Chapter 13

Well I Ain’t Evil,

I’m Just Good Lookin’

Douglas stared at me from the barrier of the circle and I hoped like hell that Nick had built it properly. I felt a bit like I’d been dangled in one of those big shark cages, directly into a frenzy of great white sharks. Only the water had been heavily chummed and the cage was made out of paperclips.

I shrugged, my hands out in front of me, a classic, “who knows?” gesture. “If I could answer that question, we wouldn’t have summoned you.” I buried my hands in the pockets of my jeans. “It’s not like we felt like a chat and thought, ‘what the hell, let’s see what Douglas is up to these days.’”

He scowled at me for a second before his expression cleared. “You need my help.”

I hummed thoughtfully for a second. “More like we need your expertise.” Before he could think too much on that, I told him what had happened. I half expected him to cut me off, tell me to shut up, or at the very least mock me, but not only had Brid been correct about him happily lording over me that he was brilliant, I’d forgotten something James had told me once.

Douglas loved knowledge, or at least knowing things. He couldn’t resist a challenge. I had just gifted him a doozy of a challenge. As I talked, his gaze softened, his arms crossed, his mouth pinched. He was thinking, and I suddenly realized it looked so familiar because James stood the same way when he was really puzzling over something.

“No pouch, no stygian coin,” he said when I’d finished, speaking softly to himself. “Warded house….” His head snapped up to James. “Does he usually sleep walk?”

James shook his head.

Douglas peered at me for a long moment.

His face relaxed suddenly, a corner of his lip twitching up. His version of a smile, I guess. It was creepy. Maybe it wouldn’t be on someone else’s face, but it was on his.

James came alert. “You know what it is.”

“I can make an educated guess.” He turned that strange not-smile on me. “But why should I?”

“I could compel you,” Nick said. I’d been so focused on Douglas I’d momentarily forgotten about him.

Douglas smirked. “You’re welcome to try, but let’s face it—you’re not the powerhouse here. Containing me isn’t quite the same as calling your everyday specter, is it, Hatfield?”

Nick didn’t say anything, but from the strain on his face, I was pretty sure Douglas was right.

From the muted glee in Douglas’s face, I was pretty sure that normally I *could* have compelled him to answer. Normally.

Nick couldn’t hold him forever, so I needed to move this show along. “What do you want, Douglas?” I asked bluntly.

He whipped his attention back to me, his eyes twinkling. No good ever came of that twinkle. “A favor.”

“*No*.” James’ response cracked like a pistol shot.

I sighed. “I’m open to ideas, James.” I hoped he heard what I wasn’t saying. We didn’t have *time* to figure this out on our own. I wasn’t sure we could, honestly. There was no guaranteeing the information was in any of Douglas’s notebooks.

From the closed expression on James’s face, he knew it, too. His nostrils flared and he looked away. “We have conditions.”

Douglas brightened further. I would have thought he’d see James’s response as a betrayal, his former *pukis* helping me make a deal. But as they started to argue back and forth, it was clear that he enjoyed arguing with James. Bargaining. I wasn’t sure what the afterlife was like for Douglas—or anyone, really—but I think he’d been bored.

After a few minutes of rapid-fire back and forth, James summarized the conditions. “You will give Samhain Corvus LaCroix all of the information you have about the situation he is in and his condition as you understand it. In return he will owe you one favor—”

“At a time of my choosing,” Douglas interrupted.

James scowled, but apparently he couldn’t think of how the addition would matter, so he kept going. “At the time of your choosing. Said favor will not require Sam to kill anyone against his will, nor will it require the giving of his own life, or physical assault of any kind. It will not require anything Sam cannot give, and has an expiration date of one year.”

“Ten years,” Douglas countered.

I held up a hand, stopping James from arguing. “Five years.” That’s where we would have likely ended up. I didn’t want a favor to Douglas hanging over my head for five years, but then I didn’t want it over my head for one, either.

