Chapter Two

Bad Scene, Everyone’s Fault

Bridin Blackthorn wondered—not for the first time—what jackass invented dating. It was everything she hated about a job interview, only you usually didn’t have to consider whether you wanted to see anyone naked during a job interview, and there was no hope of a salary when all was said and done. It was certainly more awkward all around. Usually she sized up her date and decided the benefits package wasn’t worth it sometime before they’d even ordered their drinks.

This one…she had to admit, at least to herself, was a far cry above the dates she’d been having.

Leo—and honestly, what kind of parent named their son, a *werewolf*, Leo?—Morreti was inarguably handsome. Dark hair, darker brown eyes, with warm olive skin and a chiseled jaw. The minute he opened his mouth, she was hit with a Chicago accent, the kind she usually only heard in movies. She’d let him pick out the restaurant and honestly, she was pleased with his choice. It was nice enough that she’d dressed up, but not so nice that she felt uncomfortable.

Candles flickered from each tabletop, which were capped with a crisp white tablecloth. The air was redolent with the smells of garlic, onion, and basil, amongst other things. Leo had picked out a rich red wine, and the general atmosphere was cozy and romantic.

She could grudgingly admit that, as dates went, Leo was a measure above.

Leo didn’t talk over her, try to tell her what to order, or talk only about himself. He hadn’t spent the entire time staring at other women and he hadn’t, like one particularly memorable dating disaster, offer a backseat quickie to see “if she was worth it.”

At this point, the bar was so low that Leo would barely have to lift his foot to step over it.

Leo wasn’t as happy with his choice of restaurant, sadly. He stared forlornly at his pasta. His hands—which had been busy the entire time he’d been telling her a story about his sisters—dropped to the tablecloth. “What have they done to it? If they wanted to kill me, they could’ve just shot me in the alley. At least that would have been quick.” He shook his head forlornly. “No need to take it out on the food.” Mischief glinted in his eyes when he looked up at her.

Brid couldn’t help smiling. “There’s actually a really great Italian place in Issaquah. If I’d known, we could have avoided your misery.”

He leaned back in his chair, examining her, his meal momentarily forgotten. “Didn’t think you’d want us that deep in your territory, to be honest.”

Brid shot him wide, innocent eyes. “Are you implying you’re a threat?”

Though he’d smiled all evening, his first real smile slowly unfurled across his face. It catapulted him from handsome to glorious.

It did nothing for her.

“You know, I like you.”

The waiter dropped a fresh loaf of bread at the table, and she grabbed a slice of it, slathering it with butter. “You sound so surprised.”

He plucked his wine glass off the table, taking a slow sip, before leaning close and dropping his voice. They both had a representative of their pack at the other side of the restaurant, and though the room was filled with chatter and clinking silverware, they had very good ears. “I am. I’ve seen the list of suitors you’ve chased off. You’re getting a bit of a reputation, Blackthorn.”

She scoffed. “If I was a man, I’d be called ‘discerning’ and no one would question it. They’d *applaud* it.”

His smiled at her over the lip of his wine glass. “Not arguing with you there.”

She used the bread to catch some of the cream sauce on her plate. “If I’m a picky bitch, then why did you agree to meet me?”

“I’d say that maybe I like ‘picky bitches’ but to be candid, I don’t care for the term.” He finally sipped his wine. “In your position, I’d also be discerning. It’s smart.” He set down his wine and with some amount of resignation, pushed his pasta aside with his fork and cut into his steak. “Maybe I wanted to see if I made the cut.”

He looked up at her blank face and laughed. He had a charming laugh, causing several heads to turn appraisingly. “Don’t bother stalling or coming up with a polite lie. I knew two seconds after you greeted me that you weren’t interested.”

She chewed carefully, giving herself a moment. Leo’s charm probably distracted most people away from the sharp intelligence in his eyes. From the dossier compiled by her oldest brother, Bran, before this date, Leo was finishing up an MBA. High marks. Came from an old, established pack. She wasn’t quite sure why he would consider relocating away from Chicago. There was no obvious reason for it. “What makes you say that?”

