Coffee Mates

by BirdOfHermes

Summary

Harry gets a job where he needs to be on stakeout, so he chooses a cozy coffee shop to conduct surveillance. There's only one problem, and it's the adorable coffee shop owner with a supernova smile. Post White Night, Pre Small Favor.

Notes

*bangs pots and pans together* HARRY BLACKSTONE COPPERFIELD DRESDEN DESERVES NICE THINGS 2K19.

And if Jim Butcher won't give them to him, then by God, I'll do it myself.

I fully admit this is just fluff. It is possibly the fluffiest fluff I have posted thus far on this website, and I don't even care. I want this wizard to have nice things because he fucking deserves them, so here we go again.

And yeah, I did go full Freudian on this one with our leading lady, and I still don't care. I regret nothing. NOTHING, I SAY.
I know most of my life sounds interesting, but trust me, there are parts of it that are anything but.

Television and movies have really done private investigating a disservice. When I'm not being propositioned by evil fairie queens or hunted by Red Court vampires, I'm still back to doing the regular gumshoe work. And the gumshoe work is often very, very boring, and very, very tedious.

Case-in-point, I caught a job that required surveillance of a private jewelry store to catch a career criminal who had stolen a valuable heirloom item that was part of a set from its sister location in Baltimore. The item wasn't entirely worthless without the other piece, but the thief would only get about a third of the money with just the one, so it was all but assured he'd come after the second piece to get the full amount it was worth. I'd asked how much the set was worth. More zeroes than I'll ever see in my lifetime, so I sure as hell wanted this assignment since the payout would be higher than my normal rates for a case. She'd offered to pay me per day and then a bonus if I caught him in the act, so basically I was stuck on stakeout until he struck.

Well, you can't just go loitering outside a place for a week or two. Your regulars pick up on it quite fast. Therefore, I needed some cover, and it just so happened that there was a little coffee shop across the street from the place. I was relieved to see it wasn't one of those large chains; they were extremely loud, busy, and made it too hard to find regular seating. The shop couldn't have seated more than maybe 12-20 people at maximum, and I'd walked past it many a time, so I knew it wouldn't be packed.

Bright and early, just before the jewelry store opened, I waltzed into Coffee Mates.

Immediately, my stomach rumbled as the familiar scent of roasted coffee beans hit my nostrils. It was six in the morning and I hadn't eaten yet, but this had been part of the plan anyhow. I heard the whirring of the machines as I glanced around and got in line, which had about six people in it including me. The floors were dark wood, polished to a high shine, and the menu had been written in brightly colored chalk. I scanned it, relieved to find that the coffee was priced fairly—a buck fifty for a small medium roast, which was killer in the days of four-and-five dollar coffees with French and Italian monikers.

The counter was relatively small, but could comfortably fit maybe five or six employees at a time. It was completely open on three sides, with the fourth housing fresh baked goods that also made my stomach growl. I tended to go for donuts like a classic Neanderthal, but I had an eye on a croissant that was nearly as big as my entire hand.

I kept the jewelry store within my peripheral as the line moved. There were ways to spot someone casing the place. The career criminals weren't as obvious as they made it look in the movies. They
learned to blend in by walking a dog or pretending to be a jogger. What I wanted would be patterns. It would be relatively tricky to case a place in just one day. I’d compile a list of people sighted more than once and then start narrowing it down from there. I had a description of the perp, but from the sound of the theft, there had been some element of magic involved. I’d have to stay on my toes.

"Good morning, sir. What can I get you?"

I faced forward.

And found myself staring at pure sunshine.

She was maybe late-twenties, early thirties with dark skin and long hair set in soft, bouncy curls that fell to her shoulders. Her eyes were just a touch lighter than her skin, and they radiated warmth from beneath thick lashes. She was a bit tall for a girl, maybe 5'7" or so, and her frame had the strength of former athleticism complimented with copious curves. She wore a white dress shirt and a black high-waisted skirt with an apron over it.

But what stopped me was just that smile.

Wow.

She could stop traffic with that smile.

It wasn’t just her pearly whites or the dimple in her left cheek; it was the light that seemed to emanate from that smile that filled her face with a friendly, approachable air. She had the kind of smile that made you want to sit there and tell her your life story, and in a manner that would make her laugh. I bet she had a great laugh.

"Sir?" she asked again, and I realized I’d just been standing there, stunned for a few seconds.

"Uh, right, sorry," I muttered, color rising in my cheeks. "Small medium roast and a croissant, please."

I handed her a five spot. She gave me change back. Holy hell, I loved this place already. I could hardly get breakfast at Dunkin Donuts for five bucks, let alone get change back.

She flounced over to the giant industrial-grade coffee grinder and then poured my cup. She snagged a croissant, dumped a couple of those whipped butters in the bag along with a knife and fork, and then returned to me, still smiling like all was right with the world.

"Thanks," I said.

"Anytime," she said, and then she moved on to the next customer.

I picked the loveseat nearest to the window facing the store and plopped down. I dug out my croissant, dolloped the butter on it, and took a bite. Oh, God. I was going to waste entire paychecks on this place. The croissant was perfect. Buttery, flaky, hot, and delicious. I sipped my coffee in between bites and found it had a great flavor: not too strong, not too weak, and just hot enough that it didn't burn my tongue but it warmed me through and through. No wonder she had a line to the door.

I observed the store as the morning wandered on by, taking notes and doing small sketches of potential suspects. Nothing yet, but like I said: this job is far from exciting most of the time.

At lunch time, I ordered the soup and sandwich combo, which was homemade tomato soup and a four-cheese grilled sandwich with a Coke. I ate that too and nearly wept with joy as it was just as
good as the breakfast had been. I also noted that it was a minimal staff coffee shop, it seemed; the pretty girl at the counter stayed throughout the day and was only joined by two other people by the time we reached late afternoon. While I focused mainly on the store, I caught bits and pieces of conversation and worked out that she was actually the owner, not just the cashier. She had regulars that she greeted and they chatted pleasantly. Each of them really seemed to like her. Hell, it was probably hard not to with food this good and a smile that unforgettable.

They closed at six, the same time as the jewelry store, and I left shortly before to get out of their way. The owner waved goodbye and I returned the gesture before heading back to my apartment to analyze what I'd gathered for the day.

