Chapter 8

Well, I’ve Been Afraid of Changin’

If I’d hoped to slide back into Seattle unnoticed and lay low for a while, those hopes were quickly dashed.

I’d barely made it over the threshold into my home before I was assaulted by work and responsibility. Just once I’d like work and responsibility to give me a nice cuddle and a pat on the head instead of walloping me.

My sister, Haley, had been house sitting in my absence, partially because she knew how dangerous things in my house could be. I’d inherited it from an unscrupulous necromancer named Douglas whose hobbies had been torture, collecting nice things, and doing evil magic. Possibly walks on the beach, but I had no evidence of that.

We’d done our best to find, neutralize, and sometimes contain the things he’d left behind, but he’d had decades to work. That was a lot of time to make evil happen. We’d probably only managed to find one tenth of the dangerous things in this house, and even that fraction might have been optimistic.

Haley was smart, careful, and a witch in her own right, so she was one of the few people I’d let watch the house.

Plus, the gnomes, marble centurions, and various hedges and statuary around the place basically thought she was the best, so no one would give her any shit. My sister could hold her own.

So I was not expecting the frazzled look on her face as she greeted all of us at the doorway. “You have a stack of voicemail on the business line, the gnomes won’t stop fighting, and Brooke is on the fritz.”

I didn’t like handing out my cell phone for council business, so we had a landline that James usually took care of. It normally rerouted to his cell phone, but he’d left it connected to voice mail while we’d been gone. Any necromantic emergency was supposed to have been handled by my Uncle Nick while I was gone.

Despite sleeping on the plane, I was beat. Travel always took it out of me, but I suspected the lion’s share of my exhaustion belonged to whatever the hell had happened to me. I rubbed a hand over my face. “James, can you make caffeine happen?”

James was already walking past me to the kitchen, waving a hand at me in dismissal. When I first moved into the house, I would have thought he was blowing me off. Now I knew it meant, “I got this, carry on.”

So I carried on. “Frank, gnomes.” Frank peeled off with Chuck at his heels.

Ramon picked up the bags. “Ramon, bags.”

I shot him a look. “I wasn’t going to demand you put our luggage away. I was going to leave it and have you come with me.”

Ramon snorted. “Please. This will take me two seconds and then I’ll come help your sad ass.”

“My sad ass thanks you,” I said as Ramon ran our bags up the stairs. Okay, that was gnomes and coffee sorted. “Voice mail handed off to Nick?” I asked hopefully.

She shook her head, crushing all of my hopes and dreams. “He’s tapped out. I let him know when you landed and he’s on his way over.”

There was a knock on the door, almost like it was choreographed. I opened the door to find my Uncle Nick on the other side, and I took a moment to study him.

In second grade my teacher made me us do a science experiment where we put a seed into a little cup full of soil, watered it, and then stuck it into the cabinet under the sink to see if something will grow without light. Uncle Nick used to remind me of that stunted seed—like he’d been living in some version of that cabinet. Pale, too thin, and sort of…lost.

The Nick on my doorstep was leaps and bounds away from where my uncle had been. Under my mom’s care, he’d lost the weedy look. Filled out. Got some sun. I think he’d been working out. It looked good on him. Today, however, he had the appearance of someone who was running on fumes for awhile and had actually completely run out a few miles back.

He didn’t enter, hesitating on the threshold. Things were still touchy between my Uncle and I. On my end of things, I was working on forgiving him for what he’d done to me. On his end, he was working on forgiving himself. It took some of the fun out of being angry at him when I knew he was still beating himself up over it.

Haley rolled her eyes at both of us, grabbing Nick’s arm and basically yanking him into the house.

He stumbled over the threshold, smiling at Haley before turning his attention to me. “I’m so glad you’re home.” He kept walking after Haley released his arm, making it to the living room and collapsing onto the couch. “Haley had me look at Brooke’s spell—I’m not sure what prompted the check, but something’s seriously awry.” He groaned, sinking further into the couch, missing the look Ramon and I shared. The “oh shit, how are we going to handle this” look.

We were really good at that look. Practice makes perfect and all that.

Nick carried on, his voice tired. “Did you check the messages yet? Someone from the pack apparently called? Something about arbitration and you needing to raise a ghost? Details should be on the message.”

James came back in, handing me a mug of coffee, before heading straight to the landline and listening to the messages. I couldn’t hear the voice mail, but I didn’t like the expression on his face as he listened.

I was getting the deep, uncomfortable feeling that I was fucked. This was a pretty routine feeling for me, so I sipped my coffee and waited for doom to fall.

James put the phone down, his mouth pursed. “First things first—what’s this about Brooke’s spell?”

