Chapter 5

On Sleepless Roads, the Sleepless Go

James made good on his threat—he stood over me as I sat in bed and made sure I ate every bite. I knew better than to even try to argue. James was in full blown Mother Hen mode and on edge. The only reason I wasn’t freaking out was that I was probably still in shock. Or maybe just so grateful I hadn’t been left to die with the hogs.

James…had control issues, to put it mildly. Frank was right—I’d scared him, and this was his coping mechanism. He couldn’t control who took me or what they did, but he could control how big of a bowl of grits I was eating. I finally drew the line when he handed me the second banana.

“James, I honestly can’t eat anymore. Four eggs, two pieces of toast, a large bowl of cheese grits, melon slices, and a banana are my limit.” The list didn’t do it justice. It had been a lot of food. More of a Ramon-sized helping than a Sam-sized one. And I was honestly alarmed at the amount of butter involved in my meal. Personally, I loved butter. Not enough to marry it, but definitely enough to take it out to dinner. James usually watched my diet like he was the king of the food pyramid and his chosen weapon was steamed vegetables and hummus.

Not together, obviously. But like…you know what I mean.

Anyway, it was deeply disturbing that James was letting me eat a meal that probably involved at least one stick of butter, several cups of cheese, and a very healthy amount of cream. And I’d taken full advantage of it, but I could not take that second banana. I just couldn’t.

He sighed and handed it to Frank. “You eat it.”

Frank opened his mouth to argue, saw James’s glare, and meekly peeled the banana and ate it.

James took my pulse rate again, but his frown was much lighter this time, which meant while I wasn’t back to normal, I was at least improving.

I was still tired, though. “I don’t suppose you’d let me nap before—”

“No.” James dropped my wrist. “You can nap in the car. Get up, get dressed—.” He eyed me. “Do you need help getting dressed?”

“I’m a grown-ish man,” I said, throwing back the comforter. “Of course I can…” I trailed off as I swung my legs over the side, stood, and abruptly slid to the ground like an overcooked noodle. I sat there for a second in the full stream of afternoon light, my boxers the only thing between me and the hardwood floor. I had the will to get up, but neither the energy nor the ability. “James, please help me put on pants.”

Ramon and Frank left to get themselves ready while James helped me into my clothes. Normally, this was where James would shoehorn me into a suit. I might be going to see June first, but our original plan had been to meet with the gnomes. As the person the gnomes would be protecting, I needed to look like an esteemed member of the council. A necromancer you do not mess with. And not the bruised, battered, and frankly bumbling person they were actually going to deal with.

In deference to the heat and my current status as “something the cat dragged in” that meant steel gray summer weight suit pants, matching vest, a deep blue short sleeved dress shirt, with some rather nice wingtip shoes. So help me, but James’s sense of style was starting to rub off on me. Which, honestly, was probably for the best since I still dressed like I was twelve. But the fact that I was starting to feel comfortable in dress clothes kind of weirded me out.

Suitably attired, I was bundled toward the rental car with Ramon, Frank, and Chuck-as-a-baby, with James sliding in behind the wheel. I’d called shotgun and no one argued because I think they were coddling me. Everyone was dressed to suit James’s expectations, even Chuck. Have you ever seen a baby in shirtsleeves and a bowtie? Adorable. Now picture that baby with a beard cursing like a sailor’s granny. So cute. Just precious.

“Chuck, adjust your glamour. I can see your beard.” His answer was to flip me the bird, which I ignored.

Frank gently pushed the obscene gesture aside as he tried to get Chuck into the five-point harness in the car seat we got for him. We’d placed by the window in the SUV, because safety is important and Chuck would complain less if he had a window seat. Frank was still outside the car, leaning in to strap in Chuck, but Ramon had already slid into the back bench seat.

Chuck was suddenly having none of it.

“No!” He smacked away Frank’s hands and tore off his baby glamour. “I will not show up like a big baby, all trussed up and weak. They will laugh at me!” He crossed his arms and huffed. “I will not jeopardize this mission.”

We all looked at Frank, who was king of the gnomes, at least honorarily. I’d bought him a rather lovely tiara to prove it. He looked helplessly back at us.

Frank held out the necklace with a different glamour charm on it. “A cat, then. I can go get the carrier—”

Chuck bristled, his face turned a mottled red before releasing what was, frankly, an impressive stream of profanity, even for him.