When I came back the next day, the owner recognized me, and gave me that supernova smile again.

"Back for more, I see," she teased.

"That croissant changed my life," I told her severely, and she giggled. It was just as cute as she was, as I suspected. "Same order."

I paid for it, and instead of keeping the change, I stuffed it in the tip jar and gave her a wink before I headed over to the loveseat. I got settled in, ate my stellar breakfast, and observed once again. This time, though, the coffee shop had its music going. Normally, I tuned out whatever music played in a public space. They tended to find the most non-offensive, flavorless radio station and tuned in, but the coffee shop kind of...grooved. I heard all sorts of artists on the tracks, from Rolling Stones to Louis Armstrong. A few times I caught myself humming under my breath, once to Tom Waits, another time to George Michael, and again to Looking Glass.

"Fun."

I glanced up to see the owner stooped by the coffee table--Ha! Get it?--rearranging the magazines. "I'm sorry?"

"That's the name of the band playing," she said, pointing towards the speakers in the ceiling.

"The band is called Fun?" I asked, lifting an eyebrow. "Isn't that sort of confusing?"

"It is," she admitted. "But it does make them memorable."

"How'd you know I haven't heard of them before?"

She smiled, those dark eyes mirthful. "You strike me as the type of guy who's been listening to the same forty songs from your childhood and you need some new music. Check them out. I think you'd like them."

"I'll think about it," I said in an equally teasing tone, and she chuckled and moved away to continue her tasks.

Midway through day three, during a slow, quiet period with only me, her, and another customer in the far corner, she plopped down in the seat across from me. "So. You a cop?"

I arched an eyebrow. "I...look like a cop?"

She gestured to me. "The giant foreboding duster sort of makes you look like either a cop or a vigilante of some sort."

I grinned. "I'll take that second one in a heartbeat. But no. Not a cop."
"Okay." She slid forward in her seat, and the humor vanished. She looked at me dead on, and I had to slightly adjust my gaze to her lashes to avoid accidentally triggering a Soulgaze. "So why are you checking out the jewelry store?"

I stilled. "Excuse me?"

"Don't play dumb with me," she said in a quiet, serious tone. "I know those people. They're good people. If you're stalking one of them or casing the place, I'll tell you right now--get the hell out of my shop and don't come back."

Wow. I believed her completely that she'd throw me out. I even felt a bit intimidated by the heat and fervor in her words. She was bold, if nothing else, but kind of naive. If I were a bad man, I could very easily hurt her for confronting me about it. She needed to learn a little tact. And yes, I know--don't throw stones in a glass house.

"I'm not stalking anyone," I told her. "May I?"

I gestured to my pocket. She eyed me, but nodded. I dug out my wallet and handed her my P.I. license. She read it thoroughly while I explained. "Owner hired me to prevent a suspected upcoming theft. This was the easiest and least suspicious way to get surveillance since there's no long term parking on the street."

"Dresden," she said slowly. "Wait, you're the wizard guy, right? The one in the phone book?"

"That's what it says on my underwear." My expression soured. "And please don't tell me you know me because of Larry Fowler."

"No, not from that schmuck," she said, her nose wrinkling in disgust. "I had a friend who hired you to find a lost item a year or so ago, and she said she had no idea what the hell you did to get it done, but you found her mother's locket in less than a day when she'd been searching for it for close to two years. Impressive."

She handed me the license back. "Any luck so far?"

"Nada," I said with a grimace. "Some loose leads, but nothing solid. Sorry for the intrusion, but I might be here a while."

She shrugged and stood up. "I don't mind. I'm glad the store's got someone watching their back."

She cocked her head to one side. "And you always buy food, so you're in the clear, Mr. Dresden."

"Glad to hear it, Miss...?"

"Lila," she said, offering her hand. She had a strong, solid grip, and she knew how to shake hands properly, which for some reason was a dying art.

"Lila," I echoed. "You make a helluva a brew, by the way."

She beamed at me. "Thanks. Let me know if I can help out at all."

I dug out another couple of ones and handed them to her. "Hit me with another cup. It's gonna be a long day."

Lila blew a stray curl away from her forehead as the front door to the shop jingled. "Don't I know it."

On the morning of day four, I dragged myself up to the counter and she gave me a sympathetic look.
"You're not a morning person, are you, Mr. Dresden?"

"Not even close," I grunted as I searched my pockets for my wallet. "Strongest thing you've got in the largest cup I can get it in."

She chuckled. "Poor thing. Here, I'll make you a latte."

I arched an eyebrow. "Do I even wanna know what that is?"

"Just know that mine are strong as hell and I'm super good at making them."

"You're the boss," I said, and handed her the bills and coins. I took my normal seat and munched into an enormous blueberry muffin while I tried to focus my eyes on the store. I'd had a late night running down leads and I really could use some sleep, but that wasn't in the cards for now.

Lila appeared a few minutes later and handed me an actual ceramic mug instead of one of those paper cups. She winked before she left. I glanced down and saw that she'd written the word "smile" in the foam on top of the latte. I couldn't help it. I grinned like a fool while I drank the latte. Which was, as she'd promised, super good.

Closing time arrived, and I got my first surprise of the week.

"Um," she said just as I'd gathered my stuff together. "This is gonna sound weird, but...would you mind walking me to my car? My closing associate has an exam so I had to let him go early. It's just a couple blocks over."

"I don't mind at all," I said sincerely. "Gets dark early this time of year."

She sighed in relief. "Thanks. Someone at the thrift shop got held up coming out of the store a week ago and I'm still a little spooked."

I frowned. "Damn, that's a shame."

"Yeah, we all know each around here and we pooled together to help them recup the loss," she said as she took the drawer out of the register. "It's the least we could do."

She disappeared to the back and returned without her apron, but now with an overcoat and a purse. I held the door for her and she locked it, then we headed down the sidewalk.

"You know," I said. "One thing about being a P.I. is you sort of notice things a lot."

"Uh-huh."

I eyed her. "You're awful trusting, you know."

She gave me an arch look. "Do you have a problem with that, Dresden?"

I shrugged. "Just saying. I could be crazy."

"You're listed in the phone book as a wizard," she said with an amused snort. "You probably are crazy."

"So why trust me to walk you to your car unharmed?"