“Five years.” The words came out of James grudgingly. “Are both parties agreed?”

“Agreed,” Douglas said easily.

“Agreed,” I said, with a sigh. I already regretted it, but again, couldn’t see a way around it. “Now tell me what happened.”

“A ghoul,” Douglas said, his expression triumphant.

No one said anything. I looked around the group. My mom looked perplexed. Nick seemed worried, or about to pass out from the strain, it could go either way. I couldn’t see Ramon, because he was behind me, but I heard him snort. James was frowning at the ground like the grass had messed up the color coding on his planner.

I had heard the word “ghoul” before, but I wasn’t sure what it meant in real life context.

“Don’t ghouls eat flesh?” Ramon asked.

I turned my head to look at him.

He shrugged. “They’re from Middle Eastern folklore, I think.”

“America doesn’t have ghouls.” Nick’s voice was gravelly, like he’d just woken up.

“We did,” James said slowly. “But I thought they were extinct? If I recall, they also ate flesh, as Ramon’s question stated.”

“The greater American Ghoul was a flesh eater, yes. Mostly carrion. General nuisance around cemeteries and crypts. Incredibly stupid and as far as I know, at least functionally extinct.” Douglas tucked his arms behind his back, appearing to be every bit the lecturing professor. “They were strong and fast, but easily hunted and killed off a long time ago.”

Douglas was warming to his subject now, rocking back on his heels and tipping his head up to the sky. “But the *lesser* American Ghoul never went extinct. We banished it.” He dropped his gaze to me. “By we, I mean necromancers.”

“Banished it?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“To the underworld,” Douglas said. “Or at least a pocket of it.”

“How could they banish a living creature to the underworld?” My mother asked, her voice clipped.

“Due to a quirk of their own biology.” Douglas waved a hand at me. “Lesser American Ghouls adapted a unique food source. Necromantic energy. Death magic.” He turned to me. “Haven’t you ever wondered why there are so few of us, Sam?”

I hadn’t, to be honest. I’d just sort of accepted that we were rare and been grateful for it. The world didn’t need *more* of Douglas. My answer must have shown on my face because Douglas kept going, his tone faintly mocking.

“We were almost wiped out on this continent by that particular kind of ghoul.”

“I’ve never heard of this,” Nick said. Which made me feel better about my own ignorance.

“Once a problem is no longer a problem, people tend to forget about it,” Douglas murmured. “Besides, I don’t exactly think the necromancers that were left wanted anyone to know about the ghoul. People unconnected to us likely didn’t care or know what it was feeding off of. Not their problem. So the necromancers buried the knowledge.”

“If they knew, they might be able to summon one back,” James said. He must have sensed my next question, because he glanced at me. “If you could summon a ghoul and control it, you could easily get rid of your competition.”

Douglas nodded. “I only knew about it because I found a note in an old diary, something from my aunt’s old library.” He appeared troubled at the mention of his aunt. “I think she’d been considering summoning one, or trying to figure out how to go about it. No one had managed as far as she knew.”

“Someone managed,” Ramon said.

“Or at least managed *enough,”* Douglas said. When he saw our blank faces, he sighed, holding his hands out about two feet apart. “Imagine this—someone attempts a ritual to summon a ghoul from the underworld. They get most of the way through it, but something happens. Perhaps they screwed up the incantation, lacked the power, didn’t have the right sacrifice, who knows.”

He pressed his hands together like he was praying. “They failed to actually pull the ghoul through to the point of manifestation, yes, but they didn’t fail *completely*.” He shook his praying hands. “Here the ghoul sits, pressed between the two worlds, neither here nor there. Buried potential. A seed, if you will.”

“Seeds can sit dormant for a long time,” My mom said, interested despite her hatred of Douglas, “until the conditions are right. Sunlight. Rain. Soil.”

