightly looser. "A TV show character," I said instead.

"You need to get out more."

"Maybe we all do," Liam said, a slight smile tugging on the corner of his lips.

"Can't," Briar said. "I'm meeting Sebastian. We have to gather stuff for his spells that I'm doing on Thursday."

Liam glanced my way as we stepped up to the shop door. "Shall we go out and celebrate anyway?"

My mother would have been *thrilled* at the prospect of me doing so, I'm sure, which made me initially hesitate. At last, however, I smiled and nodded. "Why not?"

I slid the key into the lock to open the door, only to realize it was already unlocked. My fingers paused on the door handle for a moment, then I turned it and pulled the door open. The bell over the door jangled.

The sight of Madam Curio in the shop startled me for a moment. We hadn't expected her in, and I'd closed the place down for the evening.

I strode inside with a smile on my face for once, Briar and Liam at my heels. We still had troubles, true, but for the first time in two weeks, I felt a glimmer of hope.

Madam Curio frowned for a moment when we reached her at the counter, her brows pulled into a thoughtful crease. "Were you supposed to be in earlier?"

"We were busy today," I said. "We had a psychic carnival, remember? To raise money for the shop?"

"Oh!" She smiled, though I sensed she didn't have the vaguest idea what I spoke of. "Of course. How did it go?"

"Awesome!" Briar said as she pulled herself onto the stool in front of the counter. "We made a killing!"

"I think we raised a lot of awareness," I said.

"But the money is so much better than that!" Briar said, eyes bright. She

snatched the bank deposit receipt from my grasp. “Look at all those digits! We raised almost three thousand dollars!”

“It’s not enough to cover all the expenses,” Liam said. “But it’s enough to—”

“Pay me back.”

We all looked to our left in the direction of the familiar sharp voice.

“Alicia?” Briar blurted out. “Who let the Wicked Witch in?”

“Oh, she called and asked me to meet her at the shop,” Madam Curio said with a smile. “To get her loan.”

“Loan?” I repeated. I reached out to grasp the edge of the counter as the heavy weight of dread descended upon me.

“Yeah,” Alicia said. “She took a three thousand dollar loan from me six months ago to pay for store supplies.”

“But...” I glanced to the receipt in Briar’s hand. “But we need this. To save the store. We just spent all day working—”

Alicia’s gaze fixed on me. I expected to see venom in the depths of her eyes with what she was doing to us now, but it wasn’t there. No, she wasn’t trying to be mean, she just...she didn’t care.

“It’s important to pay off loans,” she said.

“Well, too fucking bad,” Briar said. “You can wait ‘til after the landlord gets his. We’re not sending you any money, so—”

Alicia pulled a piece of paper from her pocket and waved it at us. “I already have my cheque. At least now I know it won’t bounce, so...thanks for that.”

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