Chapter 3

The Evening Fell Just Like a Star

I’d given up on any pretense of sleep after talking to Brid’s date. My body felt heavy with exhaustion, but it wasn’t like I could sleep after that conversation. So even though my body felt like it was shutting down, my brain was doing a fun impression of an over-caffeinated hamster in a wheel.

The thing was, I knew he was lying, and more importantly that even if he wasn’t, it technically wasn’t any of my business. If she wanted to stop calling me, and date anyone that struck her fancy, that was her right. I wasn’t normally a jealous or possessive kind of person, so in many ways the situation was screwing with my head. Knowing that if it were up to only her, we’d still be together, was the very definition of cold comfort.

Which is why though nothing Leo had said was Brid’s style, jealousy had flared white hot for a second anyway. It had dimmed, but it wasn’t gone. Because even if Leo lied, he was still there with her while I was in New Orleans dealing with gnomes, my shitty grip on my own magic, and probably cleaning up puke in a few hours.

The jealousy and frustration crested, breaking like a wave, and left, leaving me in a mudflat of misery. Have you ever smelled a mudflat when the tide was out? It was the worst.

This was the *worst.*

I decided to watch a movie on my phone while I waited. Brid would call me back if she could and…I needed to hear her. Simple as that. I also needed to keep my garbage thoughts in check. We were both going through this situation together, but I only had my own expectations to manage—Brid had an entire pack. I didn’t want to add to her burden.

I only ever wanted to help her carry it.

I was halfway through the movie when my phone rang and I quickly hit the accept button.

“I wasn’t sure you’d still be up.” Brid sounded tired, but I was ridiculously grateful that she’d called me back. Hearing her voice made everything in me relax, like my gut had been clenched in a fist until now and I hadn’t even realized it.

I cleared my throat. “Just watching a movie.”

“Which one?”

“*Blood & Chocolate*.”

She snorted a laugh. “Is that the one where they have the werewolves doing parkour or whatever?”

I grinned, leaning back against the headboard. “Are you saying you don’t parkour? Because I’ve seen you move, and you definitely parkour.”

She made a scoffing noise.

I grinned. “That’s not a no.” She laughed, and it was so good to hear, but my grin died nonetheless. “How was your date?”

“Really good.” Her voice didn’t change at all, still breezy and happy, but somehow I knew it was carefully and consciously done that way. “We had some things in common. Bran’s not sure about him, are you Bran?”

I heard her brother’s low grumble. Brid’s response might seem harsh—who tells their ex that their date was really good, right? But with Brid, conversations were often about context. She wasn’t alone, for one, and she’d let me know that by asking her brother a question. Though she adored Bran, that didn’t mean she wouldn’t keep a secret from him. We often keep secrets from those we love to protect them. Bran might not be the only person with her, either. So she had to be careful. Which meant I couldn’t take a single thing on face value here, and I needed to watch what I said.

“He had a lovely speaking voice.” I rubbed a tired hand through my hair. “Charming *and* sexy.”

“Yeah, he had positive things to say about you as well.” She sighed. “You know how these things go—dating. Everything’s like a test, you know? But I feel like we passed.”

Huh. I sifted through that. Leo had said nice things about me followed by a test…a test we passed? Or a test *I* passed? Maybe both? “I’m glad it went well.” I hated asking, but I couldn’t help myself. “There a second date in the works?”

“Mm-hmm. He’s going to come stay at the lodge for a bit. Check things out.”

I’ve had punches to the gut that hurt less. “Oh. Wow. Okay.” He was going to stay with the pack, then. Which meant the date had gone *really* well. No other suitor had met the pack like this and…fuck. My brain was practically holding up signs for me now—reminding me that this wasn’t what it looked like—but my heart? My heart was crumpling in on itself. I needed to get off the phone now, because it was real likely that Bran could hear what I was saying, and I didn’t want a single person in her pack hearing me break down.

And I was going to break down.

