Chapter 4

When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?

When I woke up, everything hurt, as if my body was one big bruise. It felt like—I don’t even know what it felt like. Just pain, everywhere at once, little needles pricking under every millimeter of my skin. If someone had offered me death right at that moment, I might have considered it. I laid there for a moment, shivering in the heat, concentrating on breathing in and out.

Something snuffled by my head and I managed to open my eyes. Light stabbed me, my pulse skittering away as I blinked rapidly through the pain, trying to see what was making that sound. Finally the smears of green and browns came together, revealing grass, mud, trees and…a pig.

I was staring at a pig.

I didn’t remember going to bed with a pig. I didn’t remember going to sleep on the ground, either.

Brown, large, and hairy, the pig grunted as it rooted in the ground close by with its snout. Mud smeared its lower half. It wasn’t a cute pig, at least not the kind I was used to seeing at the county fair or the kind people kept as pets. This one looked like it could start some shit. Like the kind of pig you’d meet in an alley, up to no good.

Wait, no, not a pig. That wasn’t what they were called. We’d taken one of the swamp tours over in Slidell. The guide talked a lot about the local wildlife, including some of the invasive species. *Hog*. Were hogs and pigs even the same thing? I didn’t even know. Either way, I was looking at a feral hog. A very *large* feral hog.

I laid there, still shivering, trying to remember what the guide had said about them. The hog was so close, I could have reached out and touched it, which I absolutely did not want to do. Some of them carried diseases. And while hogs didn’t generally go after humans, they were opportunistic eaters, and I was sprawled out like a buffet. I already felt half-dead. Wouldn’t take the hog much to finish off the job.

I breathed out slowly. Please, please, don’t let me get eaten by wild hogs. Hogs ate everything. No one would ever know what happened to me. My family—I cut off that line of thought. That mental direction would only lead to panic, and panic wasn’t helpful.

I watched the pig as I took stock of the situation. Pain still pulsed through my body, beating behind my eyelids every time I blinked. What had happened? Where *was* I? Because this was not my bed, and it certainly wasn’t my hog.

As I stared, the hooves moved closer. My body rocked as the hog nudged me in my thigh. It was enough to make me dredge up whatever resources I had left and roll away. This startled the hog and left me gasping on my back, star-fished out in wet muck. Luckily the morning air was already hot and thick—at least by my standards. The shivering was probably from shock.

I’m not a fan of muck. I’m less a fan of Louisiana muck. Everything—and I do mean everything—in Louisiana is trying to kill you. Someone told us that in the spring, caterpillars fall from the live oaks and bite people. This was not a thing in Seattle. We mostly tried to kill people with crushing living expenses. Nature generally left us well enough alone as long as you left it alone.

Which meant I wasn’t about to lay in the muck, waiting for something to bite, poison, or otherwise turn me into lunch. I levered myself up on shaking arms. I didn’t want to crawl through the muck. Another thing Louisiana has? Fire ants.

No thank you.

After several tries, I managed to push myself up onto my feet. It did not make me feel better, though it did make the hog scurry off. I saw trees. Grass. Birds. What I did not see was my house, my friends, or…I looked down. I was still in my pajama pants, a hoodie, and shoes. No shirt. No socks. Several red bumps already covered my chest and stomach. I’d been a mosquito feast.

I closed my eyes, straining my ears for any sound of civilization. Nothing. No people talking, no cars. I heard an unfamiliar bird call, but that was it. I opened my eyes, hoping by some miracle I’d catch some kind of clue, but of course the scene stayed the same.

What the absolute fuck had happened? How had I ended up in the middle of nowhere? The last thing I remembered was falling asleep, sad and alone.

One of my pockets hung heavy, and I checked it—my phone! If I’d had any energy, I would have shouted for joy. As it was, I barely managed to tap it to wake it up. It lit up, but my joy quickly flickered and died. No bars. I had no bars. I couldn’t call anyone. Maybe I could get somewhere that had service?

The idea of walking anywhere right now made me want to cry. I was so *tired*, and moving anything hurt.

Okay, what were my options?

1) Lay down and die. Not bad per se, but lacked elegance.

2) Try to walk somewhere before I lay down and die. Better, but not great.

3) Summon Ashley to tell someone where I was…

Ashley! I had never been so happy to be a necromancer. Surely my harbinger could help me get a message to someone. I closed my eyes to reach for my power to call for her and…there was nothing there. *Nothing*. I was like an empty bottle of soda. All my power was simply…gone. Panic filled me. I started to shiver again, my teeth clacking as adrenaline poured into my system.

