Prologue

You Can’t Start A Fire Without A Spark

The first thing it knows is blood. A salty splash of it, like Mother’s milk. It drinks it down in gasping sips, but it’s not enough.

It’s never enough. The tongue is wet, but the throat whistles with the song of the desert.

Hollow. Empty.

Just enough of something to know that it is *nothing.*

If it had a throat, the creature would scream. The anger is there, but not the howl.

But wait.

*Wait*.

There, just above the soil. What is that?

There, past the worms and digging roots—the sharp ozone of magic. The chilled power of graveyards and winter moons.

Death magic.

If blood is Mother’s milk, magic is the heady ambrosia of the gods. The stuff that dreams are made of.

Or nightmares.

The creature only knows nightmares. After all, like calls to like.

It reaches for the magic, grasping with only the faintest whisps of fingertips. If only it could get a grip, it would grab fistfuls. Gobble it up like the candy it is.

Death magic meant *life.*

It could hear words then, pieces of the spell burrowing down through the soil. The closer it came, the more the creature pulled together, collapsing rapidly, like a dying star. Condensing, growing, building, a beating heart in the earth. Shadows made flesh.

Only.

The words, the beautiful *words*, falter. Stop. The spell went from a tight rope, neatly woven, to so much dandelion fluff, born away on the wind.

No.

*No. Nononononono.*

It scrambles in the dirt, but it doesn’t matter. It’s too late.

The magic is gone.

The spell unfinished.

The beating heart of magic slows. Ebbs and flows with the slower rhythm of the earth. Slows, but doesn’t stop. Instead it lays there, dormant. Waiting. A seed slumbering in the earth.

Waiting until the right moment.

Waiting for the cold magic to come back.

Waiting to be born again.

That’s When I Come Alive

The French Quarter was too much for Ramon’s sensitive nose. Hell, it was too much for *mine* and I’m human. Still, you couldn’t go to New Orleans and not at least see Bourbon Street.

Ramon’s nose wrinkled into a snarl as he crossed his arms across his chest. Even through his T-shirt I could see the definition of his muscles, no doubt helped out by the thin layer of sweat on his skin. October in New Orleans—at home we’d be enjoying the first steps into fall. Chilly weather, hoodies, hands wrapped around to go mugs of coffee as you stepped among the falling leaves ranging every color of a sunburst.

New Orleans hadn’t got the memo. The air was muggy and thick. You could practically chew it. Ramon rolled his shoulders. Ramon would never be tall, but he’d shot up at least two inches this last summer—probably a final growth spurt. He’d put on muscle. Gone was the skinny skater kid I used to know. Now he looked like he could snap someone in half. He was still funny and smart, but there’s a thread of gravity that hadn’t been there before.

Oh, and he could turn into a bear now. That was a hell of a thing.

The last year had brought on so much change, I couldn’t quite keep up. My best friend could turn into a bear, my other friend became a ghost, I’d found—and lost—the love of my fucking life, and I learned I could raise the dead. I’d come to grips with the first thing, my heart broke over the second and third, and fuck if I knew how I felt about the fourth thing.

A group of frat-looking dudes covered in beads—despite it not being even close to Mardi Gras season—passed by, their hands full of yard-long drinks as they whistled and shouted at a bridal party walking the other way. I could tell they were a bridal party because they were wearing matching shirts that said so.

Maybe if we’d made group T-shirts, we wouldn’t have lost part of our group. That bridal party was on to something.

Ramon grunted, annoyance twisting his face. “Smells like vomit.”

“They have to hose down this street every day for a reason,” James told him absently as he looked in the other direction. If Ramon looked annoyed, James looked disgusted. He was crisply dressed in a suit, though he’d abandoned the jacket back at the house we’d rented, his only nod to the heat. Oh, wait, and he’d rolled up his shirtsleeves.

His silver eyes reflected the light of the neon as he examined the crowd. From the way he held himself, like he didn’t want to touch anything, it was easy to see that one of his forms was that of a cat. He also turned into a small dragon, because he was a fancy man. I didn’t turn into a single thing, which felt like a raw deal.