"Let's just say I'm going with a gut instinct on this one. Plus, you're objectively terrifying. No one would even try to hold me up standing next to a Shaq-sized guy in a black leather coat in the middle..."
of Chicago at night."

"Ah," I said. "Fair point."

"But," she said. "There are other smaller signs that maybe you aren't so bad."

"Such as?"

"You take your coffee with way too much sugar and cream, and you love sweets."

"Even Hitler ate sugar."

She laughed. "Fair point. But there's also the fact that you say 'please' and 'thank you' and you held the door for me. You also tip well, which is rare in my line of work."

Lila tapped her chin with a finger. "Oh, and you've been here almost a week without checking me out once."

“Hey,” I said, oddly offended. “Maybe I’m just extremely stealthy about it.”

She rolled her eyes at me. "Point is, I can usually tell when someone's not as scary as they seem. Don't judge a book by its cover."

"Good advice," I admitted. "But it wouldn't kill you to maybe carry a shank or something."

She chuckled. "I have pepper spray, I promise."

I nodded. "Good."

She hit the key fob on a nice little modern car, a Hyundai of some sort, and I opened the car door for her. She tossed her purse inside and smiled at me, one eyebrow lifted. "So. See you tomorrow?"

I gave her my best mysterious smile. "Maybe."

She grinned. "Night, Mr. Dresden."

"Harry," I said.

Her luminous smile widened. "Night, Harry."

"Night, Lila."

She climbed into her car and drove off into the night.

"--and then you just come around like this a little bit and you're done!"

I lifted up from where I'd been hunched over the counter, and cocked my head. "It doesn't look like a smiley face. It looks like that creepy doll from Coraline."

Lila laughed and took the toothpick from me, adjusting the white foam. "There. Now it's a smiley face. Congratulations, Picasso."

"At last," I said as I brought the mug up to my lips. "All my life has been building to this moment."

She shook her head at me as I made an obnoxious slurping sound. The phone rang and she held up a finger before she went over to answer it. Her smile faded rather quickly. She exchanged terse words.
with whoever was on the line, growing more tense until she finally sighed and hung up with a muttered curse under her breath.

"Something up?" I asked.

"My associate called out," she said. "Stuck by myself until two o'clock and the lunch rush is about to hit. This'll be fun."

I gave her a sympathetic smile. "Sorry. Give 'em hell."

"That I will." The phone rang a second time and she grabbed it, and this call didn't seem to go any better. She actually slammed the phone down on the cradle and shut her eyes for a long moment.

"Dare I ask?" I said carefully.

"That same associate said he just remembered an office order that was supposed to have gone in to be picked up at one. For twenty-five blended drinks."

"Hell's bells," I groaned. "When it rains it pours."

"And I'm about to get soaked," she said as she rolled up her sleeves.

"Good luck?"

"Forget luck. You're a wizard, aren't you? Can't you just make a copy of me or something?"

"I would if I could."

She flashed me a small smile and then got to work. Sadly, she wasn't wrong about the lunch rush. Noon hit and she became utterly swamped with customers. I honestly had to stop myself from trying to man the counter in the meantime as a small throng of people formed around her. Most of them remained patient and reasonable, but I could tell a few were getting antsy even though they could see she was alone this time. I heard a snide comment here and there, and had to bite my tongue. She did her best to balance among the machines and still fill the large order in between. It took a ton of concentration and patience, from what I could tell, not to simply lose her place in which drinks and lunch orders she'd already taken. She was nothing if not determined, at least.

Five minutes to one o'clock, she'd managed to get the line down to the last man standing with only about five of the large order left to complete. It had been hell, but she'd made it out in one piece, at least.

"I said no ice!"

My head snapped around when I heard a gasp and a sudden splash. Some guy in an expensive suit stood there at the counter, red in the face, his plastic cup emptied.

And she was wearing his drink.

"Dumb bitch," he snarled, tossing the empty cup on the floor, and then turned to go.

He didn't make it more than a step before I caught him by the shoulder and hauled him around to face me.

"What the hell is the matter with you?" I spat. "Like you didn't just see her making all those damn drinks by herself. It's fucking coffee."
The guy's jaw dropped open, but no sound came out. He'd been so self-important he likely hadn't noticed me in the corner, which somehow just annoyed me even more.

Before anything else could happen, I felt soft fingers on my wrist.

"Harry, no!" Lila urged. "It's...it's fine. Let him go."

I glanced aside at her. "It is the furthest thing from fine."

"It doesn't matter," she said quietly. "Just...let him go."

I shoved the guy, hard. I didn't even try to measure my strength. He stumbled onto his ass and crab-walked to the door, then fled the shop as pale as a ghost. I glared after him and tried to slow my breathing. It had been a long week, and I was aching to deck someone. He'd have been a wonderful target, even if all it did was land me in jail for assault. Hell's bells, I'd have welcomed it if it meant I got to teach him a lesson.

I breathed out as much anger as I could and faced her, asking gently, "You alright?"

She gave me an exhausted smile from underneath her wet curls. The prick had gotten it pretty much everywhere, from her hair to her skirt, some dripping onto her shins and into her flats. I resisted the urge to give chase and pound his head into a brick wall a couple of times.

"I'm fine, Harry."

I shook my head. "You shouldn't have to put up with shit like that."

She shrugged. "Comes with the territory."

"No, it doesn't."

Her dark eyes flinched a little. "It shouldn't, but it does."

She sighed as she stared at the sticky caramel mess she dripped onto the floor. A thought occurred to me. "When did you say your relief comes in?"

"Two o'clock."

"What size clothing do you wear?"

She squinted at me then. I rolled my eyes. "Relax, I'm not making a pass at you. I can run across the street and get you something to wear so you're not stuck in that mess until your shift ends."

"Oh." She blinked at me. "You...don't have to do that."

"No, I really do. I need to prove there is some form of human decency still in the world."

She bit her lip. I could tell she wanted to say no, but that drink had been partially frozen, so the poor girl was wet and cold, so she finally answered. "Medium shirt. Size eight skirt or pants. Don't worry about the shoes; I can just rinse these off."

I nodded. "Be right back."

"Wait, let me give you my credit card."

I shot her a look. "And fart in the face of my gentlemanly upbringing? Forget it."
She tried to hide a laugh, but couldn't, so it came out as a snort, which was cute as hell. "Right. Sorry, Sir Galahad. I'm gonna go rinse this off."

