Chapter 16

But Hidden in His Coat Is a Red Right Hand

It felt like my skin was crawling with power. My bones *ached* with it.

All sensory input had gone haywire. My eyes weren’t working right. Images and movements were disjointed. Like bad stop motion.

Voices came and went.

“Is this normal for him, then? The threats and the foaming at the mouth? Because Brid, darling, I really get what you see in him.”

“Shut up, Leo.” Brid’s tone was eerily calm, which meant she was freaked out. On some level, I knew that.

But I didn’t *know* it.

That didn’t make sense.

Somewhere in the distance I could hear myself saying stuff. *Vile* stuff.

“Do you think he really knows how to skin you alive using only a butterknife?” Leo sounded curious.

I blinked hard, trying to get my vision to work right again. My whole body shook.

“He does not,” James said. “He’s a vegetarian.”

“The only thing he can skin is a potato,” Ramon said. “How long is he going to be like this?”

“We need to put something between his teeth. He’s going to bite off his tongue.” I recognized Bran’s voice, but it took me a second.

 I guess the gang was all here.

Someone shoved something into my mouth. I bit down and tasted iron.

“For fuck’s sake, Sean, he didn’t mean your arm!” Brid’s voice was sharp.

“Eh, I’ll heal,” Sean said. “He’s not going to grow back a tongue. Being human must feel so limiting.”

I bit down harder. Blood filled my mouth. I should gag. The blood wasn’t mine—and as soon as I thought that, a small voice inside said, *isn’t it ours now?*

It was.

It was ours now.

That voice cackled. *And what do we do with blood?*

We summon. That’s what we did with blood. And this place held so many ghosts.

Faintly I heard Leo says, “Wasn’t blood kind of the problem in the first place?”

James swore and Sean’s arm was torn from my mouth, but it was too late.

I had power, *oh I had power*. And now, now I had blood. There was only one thing left. “Come to me.” My voice sounded like a hiss.

Power pulsed outward like someone had thrown a boulder into a pond. The ground shook. Ramon swore quietly under his breath, but I heard him.

It made me smile.

“Never seen Sam smile like that,” Sean said.

“I don’t think Sam’s all home right now,” Ramon said. “Leo, hold on tight. I don’t care what he does. James, can you move a little faster?”

“Do *you* want to try to draw a circle while the ground is moving?” James growled. “No? Then shut up.”

Energy flowed out of me. So much *power*.

But my skin still crawled with it. My bones vibrated like struck bells. Muscles cramped in my back. Through all the rumbling, yelling, and noise, I heard myself, a constant, vile litany.

“…Hordes of the undead will strip the flesh from the bones of the living. Society will fall, crushed beneath my boot. Rivers of blood—”

Someone shoved something in my mouth again. A sock, from the taste. I tried to spit it out, but strong hands clasped my face, and I couldn’t move my jaw.

James’ face swam in front of mine as he checked my pupils. “He needs to siphon off more power.”

Sean barked a laugh, a hysterical tinge to the sound. “You want *more* of them?”

“No,” James said. “I want him back in control.”

The world slid by again. Arms held me tight. Grass tickled my feet. I kicked.

“Ow!” Ramon growled. “Cut it out, Sam.”

“Here, give him to me,” Leo said.

“Why should I do that?” Ramon snapped.

“Because he’s hurting you.”

“I’ll heal.”

Leo sighed. “Yes, but he’ll feel bad. He doesn’t know me well. He won’t feel as bad if he hurts me.”

I was transferred over to another set of arms, like a sack of potatoes. Leo held my back to his chest, his grip firm. I kicked, but he didn’t seem to care. I tried to slam the back of my skull into his face, but he dodged it somehow. He clamped my head against his chest so I couldn’t move.

“Everyone inside the circle,” James said. “Just in case he gets homicidal.”

“Do you mean *more* homicidal?” Sean asked.

James’ face swam in front of mine again. “I’m going to remove the sock, Sam. I want you to call for Ed.” His voice held no give. It demanded obedience.

He removed the sock.

I spat at him. He was not a *god*. I was.

James’s upper lip lifted in a snarl. His silver eyes burned. “Armies of the dead won’t touch me, Samhain Corvus LaCroix. Want to fight me, child?”

“*I am a god!*”

 “You are *nothing*,” James snarled again. “A child. A speck. You want to come at me, Samhain? Bring me something better. Bring me a *real* god.”

I wasn’t sure if he said Ed’s name or not, or if that was just the first god-like creature I thought of. It didn’t matter. My brain was on fire. I literally saw red.

I screamed for Ed, punching the air with my power.

There’s a sharp sound, like a sonic boom.

My ears rang. My vision cleared.

For several heart beats, there was silence.