You would think, because of his sneer, that James didn’t like New Orleans. You’d be wrong. There was an old world glamour to the city. An exhausted elegance. James fit in perfectly. He just wasn’t fond of Bourbon Street, but there was plenty of the city outside that particular stretch of buckling concrete.

I had nothing against the party scene, but I knew it wasn’t for me. We’d taken my mentor, June’s, advice and spent most of our time in other parts of the city. We’d gone on a swamp tour, listened to music in the Marigny, and took Ramon on a food tour as he ate his way through a dozen restaurants.

We’d skipped the haunted tour. After all, my life was already a haunted tour.

My name was Sam LaCroix, and I’m a necromancer—which meant I had a special affinity for the dead. James might match New Orleans grandeur, but I connected to the city on a different level—we both straddled the line between the living and the dead.

That was also why I was wearing a new protection bag, courtesy of my mother, around my neck. It nestled against the silver chain that held a tarnished coin. That coin troubled me deeply, but I couldn’t get rid of it—didn’t trust it to anyone else. June was helping me get the hang of using it, but so far, it was best left alone. According to James, it was like hitting the nitro button in a car. It boosted the fuel. I wasn’t good at car analogies, because I didn’t really understand how cars worked. All I knew was the coin held onto power until I needed it, then gave me a kick.

I didn’t need it. I certainly didn’t want it. But in New Orleans? I needed to be careful with it.

New Orleans was an old city—at least for the US—and much older than my native Seattle. It was a city with history—a city that celebrated the dead in a way that we didn’t in my neck of the woods.

It also had a murder rate that was through the roof. It didn’t have the highest—last I checked that dubious honor belonged to St. Louis, but it was definitely in the top ten. But there was something special about this city. Was it all the focus on death? The fantastic cemeteries? A unique magic to the place?

Whatever it was, New Orleans held onto its dead. Practically cradled them in its arms. That was hard on someone like me. I had been told in no uncertain terms by June to leave the coin alone and my protection bag on at all times while I was in the city. She was worried I would be overwhelmed. I didn’t argue with her. I was new to the whole necromancer thing, which was why we were down here in the first place. I was here to train with June, though that wasn’t what we’d told everyone back home. Technically I was here to escort Frank and one of my garden gnomes, Chuck, and aid in the negotiations between them and a local colony of gnomes.

Yes, I had gnomes. Yes, they’re alive. No, they’re not sweet. What they were was a pain in my ass.

June had found a colony of gnomes close to her place and we were trying to convince them to send a delegation of female gnomes up with us to consider marrying into our gnome posse. A necessary mission, but also a cover. Mostly, I was here to learn from June, but as a member of the Council in Seattle, I couldn’t let anyone know I still desperately needed training. It would expose a weakness, and I didn’t need to deal with anyone challenging me for my position right now. No, it was better they thought I was a gnome matchmaker.

I rubbed a hand over my face. It was official. My life was weird.

“Do you see him?” I peered into the crowd. We’d managed to lose Frank about an hour ago. He wasn’t answering our texts. If we’d lost Ramon or James, I wouldn’t worry. Both of them could take care of themselves. Frank, though. Frank was a little younger than us. Smaller. And completely one hundred percent *human.* He also had no tolerance for alcohol and had been released onto Bourbon Street with a top-notch fake ID. Not that anyone had been checking our IDs.

People walked around us with to-go cups of neon-colored cocktails and slushy daiquiris. I grimaced. “By the time we find him, he’s going to puke a rainbow.”

Ramon barked a laugh. “What about Chuck? It’s going to be a double rainbow.”

“Don’t you call that evil down upon us,” I said, shoving his shoulder. He didn’t budge. I’d been lifting weights, trying to get some sort of strength going on, but I’d never catch up to Ramon now.

“A teeny, tiny rainbow of puke.” Ramon laughed again.

I grunted. Chuck may be a gnome, but I didn’t for a second think any mess he made would be *tiny.* Chuck the Norriser was the gnome we’d brought with us. We’d tried to leave him at June’s but he wouldn’t have it. After all, it was his job to protect us. Never mind that we often needed protection from Chuck more than anything else. “Can you catch Frank’s scent at all?”

Ramon just looked at me.

“Right,” I said. “The vomit.”