I gave her a salute and then left the shop to hit the thrift shop down the way. It wasn't difficult to find a woman's white blouse and a black skirt in her size, so I was back within fifteen minutes. When I returned, she looked a little better. She'd rinsed out her fluffy hair and it was slick and shiny in a ponytail at her nape.

"Really, you didn't have to do that," she told me as I passed her the bag of clothes. "I think that guy might have pissed himself on the way out."

I shrugged. "It's sort of a waste when you're my size and you don't threaten a guy who's a jerk to a nice, pretty girl every once in a while."

She shook her head, beckoning a finger. "Down here."

I stooped and she kissed my cheek. She also paused before she pulled completely away, and her dark eyes were all sorts of beautiful from so close. "Thanks again, Sir Galahad."

Oh, boy. I was already in trouble, wasn't I?
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Harry and Lila set a date.

Chapter Notes

Any of you who read my stories know sometimes I fudge magical things a little bit, so keep that in mind for the shenanigans this time around.

“So,” Thomas asked before sipping his beer. “Are you in love with the coffee shop girl yet?”

I glared at him. “Excuse me?”

“You said you’ve been camping out at Coffee Mates for a week,” he elaborated with a smug smile. “And the girl who runs it is positively adorable. She’s exactly your type, too: dark-haired, smart, and sarcastic.”

“One track mind,” I said, shaking my head.

“Oh, please. At least I’m honest about it.” He paused. “Now answer the question.”

“No,” I said with a groan.

Thomas stared at me with complete and utter disappointment. “Really, Harry, you’re completely useless.”

“Why do you always meddle in my personal life?”

“I’m your brother. It’s my job.”

“Pick a new profession.”

He rolled his eyes. “Believe me, I would if I could. It’s taxing to be related to such a Neanderthal.”

I sighed. “Thomas, come on. You’ve seen what an utter mess my life is. I’m not going to drag someone innocent into it.”

“Why do you treat every girl you meet like you’re going to marry her, Harry? You do realize you can just enjoy someone’s company, right?”

I opened my mouth to retort, but he cut me off. “And no, I didn’t mean just sex. I meant there wouldn’t be too much harm if you bought her a drink and just hung out with her. It doesn’t always have to go somewhere or be a whole thing. It doesn’t have to be life-or-death or a long-term commitment.”
“Why are you pushing this?” I growled.

He narrowed his eyes at me. “Because you’re holed up in here too much and it’s unhealthy. You need to have fun sometimes, little brother. Platonic or otherwise.”

I scowled at him, but didn’t immediately fire back as I considered what he’d said. Well, he was being an ass about it, but he wasn’t entirely wrong. I rarely went out. Especially lately. I hadn’t really thought about the fact that it had been a while since I’d done something not related to work. It hadn’t been too long ago that Billy had metaphorically smacked me in the back of the head for doing this sort of thing; isolating myself and dealing more with monsters than actual good people.

And, if I was being perfectly honest, I did like Lila. More than a little. She was fun. An oasis in the desert that was my life.

I scratched my hair and avoided his gaze. “Fine, I’ll…give it some thought, alright?”

He gave my shoulder a little slap as he passed by to head to the kitchen. “It’s for your own good, I promise.”

I heard the clink as he dropped the bottle in the garbage. “And anyway, how else am I gonna get myself some nieces and nephews?”

I lobbed an empty burger wrapper at his head while he laughed. Jerk.

The next day, somehow, I managed not to say anything stupid when I grabbed my breakfast from her in the morning. When it came time to ring me up, Lila refused the money.

“You bought me clothes,” she said. “Everything today is on the house. My show of thanks, Stilts.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “I’m not gonna talk you out of this, am I?”

“Nope!” she said cheerfully.

“Figured as much. Alright, what’s the most expensive thing on the menu?”

She scowled then and I just laughed and asked for my usual before I headed to my corner. I ate and made more notes, and that was when I finally had enough data for something odd to arise. There had been no sign of our perp, but I hadn’t thought he’d just show up as himself anyway. I’d also been receiving a list of who visited the shop and actually went inside rather than just the people passing by. It had occurred to me the guy could also use a spotter, which was smart, since you could just pay any old schmuck to watch it for you and not risk getting caught. The most effective ones were homeless people, since they needed the money and sadly no one ever paid them any mind.

I thumbed through my notes and realized my prime suspect now that I’d spent a full week here. It wouldn’t take too much to make himself unrecognizable as a homeless man, magic or practical effects.

And there had been a homeless man in the alley next to Coffee Mates this whole time.

I ran it through my head a few times and it didn’t sound too absurd. The next part was tricky. I could confront him, and if I was good enough, I could get a rise out of him enough to reveal himself, catch him, and turn him in. If I was wrong, well…I’d definitely be giving the poor guy fifty bucks for harassing him.
“How’s it coming?” Lila asked, switching out the old magazines with newer ones.

“The game is afoot,” I told her. “Hey, have you ever seen that guy in the alley before?”

She thought about it for a moment. “No, I think he showed up shortly before you did.”

Aha. Suspicious is as suspicious does. “Thanks.”

Lila lifted her eyebrows. “Think that might be your jewel thief?”

“Maybe, maybe not, but he’s the anomaly so far in my case,” I said as I stood. “In my experience, you have to follow your gut or you’ll miss a window of opportunity.”

Lila chewed on her lower lip for a second. It somehow made her look even cuter than usual. “Think so?”

“Intuition is a helluva thing. You shouldn’t ignore it.”

She cleared her throat and ran a hand through her curls, looking at me obliquely. “So by your logic, if my intuition told me to ask you out, I should listen to it, right?”

My heart tried to hammer its way through my rib cage and throw itself into her hands. I licked my lips and adopted a cool, casual smile that in no way reflected how nervous I actually felt. “Well, of course.”

“Right,” she agreed. “So, Harry, would you like to go to dinner with me tonight?”

I did my very best not to answer too quickly. “Yes. I very much would like that.”

Lila tried not to smile, but couldn’t resist, to my delight. “Okay. There’s a little Italian spot on the corner. Eight o’clock sound good?”

"Sounds great."

She cleared her throat and smoothed her hair away from her face again. "Good. I have customers."

