Chapter 9

Jealousy, Turning Saints Into the Sea

James cobbled an outfit together for Uncle Papa Nick…nope, Ramon was right. Pick one and stick with it. Together it sounded wrong on many, many levels. I was used to uncle. But there was a delicious edge of irony to calling him papa, because my biological father had led his second wife to believe I was Nick’s and not his. I would only ever have one dad as far as I was concerned, and that was Haden LaCroix. He had been a generous guy, though, and wouldn’t care about sharing a bit of his mantle with Nick. He’d want us to be happy—my mom to be happy.

Papa Nick it was, then.

While James cobbled together an outfit for *Papa* Nick out of Douglas’s old suits and some of his own clothing, I grabbed my necromancy go-bag, which used to be Douglas’s. It was an old-fashioned black leather doctor’s bag. James and I had modified the items inside because, well, Douglas carried around some nasty shit.

I also freshened up, throwing on a clean suit. Now that I was back in the northwest and temperatures were much cooler, I had more options. I ended up going with a black suit with a gunmetal gray shirt. We needed to look as professional as possible to hide the fact that we’d been reduced to a dog and pony show version of our usual selves. Ramon was similarly turned out, and by the time we piled into the car, we at least looked the part we were playing.

Ramon sat in the back with Brooke, who was having a great time petting the leather seats. I expected James to smack her hands away from one of his precious babies—he could tell me Douglas’s cars were mine all he wanted, but they really belonged to James. I didn’t appreciate them like he did.

Ramon leaned forward. “What year is this?”

“1970—one of the first Audi 100’s imported to the US.” James finished putting on his driving gloves and clutched the wheel possessively. “Not the most expensive car in our collection, but it has character. It will say what we need it to say.”

“And what’s that?” I asked.

It was Brooke that answered. “It says we don’t give a shit what they think, but in like a *classy* way.”

James flashed her a feline grin. “Exactly.”

James drove with the controlled elegance of a professional race car driver, much unlike my old neighbor, Mrs. Winalski, who drove like a bat out of hell that was hooked on caffeine pills. It meant that by the time we pulled up to the Den, the pack’s group residence in Issaquah, I didn’t need to kiss the ground or throw up into the bushes.

Which lasted all of two minutes before the pack appeared to greet us—then I *did* want to throw up in the bushes. There were a few people unknown to me in the small group that met us, but for a second time froze and all I could see was Brid, the fading light making her pixie short red hair look darker, her eyes bright as she smiled at me.

And Leo.

Whose hand rested on the small of her back. Very comfortably.

Hence the wanting to vomit.

I’d really hoped that his Instagram had been one so carefully curated that it made him look more handsome than he actually appeared in real life.

Nope.

If anything, the pictures hadn’t done him justice. He looked like he was about to jet off to fucking Milan or something. He smiled at us and there was a hint of a dimple. He was just so…*charming.*

That wasn’t the worst part.

I wasn’t as good as the werewolves at reading body language. Normally, I made up for that by shifting into my other sight, or whatever it was—I didn’t have a proper name for it—to check out someone’s soul. At least, that’s what I thought it was. Whatever made us, *us*. But I was afraid to even try that right now, because I was pretty sure it wouldn’t work.

Even with my limited abilities, there was something obvious about Leo besides his stupid handsome face and ridiculous physique. Whatever makes an alpha? That potential or essential quality than Brannoc had when he was alive, that Brid shared, that I sometimes caught glimpses of in Bran?

Leo had it.

Leo had it in *abundance.*

That nebulous sense of authority. I was fairly certain that I had the opposite of whatever that thing was. A nebulous sense of novice. A whiff of the dilettante. That’s what I had.

Brid’s brothers were all in attendance, flanking immediately behind them. Sayer, Roarke, and Sean gave me sympathetic faces since the rest of the pack wouldn’t be able to see. I expected Bran to look stoic, as that was his go-to expression. Instead, he seemed…faintly irritated.

Huh. I guess not everyone was Team Leo.

I assumed Leo would step forward first, but he held back and let Brid take the lead, which made me hate him a little more because it was absolutely the right move. Damn it.

“Samhain LaCroix, on behalf of the Blackthorn pack, welcome.” She held out a hand, which I shook, and tried not to think about how good that fleeting touch felt or how much I wanted to yank her into the bushes for a proper hello, but hey, this was official business and all that.

