Chapter 26

Bringing Sexy Back

Douglas’s old cabin wasn’t much to look at, but it was the old and sturdy kind of thing that would withstand the elements. I didn’t think anyone had been up here since Douglas had hidden out in it when he’d tried to come back to life a few months ago. I had considered burning the thing to the ground and burying the ashes but was glad I hadn’t since we now needed it. I stood in front of it now, glaring at it in the low morning light, everyone clustered around me. Despite the timeline we were all on, none of us were barreling forward into the cabin.

“That,” Ramon said, “is one creepy ass cabin.”

“But it’s *our* creepy ass cabin,” I told him. “We could spruce it up, add some decorative touches.”

“Is gasoline a decorative touch?” He asked.

I turned to him. “You know, I was thinking the same thing?”

We were interrupted by a long, drawn out “Whoa” from behind us. Minion stared at the cabin, conflicting emotions on his face. “Never thought I’d be back here. Not after Master.”

Minion had been one of Douglas’s zombies, only something had gone wrong in the original process. No one knew what. I’d been working on fixing whatever it was, with mixed results. It was difficult with Minion’s schedule. He was a busy man.

I’ll give him credit—when I asked, he’d gotten on the next plane. Even so, the night had passed, and we faced the cabin in the early morning light. Travel took time and so did gathering what we needed. One didn’t just waltz into the underworld, I guess.

There had also been a bit of a fight as to who would go to the cabin and who would stay behind. We needed some people to guard Sarah from the ghoul. In the end, we moved Elaine and Sarah into my house for the day. My mom and Haley were with them, mostly for moral support. The gnomes—including Merry Death and Merciless Blade—were keeping watch over the house along with our other usual security measures. Frank and Brooke were coordinating the watch, with help from Leo, Bran, and Roarke.

Everyone else came with me to the cabin. We couldn’t take the entire party into the underworld—several people would stay in the cabin, guarding the vessels and the portal I was going to open. Sean was coming with me—he was both sibling and pack, and so might have an edge on tracking down Brid and Sayer. Ramon wouldn’t stay behind. James was torn—he wanted to go with me, but he also thought we might need him on the side of the living in case something went wrong. Plus he didn’t entirely trust leaving Nick and Minion in the hands of Ava, Lock, and Fitz, who were on cabin guarding duty.

They were currently yelling at Ezra, who had decided to come with me.

“One of us needs to go,” he said breezily, like we were talking about going to the market. “To make sure they take care of June. I’m a good fighter and foxes are lucky. Besides, I still have all of my nine lives.”

“That’s cats,” Lock said, his body stiff. He didn’t want Ezra coming with us. Couldn’t say I blamed him. If I could figure out a way to talk Ramon into staying in the land of the living, I would, even though I felt better about going with him at my side.

“I can go—” Ava said, before they both turned on her and said, “No.”

She huffed. “Why not? Is this a sexism thing?”

“No,” Lock said. “This is a ‘you have a tendency to get into trouble and shoot off your mouth’ thing.”

“You would smack talk the king of the dead, and then where would we be, dumpling?” Ezra shook his head. “You said I could charm the very devil, well, now we get to find out.”

“There’s no devil in the underworld,” James offered helpfully.

Ezra shrugged. “Foxes are tricky.” He pointed at me, Ramon, and Sean. “These fellows are a lot of things, but tricky isn’t one of them.”

“He’s not entirely wrong,” I said. I could see both of them gearing up to debate this further, but I stepped in before they could start another round. “We could argue forever, but seconds are ticking and we need to go. Ezra’s in.”

Nick piped up from where he’d been standing, his eyes shut, his face tilted up at the sun like he might never see it again. His leg jiggled a nervous rhythm. “You’re not going to be any safer in the cabin.”

“There’s a big difference between being in danger and being in the realm of death,” Lock argued.