She hurried away, and I got the distinct impression she was blushing, and it just made me like her even damned more than I already did.

I headed out the door and went to one of the very rare pay phones still left in the whole city and made two phone calls. Then I went around to the alleyway for a possible showdown with the jewel thief. Along the way, I dug some ointment out of my duster and applied it before I turned the corner.

The homeless guy had a ton of raggedy blankets down and a small, cracked bowl to collect anything people would be willing to give. His hair was in a tangled, dirty mop, as was his beard, both of them grey, and his features were gaunt. When I approached, he didn’t move; he appeared to be sleeping.

I kicked his ankle. I'm diplomatic like that. Kissinger would be proud. "Hey. We need to talk."

The old man gave a start and sat up, rubbing his bleary eyes as he stared at me. "Whuzzat?"

"I'll give you credit: you're creative and way more patient than I thought you'd be. I mean, five days? And knowing that you're across the street from a half-a-million dollar pay off? Don't think I'd be able to do that, personally."

He gave me a confused look. "What?"
"And the cover's brilliant, by the way. No one noticed except the girl next door. Oh, and me. So full marks, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to come quietly."

"The hell are you talking about?" he said. "Why you botherin' me? Go away."

"Drop the act," I said tiredly. "You're insulting both of us."

"Go away!" he yelled, swiping at me.

I scowled at him. He was very committed to the part, it seemed. Rather than another jab, I simply muttered, "Hexus."

And the cell phone in his pocket proceeded to freak out.

He jumped up suddenly, did a little panicked dance, and flung it to the ground. It was a nice, fancy cell phone too. Sparks shot out of it followed by a little puff of smoke before it died a sad little death on the sidewalk. I knew a lot about the homeless population in Chicago, and very, very few of them had top-of-the-line cell phones.

Finally, the old man chuckled. "Damn it. I was this close."

He dropped the illusion. The thief was a little shy of six-feet-tall and he had dark, curly hair and a beard, and his features were European. He wore a dark button up shirt and slacks, and I didn't see a weapon on him, but if he was a practitioner as I suspected, he might not have needed one.

He squinted empty brown eyes at me. "Warden Dresden, I take it?"

"If the cloak fits," I said. "But I'm not here on official business. Client hired me."

"Ah," he said. "So the rumor that you're in the phone book must be true."

I just shrugged. "I've already called the cops, and the client knows you're here. For once in my life, can we please just settle this like gentlemen?"

The thief smiled. "You are Harry Dresden. Warden Dresden. I'm a common thief. There is no way I can take you in a fight, and we both know it."

"I'm flattered," I said dryly. "And unconvinced nonetheless."

He held up one hand. "No, I assure you I am being completely sincere. I know when I'm outmatched. When you do what I do, you have to know when to fold 'em, as the expression goes."

Too late, I realized his hand was still in his pocket. "And when to cut and run."

He whipped something out and threw it at me. I'd been preparing my will into a shield since the minute I left the coffee shop. Some kind of object bounced off of it.

I only got out a shout of alarm as a portal to Nevernever opened up at my feet and sent me plunging down into darkness.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

The fallout of Harry's scrape with the jewel thief.

"Fucking portals," I snarled once I'd gotten the Way open, and had fought off an entire legion of carnivorous hawk-like creatures. "Fucking thieves. Fucking high priced jewelry."

I shook the mud off my boots as best as I could and took in my surroundings. Over time, I'd marked the different Ways that I knew of in the city so that if something like this happened, I could get my bearings and find my way home from there. I was on the east side of Chicago, and it was nighttime. My watch had stopped once that asshole dropped me into Nevernever, so I had no idea what time it was any longer.

"Just great," I growled as I stomped over to the curb and waited. After a bit, I managed to flag down a cab and ripped the door open.

The cabbie lifted an eyebrow at my livid expression. "Looks like you had one hell of a night, buddy."

"Tell me about it," I spat, and then gave him my address. The dashboard read the time back to me. It was half past ten o'clock. Great. Just great.

He took me back to the apartment and I stomped down the stairs, still grumbling mutinously.

I'd barely gotten the door open before Thomas shot around the corner, looking pale and worried.

"Harry?"

"Yeah, who else would it it be?" I growled once I'd gotten the door shut.

"Shit, man," Thomas said through his teeth. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Trying to catch some asshole thief. Punk threw me into Nevernever for my trouble, which probably means he's long gone by now."

"I've been looking everywhere for you," Thomas continued. "Murphy too."

I frowned at him. "Geez, man, I'm sorry, but I was busy. What's the big deal? I'm only a few hours late."

"Harry, that was two days ago."

I stopped dead. "What?"

"You were missing for two days."

I shut my eyes. "Oh, that's just perfect."

He ran a hand through his hair, his grey eyes serious. "Look, man, are you alright?"
I heaved a sigh and sunk into the couch. Mouse wandered over with a little whimpering noise and nudged his head under my hand. The steady warmth and familiarity of his fur helped a little. I rubbed his ears. "Yeah, I'm alright, Thomas. I promise. But I definitely blew it. Ten bucks says there's a voicemail about me losing the case."

I winced. "And I had a date."

Thomas blinked. "Oh. Shit."

"Yeah," I said, leaning my head back against the couch. "Shit."

The next morning was a good news, bad news, worst news scenario, if I ever saw one. The bad news was after he'd dumped me in Nevernever, the thief had waited an extra day while the confused and worried store employees tried to figure out why I'd gone MIA and then he struck, stealing the piece.

The good news was I recognized the thingy-ma-jigger the thief tossed at me. It was an item that, if fiddled with and enchanted properly, could grant a one way ticket to Nevernever for its user. I knew who sold it, and I used every ounce of my irritation to shake an answer out of him. The guy who sold it was a shifty low life who was basically a merchant to the sketchy parts of the magic community. Anyone who dealt with him had to watch out for a knife in the back. He'd sell you out in a heartbeat to save his own skin, and he did. He told me where he'd heard our thief planned to go once he nabbed the other part of the set, and that was all she wrote. I flipped to the legal side of things and called in a favor from Murphy, and she had some cops catch him on his way out of town. We recovered both pieces, and the client gave me a generous tip on top of what I'd already been paid, as well as a sincere apology for chewing me out in that voicemail.

The worst news was that I had to go see Lila.