“I’m sensing that you’re unhappy,” I said, when he took a break to breathe. “With the plan as a whole.”

He glared at me.

“Which part are you unhappy with,” Ramon asked, tilting his head. “The seat? The baby thing? Because you usually like the baby thing. You think it’s funny.”

“I think he’s worried about his fragile masculinity,” Frank offered.

“Is that it?” Ramon asked. “Are you feeling fragile?” Ramon held his arms out. “Do you need a hug? Would that help?”

For a second it looked like Chuck might actually explode with rage. He vibrated with it. “My masculinity is not fragile!” He bellowed. “It is strong!” He thumped his chest. “Like me.”

We all collectively decided that now was not the time to dissect that particularly argument.

Ramon shrugged. “Hugs always make me feel better when I’m feeling fragile, but okay. It’s here if you need it.”

James turned the key, the car purring to life.

“James,” I said. “He’s not buckled.”

James just looked at me, and the look clearly telegraphed that he didn’t care one bit if the angry gnome took a header through the windshield. “He’s a menace.” He muttered the words, but he didn’t shift the car into reverse.

I didn’t play the boss card much, because it felt weird, but we really needed to get going. “Chuck, for safety reasons, you need to either be in the car seat or the pet carrier. I don’t care which.” When he turned his cherry-red face to me, I channeled my best Icy-James expression and leveled him with it. That being said, the gnomes did best with praise ladled on with a heavy hand. “Your job is to protect. The best bodyguards blend in.” I pointed at him. “You do not blend in.” I tipped my chin down so I could see Frank better. “Do gnomes value only strength, or do they also value cunning?”

Frank frowned thoughtfully. “Both? I mean, a good brawl is number one, but they appreciate cunning.”

I turned to Chuck. “The glamours? Those are cunning.*”* I dropped my voice down. “No one suspects a *baby.* The possibilities, Chuck. You can show this other tribe that you’re cunning, resourceful, and will do whatever it takes to get the job done.” I waved a hand at the car seat. “Even if that means sacrificing a bit of your pride for the mission.”

The red faded from Chuck’s face as he turned over what I said in his mind. A slow, evil smile spread across his face. “No one suspects a baby.” He snatched the glamour back from Frank. “I’ll do it.” He put the necklace over his head and climbed into the seat.

Frank mouthed, *Thank you* at me.

I smiled at him, then collapsed into the seat, ready for my nap.

June didn’t live in New Orleans, but in a small town in Mississippi about an hour away called Bay St. Louis. I slept through the ride, only coming awake when we pulled up to her house. Though June lived inland, she was close enough to the coast that her house was on stilts. She’d explained to me that she was in a flood zone and that sometimes this area was hit with surge waves during hurricanes. The thought of which, frankly, I found terrifying. When I pointed that out, she reminded me that Seattle was close to an active volcano and got earthquakes. At least you could see hurricanes coming.

Which…fair enough.

The stilts were also covered in layers of wards, and it was difficult to sneak up and break into a house on stilts. Not impossible, but it added a layer of defense. The house itself was one story and painted green. A set of wooden stairs took you from the ground to the top deck, which June had decorated with potted plans and a couple of lawn chairs.

Ramon practically jogged up the steps, but I climbed them with the speed and dexterity of an arthritic tortoise. Sleep and food had helped, but I was far from back to normal. Frank followed behind Ramon carrying Chuck, while James hovered behind me in case I didn’t make it. I wanted to be irritated about it, but honestly, I might *not* make it.

June was leaning against the frame of her sliding glass door, a cigarette in her hand. She examined me through wisps of smoke before shaking her head in disgust. “Can’t leave you alone for ten seconds. What did you do now?”

“I have absolutely no idea,” I wheezed, finally reaching the top. “But whatever it was, I don’t recommend it. Zero stars.”

“You better sit down before you fall down,” she said, motioning to one of the chairs. I collapsed into it with relief. June spent a second calling for Ashley, the harbinger that we both worked with. Three heartbeats later, a young girl popped into existence on the porch, startling Frank, who hadn’t been prepared for Ashley to pop into existence right next to him for some reason.

Ashley looked like a young girl—pale skinned, her black hair in ponytails. Today she wore a black and white plaid summer shorts with a black button up sleeveless dress shirt covered in pink and purple graffiti-style skulls. She pushed her sunglasses up onto her head, assessing me. “Huh. I thought you were dead.”

“If it’s any consolation, I *feel* dead.” Or at least well on my way.