Nick opened his eyes and stared at him, and it reminded me suddenly of that moment where I had felt like I was seeing Douglas as a human for the first time, except the other direction. Nick as I was used to him was gone. Nick the necromancer was in his place. His eyes were flat and bleak, like a winter night with no moon. “You make a wrong move protecting us, and you’ll end up there anyway. I don’t think any of you fully understand what’s going to happen when we open this portal.”

“Enlighten us.” Lock’s tone could have sliced through granite it was so cutting.

“Portals to the underworld are unnatural.” Nick’s voice was so quiet, you’d think we’d have to lean in to hear him, but somehow it carried. “Life transitions to death. When it doesn’t, you get things like him.” He waved at Minion. “And the only reason Minion functions is because one of us is involved. We’re handling it.” He crossed his arms tight, like he was hugging himself. “I won’t be able to help any of you. Everything I have will be bent on keeping the portal open.”

“I know,” I said. “But—”

Nick jerked his head. “I’m not saying we shouldn’t do it. If I didn’t agree, I wouldn’t be here. But that kind of magic calls to things. Terrible things.” His gaze took in all of us. “You’re going to be fighting to keep things from coming through the portal into this world. You’ll also be fighting to keep things from crossing in the other way.” He swallowed hard. “It’s going to be very dangerous, and Sam and his small team will need to move fast.” Nick sighed as he turned back to Lock. “So don’t think that keeping your friend here is going to keep him safe. There is no ‘safe’ in what we’re doing.”

No one spoke for a long moment as we digested this. I knew Nick wasn’t wrong. I knew what kind of risk this was, but the idea of not going after them was unfathomable.

“Best get going then,” Fitz said amicably, his teeth bared in the kelpie version of a grin. It’s wasn’t pretty. There were a lot of pointy teeth involved, and I had to suppress a shudder.

“Right,” I said clapping my hands together. “I’ll do the ceremony to open the portal. Once I’m on the other side of the doorway we open, I’ll summon Ashley if I can. She might be able to track Lily or June.” I pointed at Sean, who had been uncharacteristically quiet. “You’ll do your thing to try to track down your siblings. We go in, we get out, fast as we can.”

“What if you get lost?” Ava asked.

“Not possible as long as the portal is open.” James dropped two backpacks at his feet. The larger one was for Ramon—he would be able to carry more. It held first aid supplies, water, food, that sort of thing. Mine held a little of that stuff, but mostly tools of my trade—athame, candles, lighter, silver dollars, and a few other tidbits James had added. I had the protective pouch my mom made me around my neck, as well as the stygian coin for luck. Brooke wouldn’t need it inside the house as she was anyway. The spell I’d built into the house would keep her around, she just wouldn’t be as solid as she would be with the coin around her neck.

“Sam will be able to feel the portal,” Nick said. “Since his magic will be twisted up in it.” He put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. “I know you’re used to having tons of power at your fingertips, but we have no idea how long you’ll have or how quickly this will drain you. Be careful, but be quick.”

I gave him a hug, squeezing him tight. “I will.”

After a second of surprise, Nick returned the hug, clutching me just as tight. “I love you, you know that, right?”

“Yeah,” I said, my voice hoarse.

“If I had the magic to go back and make you mine instead of my brother’s, I would in a heartbeat, but don’t think for a second that makes me love you or Haley any less.” He leaned, not quite letting me go. “Come back to us, okay?”

I nodded, my throat tight, not quite able to find the words to tell him that I felt the same way. I couldn’t get all of that out. So I settled on the shorthand that felt woefully inadequate. “I love you, too.”

Ramon joined our hug. “I’ll bring him back, promise.”

“Okay,” Nick said, visibly pulling himself together. “Okay.”

“Are you ready?” James asked.

I let go of Nick and Ramon and blew out a long breath, shaking out my limbs. “Yeah. Let’s do this.”

Before we could get going, I had one more person to deal with. A large figure stepped out of the woods, garbed in a flat brimmed hat and dressed in the typical ranger gear of tan and green.

That was the only typical thing about him.