I pretended that I’d waited until the afternoon to avoid bugging her during the lunch rush, but that wasn't why and I knew it. It took a lot to push the glass door open and see her standing behind the counter without that sunshine smile. Sure, she was smiling, but it wasn't the one I knew.

And it vanished the second she saw me.

Something cold and hurt flooded her features as she spotted me, and she said something to the young girl standing beside her before marching towards the blender, decidedly away from me.

"What can I get you, sir?" the cashier girl asked.

"I...need to speak to Lila."

She hesitated, glancing back at her boss. Lila didn't turn. "I'm busy."

Dammit. I stepped around the side until we were face-to-face, though separated by the counter. "Lila, please hear me out. Just for a second."

She turned the blender on. It was ungodly loud. Ouch. I sucked it up and tried anyway. "It's not what you think. I didn't stand you up. I was--"

The blender suddenly stopped and she glared at me. "I'm sorry, what did you just say? You didn't stand me up?"

"Not in that way," I said. "I went after the thief right when I left the other day, and he cleaned my
clock. I didn't get back until today."

"Really? You're gonna use that bastard as your excuse? Save it, Harry." She stomped towards the row of cups on the other side and I followed.

"I know what it sounds like," I said as earnestly as possible. "What it looks like. But you're the one who said don't judge a book by its cover, right?"

She slammed the cup down on the counter and barked, "Bryce! Order's up."

Then she glared at me again. "Do you know how many hours I work per week, Dresden?"

"A lot, I'd wager," I answered weakly.

"Yeah. A lot. So for me to take time to drive all the way home, get dressed up, and go to dinner with a guy I thought wasn't a complete asshole was a big deal. I don't change my plans for people. I made an exception in your case because you seemed different, but you're not. You're the same as these other sorry bastards who keep wasting my time."

Hell's bells. I'd really stepped in it. It wasn't just about me standing her up. If she'd been dating jerks for a while, I was just adding fuel to the fire. I'd been lucky for the most part. I'd been with women who genuinely cared about me, even if it didn't work out in the end. She didn't seem to have had that luxury. Maybe...she'd really been looking forward to going out with me. Maybe she'd worked up the courage to ask me out. Hell, maybe she'd never asked a man out before, and then the first guy she asks seems to run away, tail tucked between his legs. She didn't deserve that.

"Look, I'm not asking for another chance," I told her. "I blew it. I can't prove to you what happened, so I'm not going to ask you to believe me. You don't ever have to see me again after today, I swear, I just..."

I sighed and ran a hand through my hair, trying to find the right words. "I like you. A lot. And I wanted to tell you that I was sorry. You deserve so much better than you keep getting. You're...incredible. I apologize if I made you feel like you weren't."

For just a second, something other than disgust and anger peeked through her soft brown eyes. She hadn't been listening to me, not really, until now.

But it was only a second.

She turned away from me.

"Goodbye, Harry."

I let out the breath I'd been holding. The shop was unnaturally quiet, and so my defeated, "Bye, Lila" was all the more heard before I left.

I felt like crap for the next couple days. Thomas didn't pry, for once. He could tell I didn't want to talk about it, so we just played cards and went jogging together to get me out of my head. Didn't really work, but I appreciated the gesture.

On the third day, I dragged myself to my office since I'd been neglecting it and I was between cases, and I had a little filing to do. Busy work. Also good for getting me out of my head.

Just as I reached the front door, I heard a voice. "Wow. Still not a morning person, are you,
Dresden?"

I glanced up. Lila was leaning against the wall beside my office door, wearing sunglasses, and holding two paper cups. She had a big white paper bag tucked beneath one arm. She wore jeans and sneakers and a black t-shirt with the Flaming Lips logo on the front.

I didn't try to hide the smile as I walked up the steps to meet her. "Just not who I am, I guess."

She handed me one of the cups and the white paper bag. "Your usual."

"Thank you." I took a sip. She'd made me one of those yummy latte things. Score.

"So, uh, how's business?" I asked innocently.

She shrugged a shoulder. "It's a little quiet today. I decided to take some Me Time."

"Very wise decision."

Lila propped her sunglasses on her crowning glory and gave me a scrutinizing look. "Your speech was terrible, by the way. I've watched a million rom-coms and every single one of the 'Get You Back' speeches was better than yours."

"Sorry," I said. "I must be rusty."

"You are beyond rusty," she agreed. "But you weren't lying. That thing you said about intuition is true. Plus, there's this thing called fact-checking. I asked the owner if you busted the guy, and she said you did, so I figured odds were right that things just went sideways that day you left."

She straightened up a bit. "So here's the deal. I haven't liked anyone in a long time. But I like you. I want to get to know you. Maybe it'll work out and maybe it won't. I want to find out for myself. Sound good to you, Dresden?"

I smiled. "Sounds perfect."

"Good. Because since you busted that case while sitting in my coffee shop for a week, I'm taking some of your reward money."

My jaw dropped. "Oh, come on."

She arched an eyebrow and held out her hand. "Ten percent, Dresden. Cough it up."

I groaned and dug out my wallet, handing her bills. She giggled. "Wow, I was just kidding. You're really easy, Harry."

I blushed. Damn, she had a good poker face. "Then give it back."

"No way," she laughed, folding it and stuffing it into her back pocket. "Besides, I need it. We're playing hooky today."

"Wait, what?"

Lila batted her eyelashes at me. "You owe me a date, remember? I figure we'll start with the museum and then the park and maybe see if there's a ball game later."

That warm, sunny smile returned to her lips. "You game, Dresden?"
I couldn't help mirroring her as I leaned down to her height, tantalizingly close, as if to kiss her. "Sure. Know why?"

"Why?" she asked a little breathlessly.

"I like you...a latte."

She covered her mouth with one hand, but the laughter still escaped. "That is literally the worst."

"Yep," I said smugly. "Still got it."

I hadn't had a lot of good days recently.

But I had a really good day playing hooky with Lila.

Being a workaholic like yours truly, Lila had confessed there were a lot of landmarks in Chicago that she had never been to, so we picked our favorites and made a day out of it. We hit the Art Institute of Chicago first since she had a friend with a membership and then Navy Pier and then finished the day at Millennium Park before heading to dinner.