He laid his hand out on the table, palm up. He had elegant fingers, the kind good for playing piano or picking pockets. After a moment’s hesitation, she put down her silverware and put her hand in his. His hand was warm, and though not callused, it wasn’t soft, either. Slowly, giving her a chance to pull away if she so chose, he turned her arm until her wrist was exposed.

He ran a thumb over her pulse-point in slow circles, his gaze slowly moving up to hers. “There’s a certain alchemy to attraction. Looks are a factor, and for me, so is intelligence, but beyond those factors, there’s a chemical layer to it. Pheromones and all of that.” He continued the slow brush with his thumb. “All those things, blended together. It’s a bit inexplicable at times, what draws us to someone else.”

His lips curled faintly at the ends as he watched his thumb. “Whatever that cocktail is, we don’t have it.” He reversed her hand, bringing the back of her wrist to his mouth. He placed a kiss there and let her hand go. “Might as well be courting a mannequin.” He raised a hand before she could protest. “It wasn’t meant to be an insult. But I do not make your breath catch, Blackthorn. I do not give you goosebumps. We have no alchemy to speak of.” He shrugged and picked up his silverware again, taking another bite.

She followed his lead, returning to her meal.

He grimaced, jabbing at his steak with a fork. “It’s never rare enough, is it?”

She paused, fork hovering over her pasta. “Then why go through with dinner?”

He sighed with resignation and took another slice of beef. “Perhaps I yearned for a mediocre meal but charming company?” He placed the beef delicately in his mouth. “I did say I liked you.”

She considered this and decided it was at least partially bullshit. “You’re not attracted to me either.”

“Alas.” He tipped his head theatrically heaven-ward, steepling a hand over his heart. “She speaks truth.”

This date wasn’t half as awkward as all the others. Maybe because Leo was so charming, or perhaps because he was being mostly honest. Regardless, she was enjoying not being pursued. She took several bites of fettuccini before speaking again, deciding, as she sopped up the last of her sauce with more bread, to put more of her own metaphorical cards on the table. “You have a prosperous pack. From your stories tonight, you obviously love Chicago and your family. From all accounts, you’re only a few steps away from being the head of your pack. Why are you here, Leo?”

Leo gave up on his steak, exchanging his knife and fork for his wine glass again, though he didn’t drink it. “You’re correct—I do love my family. If I stay in Chicago, I’ll probably have to kill at least one of them.” His words were so soft they barely carried over the table. “My cousin is next in line.” He stared moodily into his wine. “He’s a strong leader, but unsure at times. He…sees me as a threat.” He downed the last of the red and moved to grab the bottle to refill both their glasses.

“If you stay, there will be a fight for dominance.”

He nodded grimly. “And I know I won’t be able to turn it down. It’s not that I want to lead necessarily, but…I can’t follow. Not him. You understand?”

The sad part was, she did. It was a tricky thing, dominance. Bridin herself was very dominant, even though she wasn’t the biggest of wolves. Her brothers, by all accounts good fighters and strong men, lacked that essentially quality. If they took over, it would be disastrous—with the exception of Bran. Only Bran thought Brid was a better fit and wouldn’t hear otherwise. He preferred to advise and back her up.

If what Leo said was true, and his wolf already knew it couldn’t bow to his cousin…well. It would indeed end in bloodshed. “Marrying outside your pack will save lives.”

He nodded.

“But you’d have to leave your *home*.” That was no small thing for a wolf.

This time his nod was slow and slight. Miserable. He was miserable over it.

The waiter came and whisked away their dishes. They both ordered a dessert, all smiles until he left.

Bridin put her hand back on the table, palm up. After a moment’s hesitation, he took it with a slightly mocking smile.

“How long do you have?”

“Weeks, maybe.” He rested his chin in his free hand, the other still clasped around hers, taking comfort from her like he’d been doing it for years. “I had hoped.” He sighed. “I do like you. Would it be the worst solution?”

His hand was warm in hers, and she absently twined their fingers. “I’m sorely tempted. Dating is *awful.*”

He looked up at her through his lashes, which were almost indecently thick. “Especially when your heart is engaged elsewhere, I imagine.”