*Nonononono…*

I licked my lips. Okay, calm down. It was a mistake. I’d just…missed it somehow. Right? That was a thing that could happen maybe? I closed my eyes again. All I saw was the darkness behind my eyelids. I was completely spent. Did I actually need power to call Ashley? I wasn’t sure. I tried. I pictured her, mentally calling her name. I even croaked it out of my torn-up throat. Had I been shouting? Fuck, I didn’t even know. What on earth had happened to me?

There was something so disconcerting about not being able to remember something. I had this chunk of time where anything could have happened, and my mind was gleefully filling in worse case scenarios. Stupid brain.

I kept calling for her—for anyone.

Minutes passed and I collapsed onto my knees, sobbing, begging Ashley to show up. Promising her so many waffles.

No one came.

Not even the hog.

I was lost, alone, and no one was coming to save me, because no one knew where the hell I was, even me.

After a while, even sobbing took too much energy. I curled on the ground and waited for the ants to take me.

I fell back asleep for a few minutes, or more accurately, I passed out. Not for long. When I came to and checked my phone, only thirty minutes had passed. At least I’d stopped shivering.

The ants hadn’t come through, and it looked like option three was out. One sounded really tempting, but I decided to go for two. If nothing else, I wanted to go down fighting. Or at least, shambling.

I got back up and started moving. I had no idea where I was, and when I tried to look at the maps on my phone, I got nothing. So I just picked a direction and started walking.

One foot in front of the other.

Repeat.

And repeat.

My legs wobbled. But I kept going.

That’s all I had to do. Just focus on that.

It didn’t go well. I was exhausted. I kept stumbling and falling down. I wasn’t even sure how far I’d gone. Eventually I collapsed against a tree. The world kept spinning and it was making me sick. Maybe, if I stopped moving, it would be easier to find me. Someone would be looking, but while I was fairly sure I was still in Louisiana, that was a large amount of ground to tackle.

How long could I survive out here, like this? I was in no state to forage or look for water, and I didn’t know any of the local fauna anyway. And I didn’t trust the water. Despair swamped me. I curled up in my jacket, closed my eyes, and fell asleep again.

Something was snuffling nearby again. I didn’t open my eyes. “Fuck off, hog.”

The snuffling stopped as something large thudded against the ground. The tree underneath me trembled.

That was some hog. I opened my eyes.

A large bear loomed over me, his mouth open, a large, meaty paw moving toward me. With claws. Very long claws. Terror filled me and I screamed. The bear drew back, affronted.

It took my brain exactly two seconds to finally connect the bear in front of me to Ramon.

At least, I hoped it was Ramon. I didn’t think Louisiana had grizzly bears. The bear sat across from me, making grumbling noises, before it threw back its head and bellowed. I closed my eyes. That was all I had energy to do. The bear was probably Ramon, and if it wasn’t, well, it was welcome to my carcass.

I heard footsteps. Arguing. More bear grumbling. But I was already passing back out. The last thing I remember was someone lifting me up. Then the sweet embrace of darkness.

This time when I woke up, I was in a bed—my bed, or at least my New Orleans one. Bed was *great*. A fan turned lazily overhead and something snored on my pillow. When I turned to look, I found Chuck the gnome sprawled out on the pillow next to me, mouth open, producing a snore much too large for his body. My protection detail, folks. So professional.

I felt marginally better. Clean. Dry. No hogs or ants. No shaking, and the pain had receded. Didn’t have the energy to get up, though. I turned away from Chuck, and realized I had another bed buddy. Ramon sprawled across the other side of the bed on top of the sheets, wearing only his boxer briefs. The muscles in his back twitched as he mumbled in his sleep. On the other side of the bed, James sat dozing in a chair.

James looked terrible. He hadn’t shaved. I’d never seen James with stubble. I didn’t know he *had* stubble. His hair was tangled, like he’d been plowing his hands through it. His slacks were dirty, and he only had on one of those tank top undershirt things—I wasn’t sure what they were called. I’d only heard them referred to as wifebeaters and I wasn’t going to call them that.

“He thought you were dead.”

I turned my head to see Frank hovering in the doorway. He’d whispered, trying to not wake anyone else in the room. Though honestly, they must have been exhausted, because at least two people in the room had supernatural level hearing and they hadn’t so much as twitched at the sound of Frank’s voice.

“We all did.” Frank tiptoed over until he was standing next to James.

“Wha’ happened?” My words came out a little mumbled, but I managed. Go, me.

“You were just *gone*.” Frank leaned against the foot of the bed. His face was pinched and pale. “No one knew how you got out of the house. You left your pouch—the coin, too. James called June to activate Ashley, but she couldn’t find you. Your power signature had vanished*.*” Frank shifted, sitting onto the edge of the bed.