James dug out his phone, flipping through several screens until he found the app that would track Frank’s phone. We’d had spotty reception in the city, which wasn’t helping things. “Finally.” He turned and started weaving his way through the crowd.

I grabbed Ramon’s sleeve and tugged him along. James had clearly found our boy, but being James he couldn’t just say he’d found him. Oh no. He would just expect us to keep up. He didn’t even glance back at us.

We followed James down the street for several blocks until he stopped in front of some bar called Lafitte’s Blacksmith Shop Bar. I could hear the piano and a group of people singing off-key. James pushed his way into the packed bar and we jogged after him.

Lafitte’s was dimly lit, the ceiling low. The humid air thick with sweat and spilled beer. A few tables were scattered here or there, all the chairs full. A handful of people were dancing.

Tucked away in the corner was a grand piano. The pianist was gamely belting out a song, the crowd singing right along with him. It appeared to be Billy Joel’s, “My Life.” Apparently, people still listened to Billy Joel, which was surprising. I only knew who he was because I collected records and had several of his handed down to me by my stepdad when he died.

James was still pushing his way through the crowd, Ramon and I trailing in his wake. The drunken crowd may not know what James was exactly, but he radiated calm menace the way some people radiated joy. You could just look at James and know he could break your bones down into a powder and wouldn’t lose a wink of sleep or wrinkle his suit when he did it.

The crowd parted and I saw something I will never, ever forget. Frank was lying on the piano on his back, one leg bent up, his converse shoe flat on the piano top. He had a microphone in his hand and was singing his heart out. On his chest rested an empty baby carrier. We had several collars that we could put on Chuck to activate a glamor—a disguise that kept what he was from human eyes. Sometimes it was a baby, but we tried to avoid that one because Chuck thought it was funny to swear in that form.

It made people make judgey faces. Chuck loved judgey faces.

The parrot one was the guise we used most, but tonight we’d gone with a fat orange tabby.

Which meant that currently there was a rotund orange cat yowling along with Frank as he sang. A few people had their phones out.

Ramon leaned close and shouted in my ear. “Is this going to be a problem, you think?”

I shook my head, keeping my voice at a normal tone. Ramon had excellent hearing. Part of the “turning into a bear” thing. “This is New Orleans. No one cares.” An unexpected but wonderful aspect of the city. New Orleans didn’t bat an eye at weird. Weird was its every day. Yesterday I’d walked past a woman smoking outside a cafe. She was seated at a table, enjoying a cocktail. She had a miniature horse, two goats, and a sheep with her. No one looked twice. Just status quo around these parts.

When I’d pointed it out to James he just shrugged. “This is a carnival city. They’re used to a certain level of pageantry.” Apparently he’d been here many times. Like I said, James fit here in a way he didn’t in Seattle. I guess he had a certain amount of pageantry to him as well.

Someone slid a string of beads around my neck. I smiled at them, my hand going automatically to the pouch I had tucked under my T-shirt. Still there. For a moment I thought I heard someone whispering in my ear, but when I turned to look, no one was paying any attention to me. I guessed I couldn’t hold a candle to the spectacle that was Frank and Chuck belting out, “I still belong. Don’t get me wrong…”

I shrugged at Ramon, taking off the recently gifted beads and putting them around his neck instead. We joined in for the last chorus, telling the world to go ahead with their own life and to leave us alone. The final notes were met with applause and I grabbed James’s elbow. “We’ll get him, you get the pianist.”

Ramon and I surged forward. He pulled Frank off the piano, Frank exhibiting the kind of liquid grace some very drunk people can manage. I grabbed Chuck. James sauntered to the piano and dropped two crisp twenties into the tip jar, leaning in to whisper something into the man’s ear. I ignored him—James would handle it—peeled the baby carrier off of Frank and attached it to myself. That accomplished, I forced the grumbling Chuck-in-cat-form into the carrier and strapped him in. He was slurring badly.

Just me and my drunk, yowling cat in a baby carrier, folks. Nothing to see here.

It looked more and more like we were going to have a double rainbow of puke in our future.