Nick perked up slightly. “Any more of that coffee?”

“Yes.” James didn’t move to get any. “Now what’s wrong with Brooke?”

Nick lurched out of the chair and headed to the kitchen. “The spell Sam put up—the one that makes it so she can manifest in the house without his help? Something’s wrong with it. She keeps flickering out.” He came back in with his own coffee and sat back into this chair. “I’m not sure what’s wrong. I checked it. Nothing looks off, but it’s obviously not working.”

I cleared my throat. “Well, funny thing about that.” I gave my uncle a very condensed version of my story.

“That’s…” Nick rubbed a hand through his hair. “I have no idea what that is.”

I’m not going to lie—part of me had been hoping he might know what the problem might be. The idea of someone swooping in and solving my problems was appealing. “Don’t feel bad. Apparently I’m a mystery.”

James strode over to me, hand out. “I need the Stygian coin.” He turned his head toward Nick. “Do you have enough power to summon Brooke?”

Nick closed his eyes for a minute, the lines of his face taught in concentration. “Yeah,” he said slowly. “I think so.” He opened his eyes, sipping his coffee. “Brooke?”

I knew from the way he pitched his voice, that he was using his power—her name took on a sort of…command. I don’t know how to explain it. What bothered me is that I should have *felt* it.

Brooke appeared with a faint popping noise—she was a little washed out, but she was there. Like, I could see her standing there, but it was like she’d been printed when the ink cartridges were low. Not as vibrant as her usual self. She lit up when she saw us.

James stepped closer to her, sliding the coin around her neck. The second the coin dropped against her chest she sharpened, coming into full focus. She frowned at the coin. “Is this Sam’s creepy blood coin?”

“Yes,” James said, and though I couldn’t pinpoint it, I somehow knew he was faintly amused. “Sam’s creepy blood coin will keep you with us without Sam’s spell.” When she looked confused, James cleared his throat almost awkwardly. Which was weird because James didn’t do *awkward*. “It’s how we made Douglas corporeal, remember?”

Brooke continued to frown at it. “Is it going to make me evil?”

“Do you feel evil?” Ramon asked while James shook his head.

She thought about it. “No more than usual.”

“That’s good,” I said.

Brooke didn’t look completely convinced yet. “Wait, doesn’t Sam need this coin? As a back-up thingie?”

James usually insisted I have it on me at all times. Called it my back-up battery.

I smiled at Brooke, but it felt brittle. “Won’t do me any good right now.”

Nick fiddled with his coffee cup, glancing up at me. “What are you going to do? About the pack. I’d go in your stead, but—” He grimaced. “I’m tapped out and I’m not council.”

What he wasn’t saying was, what with things between me and the pack still being slightly strained, we wouldn’t want them to feel “slighted” by sending a “lesser” necromancer. When he wasn’t drained from being overworked, there was nothing wrong with Nick’s power base. He just wasn’t as powerful as me.

I shrugged. “I’m not sure what I’m going to do.”

“We can’t let it get out,” James said firmly. “The last thing we need right now is people trying for Sam’s spot on the council because they think he’s weak.”

“I am weak,” I said.

“But we can’t let them *know* it.” He shook his head. “We’ll just have to go and see what we can do.”

“You mean lie our asses off?” Ramon asked.

“Yes,” James said. “Exactly. Brooke, you’ll have to come with us. They know you’re a ghost. That will help sell the story that Sam still has his powers. We’ll just have to wing the rest.” He dropped his head back and sighed at the ceiling. “I hate winging it.”

Nick set down his coffee cup. “Want me to go with you? Not sure if I can actually do anything.” He dropped his gaze, examining the floor like it had suddenly gotten really interesting. “I’ll have to reschedule some things.”

I don’t know what made me ask. My plate was already full. I didn’t need more of *anything*, but for some reason, the question came out of me anyway. “Reschedule some things?”

“Yeah.” He fidgeted, the rug under the coffee table taking all of his focus.

He looked exactly like I did when I was trying to get something past my mom, which was futile. “What kind of things?”

Nick was looking distinctly uncomfortable. “Dinner.”

My uncle wasn’t a shut-in per se, but he wasn’t a social butterfly, either. He simply didn’t know that many people, especially in Seattle as he hadn’t been living here for very long. The list of people he knew was super short.

The list of people that would make him uncomfortable just from telling me he was meeting them for dinner—that were still alive—was made up of only two names that I could think of. Since he didn’t seem angry or sad, I ruled out his brother, my biological dad.

That left my mother.

“Is it a date?” I asked softly. The room around me was deathly quiet.