“We are honored to help, *taoiseach.”* My voice came out thicker than usual, causing me to clear my throat. James slid in smoothly like it was intentional and not at all because I was choking on my feelings.

“We are glad to be of service to another member of the council and the Blackthorn pack.” He didn’t offer a hand, but dipped his head in a sort of suave bow move that only James could pull off. “You of course know our associates, Ramon and Brooke.”

Brid offered her hand to Ramon with a smile, who of course used it to pull her forward so he could hug her. Ramon did not give two fucks about being professional, I guess. But then, his credentials weren’t in question and who was going to argue with a bear? He kissed her cheek. “It’s good to see you.”

When he stepped away, Brooke moved into his place, hugging her. Brid blinked at me in surprise.

I did my best approximation of a mysterious tight-lipped smile. Brooke could easily hug people inside my house, where my spell for her resided. It was harder outside of the home. Brid would know it for the causal flex of power that it was.

Leo watched Brooke, his brow furrowed. He tapped a knuckle against his mouth, before spreading the hand out, his mouth open, like he was going to say something. The hesitation only lasted a second, then the charming mask slid back into place, but for a moment, I’d spotted the real Leo. Oh, the charming one was part of him, I think, but it would be a mistake to discount what I’d seen. That flash of intelligence. We’d done something to intrigue him.

“I’m afraid I’m at a disadvantage here,” Leo said with a chuckle. “Introduce me, darling?” He slid an arm around Brid.

I very carefully kept my hands relaxed and loose at my sides, my breathing even. We were downwind, so the pack wouldn’t be able to smell my distress unless they got closer.

Brid smiled up at him, patting his chest with one hand. “Leo, this is Brooke.”

He held out a hand and Brooke shook it, her face serious. Leo held her hand a second too long, his nostrils flaring.

Brid smirked. “You’re not missing it. She doesn’t have a scent.”

Understanding dawned on Brooke, her face lighting up. “I’m a ghost!” She wiggled her fingers at him. “Very spooky. Much boo.”

Leo peered at her. “I’ve never seen a ghost so…”

“Alive?” Brooke laughed as his expression became chagrined.

“Sorry if I have offended you, Brooke.” His glanced at me, and I caught that assessing gaze again. “I must admit, I haven’t met many necromancers. None of them could have produced a shade of this caliber.” He shook his head. “If she’d had a scent, I never would have guessed she was anything but what she seems.”

Brooke’s eyebrow winged up. “And what do I seem?”

“A beautiful and forgiving person who is obviously a friend to Brid.” He squeezed Brid to him, but he looked at me, not Brooke. “And I count Brid’s friends as my own.”

Brooke clasped her hands together, her mouth pursed. “That’s a very good answer.” She flicked her fingers in his direction. “Very well, I accept you.”

I saw her movements out of the corner of my eye because I was staring at Leo. He should look smug as shit. He figuratively—though sometimes it felt like literally—had my heart in his hands and he knew it. But that wasn’t what I saw in his face.

Though his words and actions could all be interpreted as him backing up Brid and doing the political two-step, his face told me that he meant his words. Leo was on our side.

I still wanted to punch him, though. And by the slow grin that unfurled on his face, he knew that, too.

Ramon stepped up behind me, so close I could feel him at my back. My best friend, literally backing me. Whelp, better get this nonsense on the road.

A few other werewolves—at least, I assumed they were werewolves—stood behind Brid’s family. I turned my attention on them before I started comparing myself to Leo. You know, more than I already had.

One was a woman of medium build, dressed in one of those suit skirt outfits. Because of my time spent with James, I could tell it was a pretty nice outfit—not cheap. She was glaring daggers at a younger man, his expression bored. He wasn’t dressed as fancy, though his jeans and pullover were clean and neat looking. He only stood out because he was around people mostly dressed up.

“How may I help?” My words acted like a starter pistol on the other wolves.

“An injustice has been done,” the woman said, her chin hitching up. Her mouth pinched, her posture ram-rod straight. “Our taoiseach thought you could help.”

The young man snorted. “Injustice my ass. You just don’t like the outcome.”

The woman turned on him, fists at her side. “You’re a thief!”

He rolled his eyes, arms crossed. “Fucking hell, Dani, let it go.”