Ashley stuck out a single finger and poked my arm. “It’s so weird. You’re there. I can see you sitting there.” She poked me harder. “But your power signature is gone.”

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” June said, stubbing her cigarette out in a flowerpot full of sand and other cigarette butts.

“Are you trying to grow a cigarette tree?” I asked.

She glared at me. “You must be felling terrible, because that joke was *awful.*”

I rubbed a hand over my eyes. “I’m definitely not at my best.”

“If you’ve never heard of it,” Ramon asked, leaning against the railing, “does that mean you don’t know how to fix it?”

Neither of them answered right away, which was itself an answer. June stared out at the trees, thinking. “Go through everything that happened—that you remember—from last night.”

We took turns telling the story, everyone jumping in when they had something to add. When we were done, we fell silent, everyone deep in thought.

Ashley put her hands on her hips, her mouth pursed. “I can ask around. See if Ed or anyone has heard of anything similar.” She squinted at James. “He still have that Stygian coin?”

James nodded, taking out both of my necklaces. “He had them off last night.” His tone was disapproving.

“I took a shower. Didn’t want the pouch to get wet.” No one seemed to care that I had a good reason, so I stopped arguing.

“Put the coin on him,” Ashley said. “Let’s see what happens.”

I leaned forward so that James could slip the chain over my head. The metal coin rested heavily on my chest, but otherwise, nothing happened.

June pulled out a pocket knife and stepped toward me, but Ramon intercepted her. She gently pushed him aside. “I know you usually donate, but with things as they are, I want to try his blood first.” Ramon didn’t like it, but didn’t argue.

I held out my arm, letting her slide the sharp blade against my skin, the quick bite of it opening a small cut. I pressed the coin into the blood. Still nothing. I tried calling up my power again. It was like flipping a lit switch when the power was out. Lots of clicks, but no lights. I sighed and dropped the coin. James disappeared into June’s house, appearing a moment later with a small metal box in his hands.

June cleaned her blade on a handkerchief and tucked it back into her pocket with a frown. “I was hoping since you’d stored some of your own power in there…”

“Yeah, I know. Good idea. Sucks it didn’t work.” Usually the coin acted like a power reserve. In theory, I should have been able to take that power back. In practice? Apparently not anymore.

“He probably needs a little necromantic power to draw it out,” James said, opening the box. He cleaned the small cut with a wipe, applied antibacterial goo to the bandage, and popped it onto my arm. “We’ll let him rest some more and keep trying. See if it comes back on its own.” He closed up the box and handed it to Frank. “Put this back in June’s bathroom, please.”

June snorted. “Make yourself at home.”

James simply nodded, his expression abstracted.

Ashely gently punched my arm. “Glad you’re not dead.” She popped her glasses back down onto her face. “I’ll head over to the other side. See what I can find out.”

“Thanks,” I said.

Ashley opened a portal, waved, and stepped into wherever she went when she wasn’t with us. She was very close-mouthed on the subject.

James put my pouch over my head. “In the meantime, keep this on, keep it visible. Everyone will think you’re just hiding your powers. If for any reason it comes up, we’ll have to think of creative ways out of displaying your power.”

“Got it,” I said. We all decided to not talk about the bigger question that was currently biting at my mental heels—what if rest didn’t work? What if it never came back? I hadn’t been pleased with the whole “you have magical death powers” reveal at first. It had made my life hard. Still did. But not having it? I wasn’t sure about that, either. I’d grown used to the magic. I’d grown used to my new life.

June clapped her hands, snapping me out of my funk. “Well, now that we’ve done all we can with Sam, how about we move on to why you’re supposed to be here?”

Chuck perked up. “Is it time?”

June grinned at him. “Let’s go talk to some gnomes.”

The gnomes had agreed to meet us on a neutral ground—they trusted June as far as it went, but we were unknown quantities. I sort of assumed we’d be meeting somewhere isolated—a shady overgrown lot, a wooded area, or an abandoned building.

I did not expect it to be a Waffle House.

We don’t have Waffle Houses in Seattle, but I’d quickly realized that they appeared in Mississippi with almost the same frequency as Starbucks appeared for us. The long, narrow buildings with their bright yellow signs were ubiquitous.

We pulled into the lot of the Waffle House and came to a stop. I could see through the large pane windows that the restaurant was half full, and again, it didn’t seem like the place you’d pick for a clandestine meeting.