Ramon drug Frank to the bar and got him a glass of water. I turned to see if James was following and was surprised to see him leaning against the piano, the microphone in his hand. The piano man started playing a slower song, one I recognized, and the crowd swayed along. A few couples tried to make room to dance together as James opened his mouth, his smooth baritone deftly managing the first line to Sam Cooke’s, “Bring it On Home to Me.”

I stared, dumbstruck. I didn’t even know James could sing, and it turned out he had the voice of a fucking angel.

“And yet we can never get him to go to karaoke with us,” Ramon said as he joined me, one arm holding up Frank who was dutifully sipping water. “What song is that?” Ramon was good at knowing show tunes, but didn’t listen to oldies as much as me. “I’ve heard it before, I know I have. It’s on the soundtrack to something.”

“Sam Cooke,” I said. “Bring it on Home to Me.” I had a sudden, fierce desire to text Brid. I shoved my hands in my pockets, pointedly ignoring my phone. We were still friends, even though sometimes it felt like the emotional equivalent of taking off my own skin with a dull blade. But the idea of not having Bridin Blackthorn in my life hurt much worse. We would figure it out. I had to believe that, even if I couldn’t see it yet.

A woman stepped out of the crowd, trying to dance with James, who wasn’t having it. She put a hand on his chest, though she had to be a good fifteen years older than him. Or at least looked it. James was much, much older than he looked. But he appeared young, extraordinarily handsome, and dressed impeccably. He’d been getting all kinds of propositions since we’d hit the city.

James took the woman’s hand, gave her a twirl, and deftly spun her into the arms of another man in the crowd. Ramon laughed next to me, lit up with joy. We were all together. Happy. And losing Frank aside, having a pretty spectacular night.

And if I could ignore my fractured heart long enough, I might enjoy it.

We got Frank back to the house we were renting. James had picked out the rental, which meant that even a year ago it was a house I wouldn’t have been able to afford. Of course, last year I couldn’t even afford my apartment. Here we had a view of the bayou, the house lights twinkling along it in the night, giving it a magical quality. Well, until you saw one of the nutria. Those were a little startling. Kind of like beaver-rats with Cheetos for teeth.

We bundled Frank into the house, Ramon carrying him to his room. I grabbed him a glass of water, some Tylenol, and bowl from the kitchen, managing to juggle all those things up the stairs to Frank’s room. Ramon had already tucked in Frank, a snoring Chuck sprawled alongside.

James shook his head, a faint look of disgust on his features. “Our protection detail is three sheets to the wind.” He caught sight of me, eyes snagging on the bowl. “I don’t think that’s going to be big enough.”

I set the plastic bowl on the nightstand next to the glass of water. “It was the biggest I could find.” I carefully set the Tylenol next to the water. “Worst case scenario, we end up paying a cleaning fee for rainbow-puke carpet.” I grinned at James. A brief look passed over his features—so quick I almost missed it. James could be incredibly difficult to read. He took stoic to the next level. But I’d spent a lot of time in his pocket recently, and I was getting better at figuring this stuff out. “James?”

His silver eyes never left Frank as he crossed his arms against his chest. “Yes?”

“That is the worst-case scenario, isn’t it?” I had a sudden, sneaking suspicion about the rental.

Ramon’s eyebrows shot up. “What are you thinking, we rented from someone really scary? Are we in a crime boss’s house? Should we be worried about sleeping with the fishes?”

James huffed, his upper lip lifting in the faintest sneer. “Yes, because I absolutely love putting our lives in danger.”

My sneaking suspicions weren’t so much sneaking any more as they were running full bore through my mind screaming and clashing cymbals. James was a control freak. He needed to be in charge of any situation, which meant he not only gathered any information he could, but it also meant he tried to manage as many factors as possible before going into a situation. James was the kind of guy who looked up every restaurant we were thinking of going to, checked out their menu, and read any pertinent reviews…and that was just for food. For our safety?

I rubbed a hand over my face. “James, do we own this house?”

“No,” James said, waving my question away with one hand. “Of course not.”

I dropped my head back and closed my eyes. “James, do *I* own this house?”

No answer.

I looked at him. He was very carefully not looking at me. I sighed.