“In this case,” Douglas said. “Sam.” He held up those hands. “Here it is, waiting, waiting, *waiting* for the magical drought conditions to end. The whole time starving, and then the equivalent of a monsoon walks by. It would be too hard to resist.” Douglas drew his fingers apart, making his hands resemble a flower in bloom. “Suddenly, basic conditions are met, the ritual is now complete.”

I opened my mouth to argue that I couldn’t just accidentally complete a ritual, but I had before. In fact, I’d done so in killing Douglas. My jaw snapped shut.

James was still in his thoughtful pose, though he was focused on Douglas’s hands. “How?” The simple question confused me, but not Douglas.

“Magical lure.” Douglas dropped his hands. “Things will go to great lengths to survive. Sam must have looked like a beacon, stuffed full of magic of not one but *three* powerful necromancers.”

“Three?” I asked.

“Technically my Aunt’s power was in there. Who knows how many necromancers she killed and drained, so possibly more than three.”

“You’re a magical turducken,” Ramon murmured.

I elbowed him.

Douglas ignored us both. “Think about it—what would you do if you were starving and a sign lights up in the distance proclaiming an all-you-can-eat buffet?”

Ramon caught on first. “The ghoul DoorDashed his ass?” Ramon slung an arm around my shoulder. “You were almost Grubhubbed to death.”

I raised my middle finger and held it in front of his face, but otherwise ignored him.

James huffed. “I never thought of a lure.”

“What else would get past your wards?” The only time Douglas ever had a human expression on his face was when he was talking to James. Right now it held the mixture of fond respect you might see between a teacher and a beloved pupil, when the pupil finally saw something the teacher thought was obvious.

Douglas flicked his fingers toward me. “It couldn’t get in, so it drew Sam out. Without his protection bag, he would have been lit up like the Vegas Strip.”

“The problem now is, how do I get my powers back?” I really wasn’t excited about the answer, because Douglas seemed real happy about it. Before he could spell my doom, though, Nick chimed in, sounding very, very tired.

“That’s not the problem,” Nick said. “Or at least, not the only problem. We now have a ghoul on the loose, no idea where it is, or who it will eat next.” Under the layer of exhaustion in Nick’s voice was a well of worry. “That’s a small menu, Sam. An *extremely* small menu, and you’re related to most of them.”

My heart squeezed in a bout of pure terror. I only knew four necromancers. Nick. June…and my two baby half-sisters. I didn’t want a ghoul eating *any* of them.

“Ramon, can you call June?” He patted my shoulder and moved away from the group, taking his phone out. My next question was for the whole group. “Could a ghoul get up here? It’s a long way from New Orleans to here.”

“Ghouls are fast, but they’re not *that* fast,” James said. “Unless it managed to sneak into the cargo hold of something, I don’t see how it would travel quickly, and ghouls just aren’t that smart.”

I had a brief, shiny moment of relief, which Douglas immediately shattered.

“Unless it utilizes the shadow roads.”

I knew I wouldn’t like the answer, but again, I had to ask. “What are the shadow roads?”

“Paths between the underworld and this one.” Douglas tipped his head. “It’s how harbingers and the like get around.”

James straightened. “We need to warn them.”

“Because?” Someday I would not be the most ignorant person in the room. Today was not that day.

“They eat death magic, Sam,” James’s tone was gentle. “What do you think powers Ashley? Or Ed?”

“This is all great,” Nick said through gritted teeth, “but we’re almost out of time and we won’t be able to do anyone any good if you don’t tell Sam how to get his powers back.”

Douglas clapped his hands together. “Yes, yes of course.” He looked at James. “The Bathory ritual.”

James blanched. “Are you certain?”

Douglas gave a slow nod, that gleeful expression back on his face.

James grimaced. “He’s going to hate that.”

“I’m going to hate *what*?” I couldn’t keep a slightly hysterical note out of my voice. If the ritual made both James *and* Douglas make those faces…

I was absolutely going to hate it.