I tried to make sense of what Frank was saying. If Ashley couldn’t find me, and I couldn’t call to her…what did that mean? Had something happened to my powers? Was it permanent? What would it mean, if I wasn’t a necromancer anymore?

I should be relieved. I’d never wanted the powers to begin with. Instead I felt the chilly slide of fear as it iced my veins. Maybe I hadn’t wanted the power, and maybe it complicated things, but it was also a cudgel I used to keep my friends, my family, *safe*. If I wasn’t a threat, what would happen to Ramon? Frank? The gnomes? *Brooke*.

Holy shit, Brooke. James had helped me set it up so she could be corporeal in the house when I wasn’t around, but had she blinked out when I had? Like a faulty switch?

I grabbed Frank’s wrist. “Brooke.”

Frank nodded, pulling out his phone. “I’ll message Haley.” He quickly tapped out a message. When he turned back to me, worry still etched the features of his face. “While we wait, maybe some food. You look really bad, Sam.”

“After we hear back from Haley.”

Frank looked like he wanted to argue, but wisely didn’t.

“How did you find me?” I had really given up there, in the end. I thought I’d die out there, alone except for the hog.

“Your phone,” James croaked. His eyes were slitted open, the silver irises brilliant against bloodshot eyes. After he surveyed me for a second, he sat up, shaking off his sleep.

“You traced where I pinged last or something?” I asked.

James rubbed a hand over his face. “No, that didn’t help much. When a phone pings a tower, the radius it gives you can be about twenty miles. Which told us you likely were still fairly close by, but not enough to start looking. No, you finally stumbled into an area with coverage. Which meant you showed back up on MyFriends tracker we use.” He scowled. “I’m getting you all chipped like dogs. I’m tired of losing you.”

“Dog chips don’t work like that,” Frank said helpfully.

“Then we’ll get the kidn that *do*,” James snapped.

Never had I been so glad that James insisted we use that app. Losing Frank in the French Quarter had been obnoxious, but not actually terrifying. Losing myself had been…I shivered.

“That got us close enough that we knew you were in the Bayou Sauvage National Wildlife Refuge. Once we were there, Ramon shifted. We knew if you were still anywhere in the vicinity, he would find you.” James reached out and took my wrist, feeling for my pulse.

Bears actually had an even better sense of smell than dogs. Once they’d brought Ramon to the refuge, he probably tracked me fairly quickly.

James grimaced. “The real difficulty was trying to hide a bear in Bayou Sauvage. A lot of the areas there are open marsh lands. Frank actually figured that problem out.”

Frank’s smile was a ghost of its usual self. “We had him use one of Chuck’s glamours—the one that makes him look like a cat?”

“He didn’t look like a cat when I saw him.”

James dropped my wrist, turned the flashlight app on his phone on, and flashed it in my eyes. “The charm didn’t fit him, so he had to carry it in his mouth. He dropped it in his excitement when he found you.”

“One guy did walk by on the path and saw him, but he’d taken a lot of mushrooms and thought he was hallucinating.” Frank shoved his hands into his pockets. “Kept asking me if I could see the bear, too. So I just told him I couldn’t.”

James, done with blinding me for kicks, turned the light off and stood. “I’m going to bring you something to eat. You will not leave this bed until you’ve consumed every crumb. Then we’re going straight to June’s.” James’s voice, always on the stern or serious side, was especially clipped, like he was biting out the words.

“Do we have to go to June’s?” I asked. I liked June, but I was still really tired and a lot scared.

“Yes,” He snarled, then he slammed the door.

Ramon finally stirred. “Whassit?”

“Go back to sleep,” I said. “It’s just James being James.”

Frank took James’s abandoned seat. “You scared him, Sam. Like, really scared him. He thought you were dead. I mean, we all did, but James…he really freaked out. I’m not sure I’ve ever seen him like that.”

I tried to push myself up to sitting, but mostly I just flopped. Ramon sat up, mouth opening in a jaw-cracking yawn. He slid his hands under my arms and propped me up against the headboard with the same ease I would use to position a doll to my liking. “Hey.”

“Sorry,” he said, still yawning. “Trying to help.”

“Why does he want me to go to June’s so badly?”

Frank shifted in his chair. “Well, we’re due to meet her anyway—because of the gnomes.”

I groaned, slouching down. “Right. The negotiations.”

“But he also wants her to look at you,” Ramon said, moving so he could sit across from me. “To figure out what happened. What made your power disappear.”

What he didn’t say—what none of us said—was the bigger question. What would happen if it didn’t come back?