Sexy Gary was a bigfoot, for starters, with all that entails. He was huge, hairy, and gave off a pheromone that draws women—and I’m sure some men—into a blissful state of attraction. He usually wore something to block it when he’s around humans. When he didn’t, he said it caused problems and frankly I didn’t want to know the details. I did know that he used to work for UPS and the combination of the inexplicably sexy brown uniform plus the pheromones when he forgot to wear his charm caused a bit of a riot when he made a delivery to a local winery.

It also gave him his nickname. The shorts, he told me, were too powerful, so he left that job behind and worked as a forest ranger, a situation that worked much better for all involved.

I held up a hand before he could get too close. “Are you wearing your thingie? The scent blocking one?”

He grinned, putting a little dance into his walk. “Are you worried that I’ll be too sexy for this mission, too sexy for this mission, no way I’m disco dancing.” His grin faded when only Nick and James laughed. “Kids these days.” He shook his head. “For the record, that was hilarious.”

I looked at Nick.

He shrugged. “Right Said Fred. They had a song about being too sexy.” He shrugged again. “It was the 90’s.”

“I miss the mesh shirts,” Gary said.

That surprised a laugh out of Nick. “I don’t.”

Gary flexed his admittedly impressive bicep. “Well, yeah, but you don’t have these guns to show off.”

“Why would the shirt need to be mesh—” I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Never mind. Is everything set, Gary?”

“Yeah, I’ve done the best I could blocking off the road leading up to here and getting some eyes on any trails. Who’s your home team?”

I introduced him to everyone that was going to be staying at the cabin on the side of the living, giving him a brief rundown of their roles.

Gary nodded gravely when I was done. “This is no small thing. I’m afraid I can’t help much.” He offered them a faint smile. “I’m a lover, not a fighter. But between me and my eyes in the forest, I’m hoping to be your early warning system.” He tipped his ranger hat at us. “Good luck. I’ll be in touch. I have James’s number.” With a backwards wave, he strode back out into the woods. I was pretty sure he was singing, “I’m too sexy for this forest” but I wasn’t positive. Sometimes we hear what we want to hear.

I ushered everyone through the thick wooden door and into the musty dark of the cabin. It was time for the next step.

We had decided to open the portal inside the cabin. The floor would work better for what we needed to do, and the cabin itself would add another boundary between Nick and Minion and whatever was coming their way. Lock built up wood in the fireplace, Ava setting it ablaze. She said it was easier to throw fire that was already there than creating it out of nothing. I tried very hard to not think about what she might be throwing the fire *at.*

James walked me through the set up, carefully chalking in the symbols and designs needed. We didn’t want anything smudged. When we were done, it outdid even the Bathory ritual in complexity. Ramon and I got our backpacks on, and I got ready to do my part.

James and I had argued about the next bit. My powers needed blood, but I didn’t like to kill things, instead using blood from donors like Ramon, people who healed quickly. It circumvented the cost of the ritual. James didn’t think that would work for this. We were going into the underworld.

We needed a death.

Normally, we’d need a big death, but I didn’t want to go there, so as much as I hated it, we were compromising. Fitz, Ramon, and I would all give a little of our life-force in the form of blood, but I was going to have to kill something.

James brought in a large carrier from outside. He unlatched the gate, reaching in quickly and snatching out a large Canadian Goose. I held my athame, a queasy feeling in my gut.

“It’s not young,” James said. “He’s lived a long, healthy life. When we’re done with this, he will be used to feed Taco. Nothing about this death is wasteful.”

“I know,” I said. “I still hate it.”

“I know you do,” James said gently, “but you still need to do it.”

I nodded, feeling a little stupid that I was tearing up. People did this all the time. They killed to eat, to live, and how was this any different? But I still wept for the goose. I couldn’t change who I was and I didn’t really want to. Death should always mean something. It should always demand a little grief, a little respect.

I held the athame out.

Fitz offered his arm. “How come that goose isn’t terrorizing this room right now?”

“It’s drugged,” James said.

Fitz nodded, rolling up his sleeve. “Makes sense.”