His face turned obstinate—brow furrowed, jaw tight. “It’s a good investment and this way I could hire local witches to put in the proper safety warding.” He frowned at Chuck. “Thankfully.”

I was uncomfortable with my sudden wealth to say the least. It was *literally* blood money. But James was right—the safety was worth it. I’d like to say we wouldn’t need it but unfortunately my recent past would suggest otherwise. I nodded. “Okay.”

“With your history and this city’s history you need—” James’s head whipped to mine, gaze searching. “Did you say okay?”

I shrugged. “It was a smart move. You’re right—we need the extra safety.” Even if I’d managed to avoid causing some sort of ruckus, I had my friends to think of. I could put up with being uncomfortable if it meant they were okay.

“No hand-wringing? No working-class guilt?” James put a hand to my forehead. “Are you feeling unwell?”

I batted his hand away. “Stop it.”

He dropped his hand.

“Just for that,” I said, sniffing. “You get first watch with Frank.”

Ramon snickered.

James’s sigh was definitely aggrieved. “If he throws up on my shoes, you’re buying me new ones.”

“Fair enough.” Then I left him to it.

I had the master bedroom. Now that I knew James had bought it, I could see his stamp everywhere. The king-sized bed, the nicely hung paintings on the tea-green walls. My sheets were some ridiculously high thread count and I could build a fort out of my decorative pillows. There was a *chandelier*. As I padded barefoot across the hardwood floors, I felt like an interloper. I always did in classy places.

After tossing my phone on the bed, I headed to the en suite bathroom, which would have eaten my old bathroom several times over. Pretty sure my old bathroom could have fit in the clawfoot tub. I stripped down, tossing my clothes into a pile on the floor. My hand hesitated over the protective pouch laying on my chest. I didn’t like to get the leather wet. Since I’d hit the city, I’d been doing a weird sort of contortionist act in the shower to keep it mostly dry. But if James had warded the house…I took off the pouch, setting it on the counter next to the sink.

I’d showered this morning, but I wasn’t used to being somewhere so muggy, and I’d taken to doing an evening rinse before I went to bed. Otherwise I just felt sticky, and not fun sticky. After I’d rinsed off and dug out a pair of pajama pants, I heard my phone buzzing where I’d left it on the bed. A brief flare of hope lit through me—maybe it was Brid?

I hopped up onto the bed, crossed my legs, and grabbed my phone. My hope shifted to disappointment when I saw my little sister’s name on the screen, then I felt like shit for feeling disappointed. I loved Haley.

I clicked open the message.

*Haley: How’s New Orleans? Have you taken it over with an army of the undead yet?*

I quickly typed a response. *Ha ha. That’s not on the docket until Thursday.* I didn’t wait for another response before sending another message. *How’s my death trap of a house?* Haley was housesitting for me with the help of one of my best friends, Brooke. I would have let Brooke house sit on her own, but she was a ghost, which kind of made it difficult.

*Good. I haven’t burned it down yet, I won fifteen bucks off the gladiators playing UNO, and I found a cursed tea pot.*

I frowned at my screen, trying to decide which of those last two things was more concerning. *I wasn’t aware UNO was a betting game.*

*It is the way I play it.*

*And the cursed tea pot?*

*Just a minor curse. Everyone is fine. Unrelated, but eyebrows* do *grow back, right?*

*You’re not funny.*

*I’m very funny. Just ask the gladiators.*

I laughed, despite myself. Of course I worried—Haley was my little sister. It didn’t matter how old she got or how capable she was, I would always worry. *I love you.*

*Love you, too. Come home soon. The statues miss you.*

*Just the statues?*

Three little dots appeared on the screen for a few seconds as Haley took her time replying. *Fine, fine, I miss you, too.*

*I’ll be home soon, promise.*

When she didn’t reply after that, I glanced at the time on my phone.It wasn’t quite eleven, which meant it was almost nine in Seattle. For a few seconds, I hesitated before I finally gave in to the demon that had been driving me all night.

I texted Brid.

Then I set my phone on the nightstand, determined not to wait for her response. That lasted all of three seconds before I snatched up the phone and set it on my chest. I didn’t want to miss her response, because I knew she would respond.

Eventually.

If she wasn’t on a date.

Fuck.