We traded questions about each other. She didn't pry too hard about me being a wizard, since she assumed I was merely being a smartass about it, but she did ask about my hand. I told her there had been an accident involving a fire, and she seemed interested, but didn't press me to show her, which I appreciated. She was extremely artistic like I had suspected; she painted and drew in her free time, went on morning runs at dawn, and she loved movies. The coffee shop had been a huge risk for her, but she enjoyed meeting new people every day and finding out their stories. She confessed her harsh initial reaction to the date mishap was indeed thanks to some bad boyfriends in her past.

As much as I hated to admit it, and I never would to his face, Thomas had been right. I'd forgotten the little simple parts of getting to know someone that were so enjoyable. Every accidental brush or stolen glance or fond smile reminded me that there were things I'd been missing lately.

After dinner, she called one of those Uber rides and we took it to her place first since it was closer, and that inevitable awkward moment arose. There had been small touches throughout the day, but nothing substantial. My stomach tossed around the steak I'd eaten as my thoughts chased each other, wondering if I should go for it or not.

"Well, I think you've finally gotten yourself back into my good graces for standing me up," she teased.

"Does that mean you'll give me my reward money back?"

"Think of it as paying a deposit on an outstandingly good date."

I chuckled. "Right."

I chewed my lip. "Really, I had a great time. It's been a while since I've had that much fun. Thanks for taking a chance on me, Lila."

"Well, you seemed like you were worth it," she said, lowering those thick lashes over her eyes. "And you still are, so far."

If we were in a Disney movie, this would be the part where the cartoon crab would be crooning in my ear "kiss the girl." She hadn't stepped away from the ride just yet, nor had she gone for her keys.
Those were good signs, right? Hell's bells, I was overthinking this too much.

In the end, I went with my gut. "Oh my, what's that on your lips?"

She blinked. "Huh?"

I leaned in and kissed her gently, drawing away enough to grin at her a little. "No worries. I got it."

Lila giggled. "You are by far the corniest guy I have ever gone out with, Dresden."

"Why, thank you."

She slipped her arms around my neck and pulled me back down, whispering, "You're welcome."

She kissed me. My eyes closed on their own and I let myself sink into it completely. Her lips were just as soft and full as they had looked when I first saw her smile. She smelled faintly of vanilla spice and I tasted honey in her lip balm. Her dark, loose curls brushed the back of my fingers as I cupped her cheek, soft as silk. I shuddered as her tongue grazed my lower lip and I nipped the edge of it, inviting her to taste more. She sighed wistfully as the kiss naturally deepened, and it wasn't until I heard the Uber driver clear his throat that I realized how heavily we were making out.

We both sent identical dirty looks at the driver, who cleared his throat and glanced back at his phone in sheepish embarrassment. He had a point, but still. He just hurt his chances of getting a good tip pretty severely.

"Try to stay out of trouble, Mr. Wizard," Lila said. "Because I'd like to see you again."

I grinned. "I'll do my best."

I gave her a little squeeze and kissed her again. "Night, Lila."

She flashed me that bright smile again and the darkness itself seemed to part in its wake. "Night, Harry."
Lila and Harry begin dating, but it is not without incident.

Lila and Harry begin dating, but it is not without incident.

Like Lila herself, ours was unforgettable.

She and I had been seeing each other steadily for about a month and a half. With her crammed work schedule and my penchant for getting into cases that got me beaten soundly or almost killed, we decided to designate Sundays as our date days. It was actually nice to have it be the same day every week. Something to look forward to, for once.

Things progressed nicely, in a steady fashion, which I happened to prefer. I took great care to ease her into the odd things about me and tried to explain them in a way that almost made sense. I'd told her I had condition where I just happened to short out most electronics due to static electricity build up and too many ions in my blood. She'd found it strange, but accepted it. Hell, she'd joked that at least it meant she wouldn't be getting booty call texts in the middle of the night. I assured her I could still call for one of those, and she slugged me. She has a frightfully good left jab, by the way, in case you were wondering.

She met Mouse last weekend, and it was love at first sight. Mouse immediately warmed up to her, and she threatened to steal him at least three times. We took him through the park for some exercise and spent most of the day there trying to run out all his energy. Spoiler alert: it didn't work.

It wasn't until I was dropping her off outside of her apartment that the inevitable conversation reared its head. I'd noticed that each time we left each other, the kissing got more and more involved, and I found it increasingly difficult to tell myself to let her go. Lila was more than just gorgeous; she had a sensuality to her that was effortless when we kissed. She could get me going in just a second or two, for God's sake, and it was very hard to stop afterward.

It wasn't until a random passerby laughed and called, "Get a room!" that I realized how intense the making out had gotten while we were still on the sidewalk next to the Blue Beetle.

I leveled a glare at the guy who'd said it, and Lila just giggled into my neck for an embarrassed second. "He has a point, doesn't he?"

"Not really," I grumbled, glad that it was dark enough that she couldn't see I'd started to blush a bit. "No law against PDA, last time I checked."

"Be that as it may, we probably should get off the street before this goes from PG-13 to Rated R," she teased. "And I have some ideas about that."

So did I. A lot of them. An entire encyclopedia of them. The primitive part of my brain vigorously
agreed that I should follow her up to her apartment, so I kicked it back until I could think straight. "Do you, now?"

Lila grinned mischievously. "We could always go parking."

I lifted an eyebrow. "Parking?"

"Oh, you know, what teenagers do: drive out to some secluded spot and get to second and/or third base. Don't tell me you've never done that before."

I chuckled. "I think it was called necking when I was a kid, on account of usually returning from said excursion with hickeys."

She laughed softly. "Right. Only problem is I think both your clown car and my Hyundai are too small with you being NBA-sized."

"Hey," I said, offended. "But also, yes."

"Just as well. We probably shouldn't anyway."

"Why's that?"

"Because I sincerely want to fuck your brains out."

My mind short-circuited for a couple seconds. I couldn't exactly recall if a woman had ever said that to me before, and I suddenly hoped I'd get to hear it again. Specifically from her. On repeat. For days.

But none of that got to my mouth. All I got out was, "Uh."

Lila's mouth quirked up playfully. "Sorry. I can be very blunt about certain things. And I wanted to see your reaction. It was as adorable as I expected."