“I’m glad,” I said. “You deserve a nice date. Hey, I think I hear Frank. I’m on puke duty.” Which was such a lie. I made myself laugh. It sounded terrible. “I’ll tell you about it later. Call you tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay.” Her voice sounded soft and sad and that just made it worse. We said our goodbyes and I clicked the end call button. Then I stared at my phone for several long seconds as my insides caved in. I rubbed a hand over my heart. It never got better. Maybe it never would.

I knew it was a mistake, but I opened up Google on my phone and searched for Leo Moretti. There were several hits. The first was an accountant, looked to be in his fifties. He had glasses and a side part. I didn’t think that one was it. The next hit was fifteen, so strike two. There were a surprising amount of Leo Morettis in the US.

Someone rapped at my door before they entered, not waiting for me to respond. James strode in unrolling his cuffs. “Ramon can’t sleep, so he’s taking over Frank duty. Is there anything else I can—” James stopped fussing with shirt, his eyes narrowing on me. “What’s wrong?”

I sniffed, using the back of my wrist to wipe away any moisture. Oh good, I’d started crying. “Brid had a good date.” I sniffed again. “I’m happy for her. These are tears of joy.”

James stilled. “I see.” And he probably did. One of James’s strengths was taking in the complexities of a situation with a single glimpse. Usually it was really helpful, but there were times, like now, where I wished he was a little more oblivious so I could mope in peace.

I held up my phone. “I was googling him.”

Dark eyebrows descended into a V. “That’s a terrible idea, Sam.” He strode over, hand out. “Give me your phone.”

I clasped it to me. “No.”

He sighed. “Out of the two of us, who is going to find the correct information faster? The person whose entire job it is to find things out or the sad man on the bed who still doesn’t understand Tumblr?” He snapped his fingers. “Hand it over.”

I gave him my phone. “I just don’t understand Tumblr’s interface,” I mumbled. “And you’re mean.”

“Yes, I am.” James glanced at my phone, handed it back to me, and took out his own. “Which is why you need me. If I left it to you and Ramon, you would have been murdered by the first creature you tried to hug into submission. You seem to think everything is cuddly and sweet right up until it tries to rip out your throat.”

“That’s a little unfair,” I said, hugging my knees.

James looked up from the phone. “I would state a specific incident, but there are too many.”

I sighed. “We’d probably still try to hug it *after* it tried to kill us, wouldn’t we?”

James didn’t answer, just went back to his phone. He spent several seconds clicking away before he showed me the screen. “This is the one. Leo Moretti, second in line for the Rossi clan. I’ll send you a dossier.”

I grunted. “I don’t need one. I just wanted to see him.” And now I wished I hadn’t. Leo Moretti was handsome, and looked like a grown ass man who didn’t spend his time watching shit movies with his roommates and skateboarding.

I could work out forever and never look like Leo Moretti. When I put on a suit, I still looked like I was playing dress up, even though James bought me really nice, tailored suits. Put me next to Leo and I’d look like I was twelve.

I pulled up Leo Moretti’s Instagram, knowing full well that it was a mistake. I flipped through the carefully curated, filtered version of his life and yup, it was a mistake. He wore a lot of suits and he looked good in them, damn it. It was like an extended ad for high priced cologne.

Fuck.

I showed James the screen again, even though he’d seen it. “Look at those eyelashes. If he bats them, I bet he sets off a category five swoon. Fuck.” I dropped my phone like it was poison. “Just looking at those pictures and even I would pick him over me.” I shook my head. “I don’t think I want to know anything more about him, thanks. I already know too much.”

James tucked away his phone and crossed his arms. “If he is in our territory and might be staying in it, you absolutely *do* need one.”

I flopped over onto my side. “I hate politics.”

James’s voice was ruthless, even if his face was sympathetic. Well, I mean, his version of sympathetic, which was when he wasn’t actively sneering at something or looking coldly aloof. “Politics keep you alive.”

He fidgeted for a second.

