Chapter 38

Welcome to the Black Parade

I spent about two seconds feverishly trying to decide how I wanted to handle the situation—and I will admit for a fraction of that time I heavily considered sneaking out the back door—before a scuffling sound ended my dithering. There was some shouting and a few grunts, making me think that Kevin was trying to fight his way past Minion.

James and Ramon went barreling past the entryway toward the door.

“Hey, Ramon, James—wait,” I called out quickly, not wanting the situation to escalate before I even knew what was going on.

Ramon skidded to a halt, stone-faced. “You’re sure?”

Did I want to deal with my biological father? No. Did I want to deal with him after the week I’ve had while also wearing pajama pants covered in little cowboy possums? Again, unequivocally no. But we don’t often get to pick and choose these things. I wished I hadn’t been wearing the matching possum cowboy T-shirt that said, “I’d rather be rootin’ & tootin’” but sadly it could have been worse. “Let him in. Best handle the situation now.”

James nodded sharply, heading toward the door. He adjusted his cuffs, his eyes cold silver as he did. Kevin would be dealing with the *pukis* of house LaCroix today, not my friend James.

Ramon peeled off, stealing a chair and dragging it until it was right by me at the head of the table. We all stared at the entryway. Leo had his arm slung around the back of Bran’s chair, both of them looking mildly interested in the goings on. Nick’s expression was resigned and my mother’s face was carefully blanked. Haley…oddly Haley’s expression reminded me of James. Gone was the person who had just been giggle-snorting over her waffles at something Leo had said. This Haley was ready to do violence.

Brid reached over and put her hand on my thigh, her face serene, chin high and shoulders back, every inch the alpha of the Blackthorn pack, despite wearing my borrowed pajamas that were covered in little cartoon skulls. They’d been a gift from Haley.

It was dead silent when James escorted Kevin Hatfield into the room. I’d caught a few photos of him recently—I followed Elaine on Instagram—but seeing him in person was still a shock. Kevin and Nick looked a lot alike, yet nothing alike at the same time. The resemblance was there—same chin, same shoulders, and so on, but they carried themselves completely differently. Nick…eased through the world. Like he needed to silently apologize for being there in the first place. He didn’t draw attention to himself. Quiet, a little reserved, with kind—but sad—brown eyes. He’d been laughing more lately. Been a little louder. It suited him.

Kevin strode into the room like he’d done it a million times and he had every right to be there. He was thicker than Nick, who ran lean. Not overweight, but bulkier. His hair was lighter, closer in shade to mine, though going a little gray at the temples. The sun-tanned skin of his face did little to hide the bruising under his eyes and his hair was disheveled, like he’d been running his hands through it. All in all, he looked like an upper middle class guy who’d had a bad week, which if he was here, I guess he had.

He paused on the threshold for the briefest of seconds, his skin paling as he took in the room. Then a scowl snapped into place as he jutted out his chin. “Where is my wife?” His voice was a low growl, and he practically vibrated with rage.

Despite how much I didn’t want to see him, or our own complicated history, I strove for patience. For empathy. After all, his wife and daughters had basically vanished out of his sight. I would be full of panic and worry in his place. I tried very, very hard to not compare his reaction to the ease of which he’d given me up without a backward glance.

I was only partially successful.

Deep breath. Calm. Think about it later. Cultivate empathy.

I opened my mouth to answer, but then Minion shuffled in behind him, wiping a little blood from the corner of his mouth.

And just like that, all of my goodwill evaporated. I set my palms carefully on the table. “Did you *hit* Minion?”

Kevin blinked at me, startled. “What?”

“Did. You. Hit. Minion?” I bit off each word like I needed to chew it.

“It’s okay,” Minion said, his smile gentle. “I’m fine.”

James silently handed Minion a pressed, white handkerchief. Even that motion spoke of barely repressed violence.

Kevin barely looked at them. “He wouldn’t let me in.”

Fury crawled up my back on hot feet, its claws digging licks of fire into my spine. Rage sparked in my veins like flames through dry summer grass.

I’d had a very hard day.

Week.

Month?

*Year*.

And I fucking snapped. I didn’t remember standing up. Or my chair tipping back, caught by Ramon’s swift reflexes. All I knew was my power exploded out, calling to every ghost, every body, in the area. For years this had been Douglas’s home. Where Douglas went, a trail of bodies usually resulted, so there were a lot of dead responding to my summons.

They called back to me, eager to do my biding. The temperature in the room dropped, frosting the air in my lungs. Power sang to me in a Greek chorus, the voices of the dead offering themselves up to me with fervent promises.