Then the world rushed back at me, full tilt.

Ed stood outside our circle. His jackal head glared at us. He wore nothing but a pair of boxers with little kisses all over them.

Leo let out a low whistle, but it wasn’t like a catcall whistle. It was the kind that said, *holy shit.*

“That’s…a lot of ghosts,” Ramon said.

“And dead things,” Leo’s voice rumbled against my back. “A whole mess of dead things.”

Behind Ed, circling back through the yard, were hundreds of ghosts. I couldn’t count them all. The yard was torn up, the grass and dirt already resealing itself like nothing had happened. That must have happened when all the zombies crawled out of the ground.

“James,” Bran said quietly. “Were those all from Douglas?”

James made a flat noise, but didn’t answer. The yard was full of reanimated bodies. Birds. Possums. Raccoons. Goats. Coyotes. Deer. Cows. Humans. The ground at their feet was wavy in some places, almost like it was flowing.

The yard was so full, it looked like we were having a concert. A really shitty concert.

Ed growled and I jerked my head back to him.

Ed was *pissed.* “This better be good.” He crossed his arms over his chest. How had I never noticed how ripped Ed was? I mean, I’d noticed, but I guess I hadn’t really ever thought about those muscles being a possible threat to me. Pretty sure he could tear off my head.

Like, *literally*.

“Hey, Ed.” My voice wobbled. I was shivering in Leo’s arms. James stood in front of me, but Brid, Sean, Bran, and Ramon were off to the side.

“*Hey, Ed?*” He snarled. “I was on a date, Sam. It was going *well.”* He stepped right up to the edge of the circle. “*Very well*. Then you yank me *here*? In the middle of your undead jamboree?” He paused, his eyes narrowing. “Is that part of the river? Hades preserve us, he pulled part of the river through.” His head whipped back toward us. “*What did you do?*” His voice rang through the air like a tomb door slamming shut, all thundering stone and purpose.

I looked at James.

James sighed. “We performed a Bathory Ritual. It went…” He steepled his hands. “Poorly.”

“It did work,” Ramon offered. “It just also caused Sam to go haywire.”

“S-s-sorry, Ed.” My teeth were chattering.

“We needed to drain the power quickly. You were the only upper level summoning I could think of that wouldn’t instantly eat him alive.” James crossed his arms. “Or at least would be less likely to eat him alive.”

“Is it safe to set him down yet,” Leo said, his voice vibrating against my back. “I’m generally a cuddler, but he still kind of smells like blood, and that’s making this weird.”

“Oh yeah,” Sean said. “That’s what’s making this weird.”

“I’m not sure I can stand,” I chattered.

Brid stepped forward, sliding her arms around me. “I’ve got him.”

I wrapped my arms around her neck. It felt good. Leo hovered for a second until Brid had me firmly in her grip, then decided to put his arms around us both. “Now, isn’t this fun?”

I looked up at him. “I can still taste Sean. So no, this isn’t fun.”

“I bet I’m delicious,” Sean said, his chest out. “Don’t I look delicious?”

Bran scowled at him. “I’ll show you delicious.”

Leo snorted a laugh.

Ed was tapping his foot. “Send it all back, Sam, and maybe, *maybe*, I won’t rend you limb from limb.” He jerked a finger at all of us. “No one saw any of this. You don’t speak of it.” He pointed at the wavy ground. “Especially that part. I’ll *know.*”

“Okay,” I chattered. “Okay.” Power still sung through me, but it wasn’t painful anymore. No strange voices in my head. No desire to kill everyone and make drums out of their skin.

It was a bit of a letdown, actually.

I started with the zombies. Opening the ground back up. Sending them back to sleep with my thanks. Then the ghosts, popping out of existence. Some went easily. Some fought, wanting another taste of power.

They could fight all they wanted. They stood no chance against me.

Finally, it was just Ed.

“Sorry,” I said. I went to open up a portal, but he held out a hand, stopping me. “No. Who knows where you’ll send me. Just release me, Sam.”

“Go with my blessing.” I leaned heavily on Brid. I might have been full of magic, but I couldn’t seem to get my body to do everything it should be doing.

Ed turned around, opened his own portal, and stepped through. The next second, the portal winked out of existence.

The yard was empty once more.

No one spoke.

“I think,” I said, resting my cheek on Brid’s hair. “That I’d really like to brush my teeth now.”

“I think,” Brid said, mimicking my tone, “That would be a really good idea.”

After I brushed my teeth, twice, gargled a vat of mouthwash, and had a more thorough shower, I rejoined everyone in the living room.