She tried to pull away, but he held firm.

He made a soothing noise. “Don’t do that.” He pulled her to him until they were both leaning over the small table, his mouth close to her ear. “Why are *you* here, Bridin Blackthorn, and not with him?”

She hesitated. Her pack had done a lot to keep her former relationship under wraps. So much disapproval heaped on a good man that it made her heart break. Telling Leo would be foolish. He was an unknown quantity. And yet, when she searched his eyes, she felt a kinship. People talked a lot about love at first sight. Brid wasn’t sure about that, but she’d experienced friendship at first sight, where you met someone and just instantly clicked. Now that she wasn’t seeing him as a date, Leo felt like that. An instant bond. “He’s not one of us.”

He pursed his lips. “I see.” He laid his freehand on top of their clasped one. “Is he a good man?”

She nodded.

“Strong?”

“Like us, no, but in his own way, yes.”

“You love him.”

She looked away, catching her brother and Leo’s escort across the restaurant, both of them watching her carefully. Leo’s escort seemed happy that the date appeared to be going well. Bran looked…concerned, though he masked it well. She hadn’t fooled him one bit.

“Then I see no reason we can’t help each other.”

Her head snapped back to him.

The waiter came with their desserts—a piece of cheesecake with strawberries for her, a decadent chocolate box mounded with whipped cream for him, covered in chopped pecans, a single red cherry on top. They smiled at the waiter until he left, not noticing how much their smiles looked like the bared teeth of predators.

She dropped his hand and dug into her cheesecake. “A union in name only?” She shook her head. “I don’t think either of us would be happy that way for very long. I might agree to it anyway, but my brothers will stubbornly insist against it.” Her smile was wan. “I’m not to martyr myself on their account.”

Whatever his reservation of the meal so far, it didn’t extend to his dessert. He scooped a large bite of whipped cream into his mouth, practically licking the spoon. He winked when he caught her looking and she laughed.

“I don’t think it needs to go that far, actually.” He used his spoon to crack open the box, revealing chocolate mousse and a thick brownie. The dessert, Brid thought, was very like him—decadent to the point of hedonism, but in a strangely whimsical way.

He hummed as the mousse hit his tongue. “What if we declare ourselves interested? I stay with your pack for a while. We get to know each other. Not a permanent solution, but it will buy us time until we can find one.” He carefully gouged a bite of mousse and brownie with his spoon and held it up to her to taste. “No martyrs, I promise.”

She took the bite, the rich chocolate hitting her tongue. It was almost too sweet until she sipped her wine, the rich flavor cutting through the chocolate. “And you think that will work.”

“I think,” Leo said, dropping his voice again. “That we are both intelligent people, and not a little bit desperate, and between the two of us, we’ll find a solution to our mutual problem.” His mouth quirked. “And you won’t have to go on any more first dates in the meantime.”

She laughed again, the joy and relief spreading all the way to her toes. “You know what, Leo Moretti? I think you have yourself a deal.”

They decided to go on a walk after dinner, much to the delight of Leo’s companion. Bran’s face remained stoic. She had her arm tucked into Leo’s as they walked down the street, heading toward the waterfront. The chill October air brought her the scents of leaves, the smoke of someone’s fire, and underneath it all, the distinct scent of water. Their escorts trailed slowly behind them, far enough away that they had some privacy if they talked softly.

Leo dipped his mouth close to her ear. “I feel like your brother is haunting us.”

She smothered a laugh into his shoulder. “He kind of is. I don’t think he knows what to make of you, or the fact that I haven’t tossed you out on your ear.”

He hummed thoughtfully. “I do like to keep a man on his toes.” He kissed her temple before reaching up to snatch a golden leaf off a tree as they passed. “Where are we again? I don’t know Seattle neighborhoods well, I’m afraid.”

“Madrona.”

“Pretty. What’s Issaquah like?”

“Very different. Our pack has a large chunk of forested land. If you expecting urbane sophistication—”

He threw a warm smile her way. “I bring my own urbane sophistication with me, I’m afraid.”

Before she could respond, her pocket buzzed and she took out her phone. A text from Sam lit up her screen.