I fed them substance, pulling from the deep well of power the Stygian coin offered me. Spectral hands grabbed at Kevin, lifting him off the ground and slamming him into the wall. He jerked, eyes wild, but he couldn’t move, pinned as he was like a butterfly in an entomologist’s collection.

I stalked over to him. Studying him with a cold dispassion. How dare this man come into my home and hurt one of *my* people? I could destroy him. Flay him open using nothing more than my will and the ghosts at my disposal. They whispered at me exactly how to do it.

I hadn’t even known that was possible. Now that I knew, though, it would be so *easy.* I could do it without a drop of blood getting on me. My hands would be clean. Physically, anyway.

The ghosts continued to croon instructions, gleeful in their malice, as I stepped closer to Kevin. I watched him squirm with a chilly satisfaction, sweat beading his forehead.

“Samhain!” I heard the sharp tone in my mom’s voice, but the urgency of it was lost in the song of the dead. I swayed a little on my feet.

Strangely, it was Nick’s voice that penetrated. Soft, barely audible. “Sam.”

I turned to look at him, a question on my face.

“Too much power,” he said, his elbows on the table, his hands knit together, face calm. As if we were having an idle conversation. He unclasped his hands, his finger making a loop in the air. “No circle. It’s not safe.”

“I could do it,” I said calmly. “It wouldn’t be difficult. If I did it right, there would hardly be any mess. No one would even get hurt—I can do it safely.” I thought about that for a second. “I mean, no one else.”

The corner of Nick’s mouth twitched. “Be that as it may…”

I sighed. “I never get to have any fun.” Somewhere in the middle of our conversation, I’d come back to myself. I hadn’t been thinking right and I knew it. Kevin didn’t need to be let in on that little secret, though.

I turned back to him, my hands clasped behind my back. “In this house, we use our words,” I instructed, like he was a kindergartner. “Not our hands.”

Kevin gazed down at me with nothing short of revulsion. “Abomination,” he spat, still struggling against my hold.

I scowled at him. “We use our words, and we use them *kindly*.”

His lip curled as he shuddered. “I knew it. I knew you were his.”

“He’s mine in every way that matters,” Nick said quietly. “I will happily lay claim to Samhain Corvus LaCroix.”

“And that,” I said, flicking a finger against Kevin’s chest. “Is why we call him Papa Nick.” I turned away then, flapping a hand over my shoulder. “Let him down.” I didn’t look back until I was seated in my chair again. I heard the thud when Kevin hit the ground and it made me smile.

“I got it on my phone,” Ramon whispered. “You can watch it later. On repeat. With popcorn.” He glowered at Kevin, raising his voice. “Can I throw him out now?”

“Not yet,” I said. “Soon.” I watched as Kevin stood, brushing himself off. “Why are you here?”

“To get my family.” He glared at my mom and Nick. “That you kidnapped.”

I snorted. “Kidnapped. That’s rich.”

“I don’t know what you did to them, or why Elaine’s not answering her phone, but if you hurt one hair on her head—”

“You’ll what, Kevin?”

I hadn’t heard Elaine enter. She leaned her shoulder against the wall, her arms crossed. While she looked just as tired as Kevin, there was a serenity to her that he was lacking. “What will you do?”

“Elaine,” he said on a gust of relief, striding toward her, only to be stopped by her hand held palm out. Kevin stared at her, bewildered. “Elaine?”

“You lied to me, Kevin,” she said, a hint of resignation in her voice. An almost weary acceptance.

“I never—” He reached out to her.

She glared at him, her expression hard.

Kevin dropped his hand, a look of shock on his face. “Honey…”

“You lied by omission.” She held out her hand toward the table. “You lied about the kind of person your ex-wife was and why you divorced her. You lied about your brother.” She recrossed her arms. “And you lied about your *son*.”

“He’s not—” Kevin started, but Elaine wasn’t having it.

“Stop it! Not one more word of bullshit from you! I don’t even know if you think you’re telling the truth because you’re lying to yourself or what and I don’t care. Sam is your son and you cut him out of your life, just like you did your brother, and for what?”

None of us moved—we hardly breathed—as the drama played out between them.

Kevin swallowed hard, his hands clasping into fists. “You don’t understand. There’s a lot you don’t know about the kind of people they’re different, I can’t explain—”

“Necromancers,” Elaine said, giving the word no special inflection, just like she’d been saying “plumbers” or “baristas.” As if there was no difference. Elaine glanced at me and Brid, a question in her eyes. I wasn’t quite sure what it was, but Brid nodded, so she must have got it.

Elaine gave her a faint smile before turning back to Kevin. She waved a hand at Brid’s family. “Shapeshifters.” Then she turned to Minion.