And stepped right into an argument. Bran and Leo were squared off in the middle of the room. Brid sat on the couch with Ramon and Sean. James was setting out snacks on the coffee table, ignoring the argument. While I’d been showering, we’d gathered more people—Brooke was helping James by bringing in drinks. Frank sat on the floor next to the coffee table. Brid’s other two brothers, Sayer and Roarke, stood by the window, enjoying the show.

“They don’t need to be reminded what he is.” Bran’s usually stoic expression had morphed into a scowl. His arms were crossed, his jaw tight. He looked ready to throw down.

Leo leaned over him, using his small advantage in height. “Now, see, I think that’s your mistake right there. I think they do need to be reminded *exactly* what he is.”

Bran shook his head. “They’re already scared of him. People lash out at the things they’re afraid of.”

Leo rolled his eyes. “Maybe, but it’s worth the payoff. The pack is intimidating. The pack *plus* him?” He threw his arms wide. “If they fear and respect him, then he’s a deterrent. A big ol’ weapon we probably won’t have to use.”

“Am I the big ol’ weapon?” I asked.

“No,” Bran said, at the exact same moment Leo said, “Yes.”

“Well, glad that’s clear, then.” I stole a small cheese sandwich from one of the trays James had set out. “What happened to Ashley?”

“She went to check on June again while you were foaming at the mouth,” Ramon said, grabbing his own sandwich, this one with roast beef. James must be really out of sorts if he was letting us eat in the living room. The *crumbs.*

I didn’t even get the thought out before James shoved a small plate into my hands.

“No need to be feral,” he muttered.

“You’re supposed to summon her once you’re coherent,” Brooke said. “Should we wait until Leo and Bran either fight or make out?” She clasped her hands and pressed them to her mouth.. “I know which one I’m voting for.”

Leo blinked hard and then laughed.

The tips of Bran’s ears turned red as he looked away. “I wouldn’t insult James by brawling in his nice living room.”

We’d made enough progress with James that at least he didn’t argue that it wasn’t his living room anymore.

“We have literally brawled through this entire household,” Sean pointed out. When Leo opened his mouth, Brid put a hand on his shoulder. “I’ll tell you later.”

She peered at me. “Are you feeling better?”

I shrugged, shoving the last of my sandwich into my mouth. “I’m coherent again. Power is back. No complaints.” I grabbed another sandwich. “Sorry for biting you, Sean.”

He didn’t look up from loading up his own plate. “What’s a few bites between friends?”

“So, why are you arguing about my weapon status?”

“I think I should spread the highlights reel of what we walked in to today to the entire pack,” Leo said. “Bran disagrees.”

Bran snorted.

I shrugged, taking a bite of my second sandwich. I was starving. I guess I had puked up my breakfast earlier. Amongst other things. “I summoned some ghosts. Raised some dead things. Pissed off Ed. I’ve done all this before.”

“Sam,” Leo said, looking at me fondly, “You raised a *lot* of dead things. You summoned so many spirits I couldn’t count them all. You punched a hole into another plane.”

I started to argue, but he held up a hand. “From what I’ve been told, yes, you’ve done those things before, but not all at once like that, not on that scale. And you didn’t just call Ed and wait for him to respond, you *yanked him through* without his consent.”

I froze mid-chew. Shit. Ed was going to be really pissed about that. Maybe I could send him a fruit basket? How does one apologize for yanking another being through to another dimension in their underpants?

Leo pushed up the sleeves of his sweater. He was just wearing a plain black V-neck sweater and gunmetal grey trousers, but somehow he looked classy as hell. Some people just give off the vibe, I guess.

“I’ve never heard of a necromancer doing anything to the scale or power you did today,” Leo continued.

I suddenly didn’t feel quite so hungry anymore.

Ramon threw a grape at me, nailing me in the chest. It bounced off and hit Frank.

“Hey,” I said. “What was that for?”

“Do *not* throw food in here,” James warned.

“You were making a face. I didn’t like it.” He threw another grape on me. “You’re not a freak, and I’ll keep throwing grapes at you until you understand that.”

He threw another one. Leo snatched it out of the air and popped it into his mouth. He threw an arm around me. “Sam, every single person in this room could be considered a freak.” He pointed to Brid. “Queen of the werewolves.” He pointed to Sean, Sayer, and Roarke. “Werewolf, werewolf, werewolf, and on top of that, they’re hybrids.” He moved his finger to Bran. “He organizes his sock drawer by color and season.”

Bran scowled.

Leo grinned, pointing to the rest of the group. “He turns into a bear. She’s a ghost. He’s an honorary gnome. I still don’t know what James is, but I know it’s weird.” He crouched a little and caught my eyes. “Do you think less of them for it?”

I frowned. “Of course not.”