Leo didn’t try to hide his curiosity, peeking at her screen. “Is that him?”

Brid’s throat tightened. “Yes.”

“He asking about the date?” His question was careful, almost gentle.

She opened the text. “Yes, though not directly.” She went to put the phone away.

“You should answer him.”

She frowned up at Leo. “You don’t think it’s a little rude?”

He shook his head. “If this were an actual relationship, perhaps.” He paused. “Actually, would you let me answer the text?”

“Why?”

“Call it a test.” He held out his hand. “If he’s worth you, he’ll pass.”

“I don’t like playing games.”

“Really? But they’re so fun.” He took her phone with gentle fingers. “I don’t either, usually, but I’m pressed for time and need to find out what kind of person I’m dealing with.”

Brid didn’t fight for her phone, though she wasn’t sure handing it over was a good idea at all.

He started to type something out, decided against it, and hit the call button instead.

Now she really wasn’t sure. “Give it back, Leo.”

He waved her off. “Hello, this is Sam, I presume?”

She heard Sam’s voice over the phone, though he was speaking softly enough that she couldn’t make out his words.

“Leo Moretti, Bridin’s date for the evening.” He paused, smirking. “I took her to dinner—the food was questionable, but she’s quite lovely. Smells like sandalwood and oranges. So we left the table to have a quickie in the park. Though the park was charming, I found the sex lacking, though we gave it the old college try.”

Bridin smacked his arm, straining to hear Sam’s reply. She would absolutely *murder* Leo—

His tone, which had been slightly mocking, shifted to something warm and kind. “I think I understand now. I’m looking forward to meeting you, Sam.” They said their goodbyes and Leo hung up, handing her the phone back.

“Please tell me why I’m not murdering you right now. That was uncalled for and cruel—”

Leo shrugged one shoulder. “Like I said, I needed to see.” He reached up and snatched another leaf. “How a man responds to having his territory threatened—”

She punched his arm this time, a little harder than the slap. If they’d been wolves, she would have snapped her teeth at him. She might do it anyway. “I’m no one’s territory.”

“You’re not? What a pity.” He let the leaf drop and drift to the sidewalk. “Personally, I’m looking forward to being conquered. Belonging to someone else—two hearts, one body, that sort of thing.”

Brid scowled at him. She couldn’t tell if he was being sincere or mocking, but thought he might be doing a little of both.

“Whatever your delicate sensibilities on the subject, I learned a great deal.” He glanced at her. “He loves you, you know.”

She looked out over the quiet street. Sam had told her as much. She knew exactly how he felt, she just…didn’t like to think about it. Not when she had to date other people, werewolves like her. She shouldn’t ask—the answer would hurt—but she couldn’t help herself. “What makes you say that?”

“He said I was lying through my teeth, because that didn’t sound like you at all, but if it was true, you deserve more than a lackluster fuck against a tree.”

She took her arm from his, so he slid it around her instead. Leo smelled like the wild and spice—a comforting smell.

He cleared his throat. “It hurt him to say it, but he meant it. He put you first, and he knew I was talking shit. He trusts you.” He squeezed her tight. “I know many alphas that would have called you a whore and crushed their phones. He told me you should call him later.”

Brid grumbled a response. She knew Sam wouldn’t slut shame anyone, and he didn’t blame her for the position they were in. No one’s fault but she *hated* putting him through it nonetheless.

“I have to say, I’m a little jealous.”

She snorted, sliding an arm easily around his waist. “You are?”

“That man would tear out his own heart to see you happy. Two seconds on a phone and that’s clear.” He sighed. “I’d love to meet a man who believed I deserved good sex, even if it wasn’t with him.”

She looked sharply at him. “A man, huh? Is that why we don’t have chemistry?”

“I’m afraid you’re not off the hook quite so easily, Blackthorn. I’m a bit flexible in that department.”

“I see.”

“When you call him later, extend my apologies, will you?”

She sighed. “Assuming he’ll even answer his phone after the shit you just pulled.”

He snorted. “For you? He’ll answer. Every time, Blackthorn. That’s something I know for certain.”