I wanted to give it over with. I slashed a line into Fitz’s arm. Then Ramon’s. Then mine, the sharp bite of the blade making me hiss. I shook my arm, spattering the blood into the circle. Ramon and Fitz did the same. With each drop, I could feel the power ratcheting up. Flowing through me and seeping into our symbols.

James stepped in front of me with the goose. I didn’t think about it, shutting off my mind from my action, like stepping out of myself for a moment. With a quick jerk, I sliced open the neck of the goose. He made very little in the way of sound beyond a watery gurgle.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, stroking his soft feathers.

Blood hit the floor, the ritual symbols flaring to life, and I forgot about the goose.

I closed my eyes, opening up that other vision, that way of looking at the world that only necromancers could do. With that much power soaring through my veins, the thin veil between the worlds was laughably clear. It billowed in front of me, like a close-up aurora borealis. Using the athame, I sliced a vertical line into the folds, parting them like cloth. I handed one piece to the first vessel, Minion, who grasped it in both hands, a grim expression on his face.

I handed the other piece to Nick. He could have taken it on his own, since he could see what I was seeing, but James said it was part of the ritual. I stepped up to the next layer, stroking it with one hand. It was like chilled velvet, and I felt the power of the dead at my fingertips. “Open,” I said, command lacing my voice. “Open the underworld and welcome me home.”

The veil parted without the knife, peeling back from my touch. I edged closer, moving quickly to the next part of the ritual. “I summon Douglas Montgomery. Heed my call.”

Douglas had been waiting and listening, so he appeared immediately, moving forward and grasping the side of the veil closest to Minion. I sucked in a breath, hoping the other spirit was as speedy. “I summon Brannoc Blackthorn, former head of the Blackthorn pack. Heed my call.”

Nothing happened. A few seconds ticked by. I tried again. “Brannoc Blackthorn, I beg you, heed my call.” I wouldn’t command him. That didn’t seem right. Which struck me as funny. I was standing there, blood on my hands and dripping down my arm, opening a portal into the underworld, and I was concerned about being *rude.* A maniacal giggle escaped, making Ramon’s head snap in my direction. I waved him off.

“Brannoc Blackthorn—” I started.

A foot stepped out of the murky darkness. “I’m here, Samhain LaCroix, and I’m heeding your call.”

Sean sucked in a breath. “Dad.”

The ghost of Brannoc smiled at him. “Sean.” Volumes of unspoken dialogue flowed between them. A wolf stepped out of the darkness, head high, steps light. When I looked, more eyes shone out of the misty blackness.

Brannoc dug his fingers into the scruff of the wolf at his side. “You have protection on your side. I figured we’d need protection on this side. He looked down fondly at the wolf. “You won’t let anything through, will you, love?”

The wolf bared her teeth and next to me, Sean let out a strangled sound.

This was an unexpected gift and I dipped my head respectfully. “Mrs. Blackthorn, welcome. We appreciate your help. Thank you.”

Brannoc’s smile disappeared. “Bring our babies home, Sam. That’s the only thanks we need.”

“I will,” I said, stepping forward and handing him the other half of the underworld veil. “Hold tight.”

“I will never let go,” Brannoc promised me. “Not as long as I’m able.”

“I know you won’t,” I said. In fact, I was counting on it. I pointed my athame at Douglas, even though I was speaking to Brannoc. “I know it’s going to be tempting, and out of anyone here, he owes you more than a pound of flesh, but he’s here to help, so try to not eat our other vessel.”

Brannoc grimaced and the wolf at his side growled. “If he helps save my children, we’ll keep our hands off him.” The wolf yipped. Brannoc’s answering smile was feral. “And our teeth.”

Wisely, Douglas didn’t respond beyond a slight lift of his chin.

Right. There was no putting it off any longer. I breathed deep and let it out, stepping forward from our world and into the land of the dead, a bear, a wolf, and a fox at my side.

I sent a quick prayer to the goddess Bridget that they’d be enough. She wasn’t exactly *my* goddess, but at least she had a vested interest in how this played out. After all, she was the patron goddess of the Blackthorn pack.

And we needed all the help we could get.