“Great,” He said, “because they feel the same way about you.” He squeezed me tight with one arm and planted a big kiss on my temple. “You’re a glorious, terrifying freak. A master of the undead. A scary motherfucker.” He gave me a little shake. “Not a single person in this room loves you any less just because you do some spooky shit. Just like you don’t love them any less when they do spooky shit, right?”

“Of course not,” I said. “My friends are awesome.”

“Then stop downplaying your hand,” Leo said. “*Be* a necromancer. If the rules don’t work for you, make new ones.”

I stared up at him, a little in awe. “Who are you?”

“I missed my calling as a motivational speaker.” Leo grinned.

“Most of them don’t use terms like ‘motherfucker,’” Bran said.

Leo’s eyes practically twinkled. “Don’t you think more of them should?”

Once we had all of that settled, I summoned Ashley. She repeated all the information for me now that I wasn’t threatening to drown the world in blood. She couldn’t find June. She wasn’t in her house, and her power signature was gone, just like mine had been.

“It doesn’t take a huge leap of logic to assume the ghoul got her.” James leaned against one of the walls, a can of sparkling water in his hand. I’d noticed that he often hovered on the outskirts of our gatherings, staying off to the side, not settling in and getting comfortable. Unlike Frank, who was sprawled out like a starfish on the floor.

I thought back over everything we’d discussed about the ghoul. “As I see it, there are two possibilities. She was drained like I was and left somewhere, but just hasn’t made it home yet, or the ghoul it using the shadow roads like Douglas said and took her with him.”

Ashley seemed drawn, her expression pinched. “There’s a third option.”

“If she was dead,” I said softly, “you would know, right?”

Ashley didn’t answer, but she didn’t look relieved by my suggestion.

“If the ghoul is using the shadow roads, can’t Ashley go look for her there?” Frank asked from his spot on the floor.

Ashley gave him a faint smile. “I can find them on this plane because their power signature stands out. A spark of death amongst life. How would they stand out in the shadow realm?”

“Needle in a haystack,” Roarke said.

Sayer snorted. “More like a needle in a pack of other needles, in a factory that made needles.”

Roarke side-eyed him. “That may make more logical sense, but it hardly trips off the tongue, does it?”

Sayer shrugged. “I’ll stick with logic.”

“Of course you would,” Roarke said, but there was no bite in it.

I ignored them, turning over the problem in my head. There wasn’t a ton we could do for June where we were, especially if we were trying to keep the ghoul quiet. “Ramon, did you call June’s family?”

He nodded. “When I couldn’t get ahold of her, I checked in with them to see if they’d heard from her. Haven’t for a few days.”

“We should ask the gnomes,” Frank said.

My eyebrows shot up. “The gnomes are the opposite of quiet, and probably drunk. Plus, they’re up here with us.”

“Not our gnomes,” Frank said patiently. “June’s gnomes, or at least the ones she introduced us to. They know the area, know June, and I bet they can keep their mouths shut.”

“That’s…” Huh. Merry and Mercy did have an aura of quiet menace and competence about them. “That’s actually a good idea. Ashley, can you contact the gnomes?”

She nodded, then disappeared, wasting no time.

“Brid, can you call Haley? Get all of them up to speed.” I looked at James. “Do we need to have them stay here for a bit?”

James considered it before shaking his head. “I warded that place myself and it’s Tia’s stronghold. As long as Nick is wary, they should be okay there.” He tapped his fingers along his bicep. “I should go over and adjust their wards, though. Add a layer to make sure the ghoul can’t lure Nick out like it did with you.”

“Thanks,” I said. “That’s a good idea.” I dug into my pocket for my phone. “Everyone else keep eating sandwiches—I’ve got my own call to make.”

“Your sisters?” Ramon asked.

“Someone needs to warn their mom.” My stomach sank, even though I liked my little half sisters and their mom was really nice. She’d been kind enough to let me see them a few times since I found out they existed. Of course, she also thought I was Nick’s son and not her husband’s. I also knew she hadn’t told him that she’d met me. And we all carefully avoided the topic of her daughters being like me when we could.

Except she knew. She hadn’t told her husband Kevin, I was positive, but she knew. Because my mom had made the girls their own pouches. And sometimes my stepmom would ask me questions about the “imaginary friends” my little sisters had. I’d been content to let her ease into it. She hadn’t been a dick to me or my family—that was on Kevin. As long as she was coming to me for advice, I would be happy to help out anyway I could.

But I was going to have to rip the band-aid off today. I couldn’t let her hang out in that little valley of ignorance any longer. Not when the girls were in danger. As kind and sweet as she was, she wouldn’t thank me for putting them in danger, either.

I excused myself from the room and pulled up her contact info in my phone. I took a deep breath and hit the call button, hoping like hell she picked up.