“I will not.” Dani gritted the words through clenched teeth. “You preyed on our dear grandma, Justin, taking advantage of her twilight years—”

Justin pointed a finger at her. “It’s shit like *that* ‘twilight years’ bullshit that made Gran change her will. You treated her like a freaking child, Dani.” He snorted again. “Twilight years, my ass. Gran was hale and hardy to the end. She just didn’t like you.”

Dani snarled. “You *ass.”*

“We’ve been having differing of opinion,” Brid said dryly. Dani and Justin continued to argue as Brid stepped away, pulling me with her, my entourage following us. She gestured to her brothers, who stayed to keep the siblings’ argument from escalating into a full-on brawl. Leo sauntered behind her, his hands in his pockets as he whistled a cheerful tune.

We walked a fair bit of distance before Brid started to talk, her voice low so it wouldn’t carry. I didn’t think the siblings would hear it no matter what—they were in their own world.

“They’ve been like this since the funeral,” Brid grumbled.

“Do you think there was anything untoward with the will?” James asked, his expression thoughtful.

Brid tipped her head back and forth as she considered the question. “I don’t think so? I didn’t know Marion Lasky very well. She was well into her nineties and didn’t come to pack stuff very often. I visited her at home, but I was paying more attention to how she was doing than what her plans were, which was a mistake.” She wrinkled her nose at the admission.

Leo clucked at her. “You’ve been a bit busy, darling.”

Brid gave him an unamused look. “Leo.”

He grinned. “Yes, darling?”

“Cut it out.”

The amusement drained from him quickly, leaving him serious as he examined me. “I don’t think so, darling.”

As much as each “darling” was a sharp knife to the gut, I strangely agreed with Leo. “If I can’t take it,” I said, rubbing a weary hand over my face, “I should get the fuck out of the kitchen.” I dropped my hand. “Why am I here, Brid? This is a pack squabble. Read the will, talk to her lawyer, knock sense into some heads and be done.”

“I did read the will and talked to the lawyer,” Brid said, irritated. “From everything I know, it’s exactly as it seems—Marion favored Justin.”

Leo flicked a glance at Brid, seeking permission before saying his piece. “As for the knocking heads, the pack balance is still a trifle delicate since Brid took over. She’s new, young, and unmated.”

“Brannoc ruled on his own,” Ramon pointed out.

“Not at first,” Brid said. “He was established when he lost my mother, and powerful.” She shrugged. “By the time it was just him, he held the pack in such a firm grip that people rarely challenged him. I’m not there yet.”

“A partner would go a long way to backing them off.” Leo frowned at her in sympathy. “Which chafes, I’m sure.” He turned his attention back to me. “With the power structure so unsettled, Brid has to be careful what waves she makes. Neither Dani nor Justin are alone. Dani especially has been quite vocal, complaining to other members of the pack. If Brid steps in and gives her decision, the siblings and their cohorts will focus their frustration on *her*.”

“That’s not fair,” Brooke said. “She would be doing her job.”

Leo held his hands out in a *that’s just the way it is* gesture.

I was finally getting why I was here. “But if I wade in as an outside party, raise Marion’s ghost, then their frustration transfers to me, so it won’t upset the pack.” The anger directed my way also wouldn’t be as strong, because I was just conveying Marion’s final word on the matter.

Or it would be if I could actually raise Marion’s ghost. Well, shit.

I glanced at James, hoping he’d come up with something. His expression was smoothed into his public mask. Which meant he had nothing and didn’t want anyone to know. I would have to improvise.

I nodded sharply at Brid. “Okay. Let’s get this over with.” I moved around them, walking with authority toward the arguing wolves. I had *no freaking clue* what I was going to do, but I had to do something. James strode behind me, exuding his own brand of calm authority. James should have been the necromancer. I would have made a much better lackey. Stupid genetics.

James handed me the doctor’s bag, and I stopped ten feet away from the wolves. I decided to ignore their arguing for now—I was council, I was mighty, and they were beneath me. Not that I actually *believed* that.

I set down the bag, took off my jacket, and handed it to James. After I rolled up my sleeves, I opened the bag. There were a lot of things in the bag, but I quickly pulled out what I needed. Just the basics—my ritual dagger, or athame, and a bag of neon green sand for the circle. I didn’t actually need that much sand—I wasn’t planning on anything that would necessitate a large circle.

Once I had the circle, I stepped inside it, holding my knife in front of me, projecting *I am totally mystical and shit* as hard as I could. I closed my eyes and reached for my power. Nothing. Just that weird empty feeling. Of course it had only been, what, two days? I tried to focus on that and not panic. My power could come back. It might just need more time.