“Zombie!” he said cheerfully.

She held a hand out toward James.

“Pukis,” James said. “Which means I protect this house and everyone in it.” James scowled, and he suddenly seemed bigger. “Except *you*.”

Ramon snorted.

Elaine turned a final hand toward my mom and Haley, a fond expression on her face. “Witches.” All warmth died when she turned back to Kevin. “So you see, they managed to explain to me just fine despite the fact that I’m not anything special. I’m just a mother trying to raise my two little girls. Two special, talented, amazing children, who were in very grave danger and I wouldn’t have known about it if not for Sam.”

Her words struck him with almost physical force. “Danger? How—are they okay?” He whipped around toward Nick. “What did you get my family into? I swear to god, Nick, I—”

Nick slumped in his chair and dropped his head back. “Can’t pin this one on me, brother. Won’t stop you from doing it, of course.”

Kevin put his hands on his hips. “What kind of poison have you been dripping in her ear, huh?”

“Stop it!” Elaine snapped.

“Ooooh,” Ramon whispered. “She used the Mom Voice. He’s in trouble now.”

“Shh,” Brid whispered back. “He was already in trouble.”

“Nick and Sam didn’t do anything to put our girls in trouble and no one has turned me against you except your own foolish actions.” She stepped up into his face. “Your brother risked his life yesterday to open a door into the underworld so that your son, your *son*, could literally cross into death’s realm to bring our baby back. All while Tia kept me and Sara safe.” She jabbed a finger into his chest. “So don’t you *dare* say a single, nasty word about any of them.”

For a full five seconds, the room was utterly silent for the sound of their labored breathing.

Elaine sighed, her shoulders dropping. “What you need to do, Kevin, is decide right now what you want your home life, your family to look like. Because right now, I can’t see a path forward without these good people as part of my family. I am, however, struggling to see you in it.”

And with that, she turned away and left the room.

None of us moved. Leo stood, pulled out his chair, and guided Kevin into it. Kevin didn’t fight him, just sort of collapsed, a dazed look on his face. He looked like a man who had lost everything in the blink of an eye.

My mom stood, tipped her head in the direction Elaine had gone in, and then gave me a double thumbs up, because my mom was a nerd. She was also telling me that she had Elaine covered and trusted me to handle Kevin. I loved my mom a whole lot, but sometimes, like right now, I would get hit with a sudden overwhelming wave of it. She would always, always have my back.

Brid leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. “You going to be okay?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I think so.”

She nodded, and then herded everyone out of the room until it was just me, Nick, Kevin, and James. I raised an eyebrow at James, but all he did was raise one back. Right. Over my dead body was he leaving me alone right now.

After a few moments, Kevin seemed to come back to himself. “Are my daughters okay?”

“Yeah,” Nick said. “They’re doing great. Lily…will probably have some nightmares for awhile.”

“Okay,” Kevin said. “I can deal with that.” He rubbed a hand over his face then looked at me and Nick. “And they’re…”

“Like us,” I said, and a little of my anger weaved its way into my tone. “All of your children are necromancers. Alas.”

Kevin swallowed hard, his fingers drumming the table as he watched me and then Nick. “And he’s not yours?”

Nick shook his head, his nostrils flaring. “I don’t know how or why you got it into your fool head that both Tia and I would betray you like that, but it has always been nonsense.”

“You should be very proud of your children,” James said, his words had an edge to them, almost like a threat.

I barked a laugh. “That sounded like, ‘be proud of them or else,’ James.”

He glowered at me. “It *was*.” James unfurled himself from where he leaned against the wall, before prowling over to the table and taking the seat next to Nick. “I’ve spent a lot of time with your offspring.” His gaze flicked to my uncle. “And your brother. They are, every one of them, talented necromancers. More importantly, they each possess a kind and gentle heart.”

“We could also literally possess a kind and gentle heart,” I said.

James ignored my joke. “You could do no better than be a part of this group and frankly, you don’t deserve to lick their boots.”

“James cleans my boots,” I offered cheerfully. “So at least you know you’d be licking clean tread.”

Kevin collapsed back into his chair, watching all of us. “I tried so hard to get away from this.” He looked at Nick. “From you.”

“I know,” Nick said. “I never blamed you for that. For what you did to Tia and Sam, yes, but not for that.”

“But maybe,” Kevin said slowly. “Maybe you should have blamed me for all of it. I think…” He took a big breath and let it out. “I think I need to know what has been going on.” He looked at James. “Will you tell me? About my daughters?” He glanced at me. “About my son?”

James nodded.

I grabbed Nick’s mug. “I’m going to get us more coffee. We’re going to be here for a while.”