James *never* fidgeted. For a brief second, I saw an actual, human emotion on his face, though I couldn’t tell you which one. Then his usual coldly efficient mask snapped back into place.

“I—*we*—need you to stay alive.” He turned, walking quickly to the door. “I’ll email you the dossier in the morning. Get some sleep, Sam.” He turned off the lights.

Well, I guess I was getting some sleep.

Yeah, right.

I picked my phone back up, but didn’t want to turn the movie back on. *Blood & Chocolate* was about a beautiful young werewolf falling in love with a human, and that felt too much like salt in the wound. It had been stupid to even pick it in the first place. I flipped through, but nothing looked good. At some point, I fell asleep, still clutching my phone.

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It slumbered, years spinning by in a lazy tumble, like brittle fall leaves in a gentle breeze. Mostly, it knew nothing. It didn’t dream. Nothing flitted through what passed for its consciousness. The power was off and no one was home.

It wouldn’t have even known time had passed if it didn’t surface on occasion. Every once in a while, the cold magic passed close by. Just a hint. A tease. A tantalizing aroma from far off campfires. Just enough to make it toss restlessly in its grave before giving a sleepy blink and returning to sleep.

But then. Oh. *Oh, wait.*

Something. A flare in the distance.

The cold magic. Strong, like a distant sun.

Close.

Not quite close enough.

Under the roots and soil, the soggy stench of it all, it wailed. Inconsolable. A shattering where a heart should be. It mourned the distant sun, waiting for it to disappear like all the others.

To float away until it blinked out of existence, like all the cold magic had before.

Except…

Wait.

It wasn’t gone. It hovered there, strong and steady, a cold heart beat in the world.

The creature watched. It was so *close.*

What if…what *if* the creature could bring it closer?

No more waiting. No more dank and dark. It could lure the magic close, swallow that distant sun. Fill itself with so much power that it became its own thing.

Legs to walk. Arms to hold. Fingers to grasp. Nothing would get away again.

Nothing would *dare.*

It wasn’t sure it could do it. Beckoning, luring such power *took* power, and it barely had a thimble full.

It could become nothing in truth.

But it was better than this—anything was better than this. Always waiting, never finding. It gathered up every stray bit of magic, sucking it from the soil. The creature shouted, screamed, howled and snarled, the sound worming up through the mud.

By the time it hit the breeze, it was nothing more than a whisper.

But sometimes a whisper was enough. It rode the warm night air, cushioned on humid currents, until it could orbit that cold star, that magic in the distance.

And once it was there, it crooned. It beckoned. It sang a siren song, pulling the that star forward.

Bringing it closer.

Closer.

*There.*

The star was *here*, the magic heady in its nearness. The creature feasted. Taking fistfuls of power, stuffing it into its maw, swallowing it down with greedy gulps. Licking the corners until every drop was gone. The star winked out. No more.

It didn’t matter. The creature had what it needed. The spell was finished. Complete.

And it was full after years of starving, its belly bloated, almost sickly. Fierce joy sliced through it as it dug through the soil with its hands—hands! Every inch excruciating and painful, until it clawed through the last layer of soil, birthing itself onto the warm ground.

A thing of nightmares given form.

It grinned, its teeth a ragged slash of moonlight.

The belly was gone now, the roundness ebbed away from the work of genesis. It was hungry. *Again*. So *soon.*

It searched the husk the star had left behind, but there was no magic there. For a second the creature lost control, lashing out, screeching into the night.

Despair, its oldest companion was back, and it had brought friends.

But wait. *Wait*.

In the distance. A smaller light. A flicker of magic. Different but the same, like someone had poured bottles of wine into the same bowl, heedless of flavor or vintage. A sickening blend, but it would get the job done. The creature could once again fill its rotten belly.

It stepped forward, one foot ponderously in front of the other. Every movement smoother than the last as it learned how to *be***.**

Finally how to *be*. All it needed was a little more cold magic. Then it wouldn’t be beholden to anyone else ever again.

Not even the stars themselves could stop it.