“Are you sure we have the address right?” I asked, peering out the window.

“Yes.” June sounded confident but double checked her phone for me.

Ramon bounced in his seat. “Yeeessss.”

June pointed her phone at him. “That is too much enthusiasm for a Waffle House.”

Ramon shrugged. “I like hash browns. They have hash browns. Why wouldn’t I be excited?”

“It just seems like a strange choice,” I said, ignoring Ramon.

June reached for the door handle. “It’s hiding in plain sight. Doesn’t matter what they do or how they look—no one’s going to notice. It’s a Waffle House.”

“What does that mean?” I asked, sliding out of the car.

June just shook her head. “It’s hard to explain. Waffle Houses are almost their own universe—a little bubble of unreality. Always dinner and a show at Waffle House.” She shook her head again. “You’ll understand better once you’ve experienced it.”

We followed her in, Me, Ramon, James, Frank, and Chuck. Chuck was still in the glamour of a baby, because we were pretty sure no one would let us bring a cat into a restaurant.

We stepped into the Waffle House and were immediately hit with the smell of bacon, grease, and onions. The cashier was in the middle, with booths lining the two walls extending in both directions, except for a line of stools bolted to the floor in front of a counter area. The cashier in front of us was backed by a long griddle where two cooks were handling orders. The griddle snapped and popped, mixing in with the clatter of dishes and conversation. One of the booths close to the cashier held about four people deep into a game of Monopoly.

A man stood in front of us arguing with the cashier. He was tall and lanky, wearing a tattered shirt that he’d probably slept in—I was basing that on the fact that he was wearing the shirt over a pair of tight sleep shorts. The dividing line between the sleep shorts he was wearing and a pair of boxers was thin at best. No pants. One sock. Flip flops.

The cashier was eyeballing him. “Where your pants?”

“I got shorts.” He pointed at the shorts.

In case we’d missed them.

I didn’t think anyone had, except maybe the woman asleep at the counter next to her cup of coffee, which seemed like a defense mechanism.

The cashier seemed dubious. “Those ain’t pants. You need pants.”

The man threw out his hands. “I didn’t have time to grab no pants—my wife chased me out of the house.”

One of the men bellied up to the counter turned. “Wife chased you out?”

One Sock made an exasperated noise. “With a cast iron skillet. You can’t argue with a skillet.” He turned back to the cashier. “I just need a cup of coffee. Think about what I should do next.”

“Flowers.” One of the guys at the grill half turned. “You get your girl flowers. Then she’ll put the skillet down.”

“What’d you do to earn that skillet, Sugar?” A woman at a booth asked, squinting. “That’s what you got to figure out. Say you’re sorry. Take her out to dinner.”

“She got the skillet out,” the man at the counter said, “your hole is deep. Dinner isn’t going to do it. You best get her some jewelry.”

The cashier looked at One Sock and grimaced. “You got any money in those shorts?”

The man dug two dollars out of his sock. The cashier didn’t seem overly pleased with that development, but she just shook her head. “I don’t get paid to deal with this shit.” She pointed one long finger at the counter. “Go on, then.”

One Sock thanked her and moved over to the counter, where someone bought him a waffle and people kept offering him advice. The booth playing Monopoly called out to the cashier, and she left her station to go over to them, roll the dice, and move the metal boot six spaces. She landed on an open space, counted out her money to buy it, and then entered into a fierce negotiation with one of the other players over the property.

“And that,” June said, “is Waffle House.”

“We should probably find our booth,” I said.

Frank and Chuck peered carefully at the game. Chuck grunted. “She shouldn’t trade that property. Leaves her flank exposed.”

James appeared to be ignoring everyone, but I knew from experience that he could probably give you a detailed description of everyone in the restaurant.

“I love it here,” Ramon said reverently. “And I’m going to eat my weight in hash browns.” He nudged me. “Sam, look at all the stuff you can get on your hash browns.”

“Yes, Ramon, it’s very exciting.” I stood on my toes and searched the tables. “Anyone see our party?”

It was June that spotted them at one of the back booths. A broad, amiable looking man with a cup of coffee, a ball cap pushed back to reveal a wide forehead. Next to him, seated in two booster seats, were the most serious looking toddlers I’d ever seen.

Chuck sucked in a breath.

“That’s them,” James confirmed. He herded us all to the booth like errant ducklings. “Let’s get this over with before that man’s wife shows up with her frying pan. The way things have been going, we’d never survive it.”