Nick squared his shoulders, finally bringing his gaze back up to mine. “Yes.” I’m not sure what he saw in my face, but his jaw clenched, a muscle ticking in his cheek. “I won’t ask your permission, Sam.” His tone was gentle, but there was steel in there, too. “The only permission I need is Tia’s. But I do hope this won’t make things worse between us.” He rubbed the heel of his hand against his forehead, then dropped his hand to his lap. “Maybe it’s me, but I feel like you and me, we’ve been making headway.”

I agreed with him, but I didn’t say anything. Partially because I wasn’t quite sure what I wanted to say, but also because I wanted to see what he would say if I let him talk. I snuck a glance at Haley to see if she was surprised by any of this, and while she wasn’t saying anything, she had a faint smile on her lips.

“Maybe I’m wrong.” Nick sighed. “I’d hate to jeopardize my relationship with you, but…” He scrubbed a hand over his heart, and I don’t think he realized he was doing it. “For Tia, I’d do it.” He took a deep breath, letting it out in a whoosh. “I’m hoping—I’m hoping you understand.”

Now it was his turn to watch me and wait for my response. I examined his face, setting aside my beef with my uncle for a minute. Setting aside our history. Did I understand that there were some people in your life that you’d risk everything for?

I thought of Brid, because of course I did.

And yeah, I understood.

There are some people that you’d shake down the heavens for.

My mom deserved that kind of devotion, I trusted her to make her own decisions and know what she wanted and needed. If she’d said yes to a date with Nick, I needed to support her choice.

That didn’t mean I wouldn’t bust his chops a *little.* “You love her?”

A laugh burst out of him, a sharp bark of sound. “I think I fell in love with Tia ten seconds after I met her.” He made a rueful face. “And it would have been faster, but that first ten seconds was spent in shock.”

I raised an eyebrow at Haley.

The corner of her mouth jerked as she fought a smile. “He’s really, really good to her, Sam. I would tell you if he wasn’t.”

I kept my face impassive, letting the silence drag out after that as I pretended to mull this over. Nick’s face fell.

He really did take all the fun out of fucking with him. I sighed theatrically. “I’m not calling you dad.”

“That would be very, very weird,” Nick said, his eyes wide at the thought.

Haley clasped her hands together. “Can *I* call you Papa Nick?”

Nick blinked at her, unsure if she was serious. “Maybe we should see how the whole dating thing goes first?”

Haley made a dismissive noise. “Please. I’ve seen you two goo-goo birds.” She crossed her arms. “Go in expecting victory, Papa Nick. It’s the only way to live life.”

Nick still seemed unsure. “I can’t tell if you’re kidding or not,” he said tentatively.

I took pity on him. “She’s one hundred percent serious.” Haley was a lot like my mom—she didn’t do things on a whim and was pretty good at reading people. If she wanted to give Nick a title, she’d been considering this for awhile. She must have seen something in his interactions with our mom that I hadn’t, which made sense since they shared a household.

“I…” Nick cleared his throat. “I’m not sure if it’s weird or not, or what Tia will think, but…I would really like that.” His words had gone soft at the end. “If you’re sure. I—” he cleared his throat again, struggling. “I don’t have a lot of family,” he admitted. “It would be nice to feel like I had more.”

Well, hell. Some people just made it impossible to hate them. I looked at Ramon. “Papa Uncle?”

“No,” Ramon said, decisively. “I say drop the ‘uncle’ because then you can just pretend like your biological dad just didn’t exist. Dude’s a tool.” He chopped the air with one hand. “Just completely cut that mental tie.”

“You do make a good point,” I said.

Ramon shrugged. “I vote we all call him Papa Nick.” He narrowed his eyes at Nick. “But if you hurt Tia, that will not stop me from ripping off both of your arms and beating you to death with them.”

I jerked a thumb at Ramon. “What he said.”

James stepped forward, arms crossed over his front, his gaze sharp as he took in Nick. “Tell me where you’re going, what your plan is for the date. I will dress you.”

“Okay?” James said, the word coming out as a question.

I snorted. “That’s the James gold seal of approval,” I said. “Dressing people is his love language, just like threatening people with beating their enemies to death with their own arms is Ramon’s.”

The fact that we were all okay with the date finally hit Nick and he lit up like a beacon.

Like I said, impossible to hate the guy for too long.

With all that in mind, I made the decision, to take the tangled past, the one tied up with him and my mom, and their terrible desperate decisions, and just let them go. Holding on hadn’t been doing any of us any good, and certainly wasn’t helping me feel better or move forward.

We all deserved a fresh start. I would do what I could to make sure we got one.