But I still had a ghost to raise.

I sliced a shallow cut into my arm, clenching my hand into a fist and letting the blood drip down into the grass. “Marion Lasky.” I put every ounce of authority I absolutely did not have into her name. Nothing happened. I knew nothing was going to happen, but I was still surprised.

The crowd stared back at me, expectant. Except for Brid and her siblings. They all looked slightly confused, but quickly covered it.

Okay. Time to wing it.

The silence drew out, the air filled with the sound of the October breeze through the trees. It would be full dark soon, a few sleepy sounding birds singing to the dying light.

I cocked my head pretending to listen to something as I stood there slowly bleeding into the grass.

“What do you hear?” James asked, and I have to give him credit—he acted like I did this kind of thing all the time and it was totally normal.

I opened my eyes, my expression stony as I stared at Dani and Justin. “She won’t come.”

“What?” Dani spluttered, eyes wide. Justin just laughed.

With an air of nonchalance, I pulled my handkerchief out of my back pocket and started cleaning my knife. Only when that was done did I answer their question with a shrug. “She thinks you should grow up and sort it out yourselves. I happen to agree.”

“You can’t raise her?” Dani growled.

“Won’t,” I said, “not can’t.” Oooh, was that a whopper of a lie. “You burn your dead—mostly so people like me don’t bring them back as zombies. And while I can and have done that before—.” I snorted when I saw Dani’s skeptical expression. Apparently she hadn’t heard about me bringing back Brid’s mother and some of the other wolves when Brannoc was murdered. She must be really out of the loop. “Ask your pack if you don’t believe me. I don’t owe you an explanation.”

I broke the circle with the toe of my shoe and stepped out. “As for her ghost, I could force her to answer if I thought it important enough to disturb her rest.” I curled my lip. “I don’t force ghosts to appear for petty squabbles.”

“It’s *rude*,” Brooke said with a sniff.

I handed my athame off to James. “What Brooke said.” I pressed my handkerchief to my arm to stop the bleeding. I stepped closer to Dani and Justin, channeling my best haughty James energy. My voice came out quiet, but cold. In my experience, people paid more attention when you did that instead of yelling. “You’ve wasted my time, and worse, you wasted your *taoiseach’s* time.”

I glared at Dani. “The lawyer has said the will stands. Get over it.” Justin laughed, so I turned to him next. “I don’t know fully what’s going on here, but I know families are complicated. If you want to find a path forward, something more diplomatic than screaming at each other, I suggest you ask your *taoiseach* nicely to do some mediation. As an outsider I shouldn’t have to tell you how capable your leader is.” I sank a lot of disdain into that last bit.

Time to wrap up the performance. “I’m council, with all that implies. Don’t like my answer? I don’t care. You’re welcome to petition the council and challenge for my spot.” A nasty grin spread across my face. “I’d have a good, long chat with your pack members first. Hear what you’re going up against.” They both shifted uncomfortably and I laughed. “That’s what I thought.”

I tossed the handkerchief to James as Ramon came over to bandage my arm from the kit in my go-bag.

Bran cleared his throat. “What do we say to the council member that helped you today, children?”

Dani and Justin obediently mumbled their thank you’s before they were herded away by Brid’s brothers with promises of dinner as Sean smoothed ruffled feathers with charming patter.

Only Brid and Leo remained. Brid hesitated for a second, glancing at Leo. Then she threw her hands up in the air. “Okay, what on earth was that, Sam?”

“That,” I said, suddenly exhausted by my long ass day. “Was grade-A bullshittery at its finest. I lost my powers, Brid. That was the best I could do.”

James made a grouchy noise. Leo’s eyebrows went up. Ramon finished off bandaging my arm. Brooke simply watched the drama unfold.

“You *what?”* Brid yelped.

I sighed. “It’s a long story.”

Leo stepped forward, wrapping an arm around me. “Then you better stay for dinner. That okay, darling?”

Brid growled.

Leo grinned, lazily drawing me forward. “What can I say, I charm her.”

Damn it, he even smelled good, the jerk. “Keep that crap up, she’s going to eat your face,” I said, begrudgingly following his lead. After all, the pack employed some excellent cooks and I was starving.

“She can try,” Leo said mildly.

And with that we quietly made our way into the Den.