She patted my stomach and softened her tone a bit. "I've been hanging out with you long enough to know you like to go slow. There's nothing wrong with that. I like it. The last schmuck I went out with barely even liked me as a person, and so it's good that you're not trying to rush into it."

She nibbled her lower lip. "That being said...yeah. I thought you might want to know that."

"I could stand to hear it again. Another hundred-thousand times."

Lila giggled. "I thought so. I figured we should just get it all out in the open to avoid any misunderstandings, I guess. Over a month is where it goes from just hanging out to spending actual time with each other."

"Well, let's get one thing straight," I said, linking my fingers over the small of her back so she'd stay leaned into me, all warm and soft and pretty. "It's reciprocated one-million percent."

"A million?" she snorted. "That sounds pretty dire."

"You have no idea," I said severely. "There aren't enough cold showers in the world, trust me."

"Well, I have *some* idea," she said in a sly tone, and her hips made a very wicked circular motion all of the sudden, and my brain threatened to short circuit a second time.

I gave her a little pinch and she yelped, squirming. "Behave."
She pouted, but kept still. "Fine."

"There's a reason I tend to take things slow," I said. "There is...a lot about me that you don't know yet, and it's still up to you to decide if you want to know. I sort of throw myself into relationships completely."

Lila searched my gaze for a moment, and then spoke softly. "You've been hurt before. Recently."

I tried not to wince. "Yeah."

She nodded. "I had a feeling. You sort of give off a 'once burned, twice shy' vibe. I don't want you to feel rushed. I haven't had this much fun in a while. You're a good man, Harry. Whatever it is that you're protecting me from, if you feel it's needed, then I have to respect it until you're ready to tell me everything, if you reach that point."

Something in my chest stung. This was the only downside to it all. There was just so much she didn't know. Part of me believed that I could keep my life separated. I wanted to believe that. I wanted to be with her, but I wasn't sure that I could or even should omit all the nasty little details about my life. It would definitely become a factor if I brought her back to my apartment, for instance. Trying to explain the ways of magic to a regular person--even one as sharp and open-minded as Lila--was a huge undertaking. Did I have the right to even show her these things? She'd be in danger if I brought her into my life any further than where we were now.

She seemed to see that I was struggling with it and she gave me a squeeze. "Hey, easy. I'm not asking you to make a choice right now, Stilts. It's just food for thought."

I nodded. "I know."

She gave me a reassuring smile. "Now kiss me goodnight, you giant Ent."

"*Lord of the Rings* reference?" I purred as I leaned in. "Mrow."

"Dork," she whispered before my lips met hers again. I took my time kissing her goodnight. Cat callers be damned.

After I finally found the self-control to stop, I let my lips brush her jaw on the way to her right ear. "And for the record, I'm definitely interested in that parking idea of yours. I'm a lot more flexible than I look...and I get the feeling you are too."

I let my hands slide down into the back pockets of her jeans and she shivered against me. I kissed the side of her neck and then released her with a secretive smile on my lips. "Night, Lila."

She cleared her throat, but I still heard a bit of a squeak in her tone as she tried to regain her composure. "Night, Harry."

She waved and headed towards her apartment building, and I caught the little weak-kneed wobble in her stride, chuckling as I climbed back into the Beetle to head home.

As a general rule, if your phone rang at 2am, it wasn't a good thing.

The phone clanged and shrieked me awake. I damn near went tumbling off my bed in alarm, but managed to cling to the side of the mattress before I could hit the ground. I gritted my teeth and glared at it mutinously, but I still reached out and grabbed the receiver, growling, "Hello?" into it as viciously as possible.
"Hi, Harry," Lila said in a too-soft voice. "Sorry to wake you."

I immediately opened my eyes the rest of the way. All sleepiness retreated. Something was wrong. It wasn't her words, it was her tone. She sounded...broken somehow. "Lila? What is it?"

"I..." She let out a small, shaky breath. "So remember how I was going to that Maroon 5 concert?"

I sorted through my jumbled thoughts. "Yeah."

"Well, I did. It let out at about one o'clock. I was heading back to my car and...and this drunk guy was following me."

An ice pit opened up inside my stomach. I sat up clutching the phone, my breath shallow as she continued. "Long story short, he caught up with me at the car and we..."

She took another shaky breath. "There was an altercation."

"Jesus Christ," I croaked. "Lila, are you alright?"

"I'm fine," she said in that same hollow voice. "He just shoved me around a bit. I had my pepper spray and I got him right in the eyes and he ran off. I called the cops and they took my statement, and then asked me to come downtown with them. The reason I'm calling is I'm at the police station now and I just..."

Again, I could hear her struggling to stay calm. "I don't know, maybe it all just hit me now, but I need someone here with me. Can you meet me here at the precinct downtown? I'm so sorry to ask, but my sister and my folks are in Baltimore and my bestie's out of town and--"

"I'll be there as fast as I can," I told her firmly. "Okay?"

"Thank you, Harry." She hung up. I hurled myself off the sheets and got dressed faster than I probably ever had in my life. Mouse had somehow sensed something was wrong; he was waiting by the door with his leash by the time I finished dressing. I didn't think twice; I just clipped it onto his collar and left the apartment as fast as wizardly possible.

I made it to the precinct in record time. Thankfully, I'd been working with Murphy long enough that I recognized some familiar CPD faces on my way in and they waved me through with Mouse on the pretense of him being a service dog.

Lila stood inside the bullpen near one of the desks, pacing slowly, shoulders hunched, hugging herself a little. She glanced up just in time to see me and Mouse, and she tried to smile, but it didn't quite make it all the way across her lips. "Hey, guys."

I pulled her into me. I wrapped her in my arms completely and let out a breath I'd damned near been holding since I got in the car. Lila hugged me right back, breathing in such a way that led me to believe she was trying not to cry. I shut out the rest of the precinct and concentrated on holding her, until I felt that tension leave her body. Then I kissed her forehead and drew away to have a look at her. "Are you hurt at all?"

She shook her head and then stooped to pet Mouse. My shaggy superdog licked her fingers and settled beside her, leaning his weight on her thigh. She smiled a little more and rubbed his ears as she spoke. "No. He was so drunk he could barely stand, after all. I'm fine."

"I thought you were going with friends."
"I did," she said, and then bit her lower lip. "But we parked on opposite ends of the stadium and I had to go back to my car by myself. I didn't want them to walk me there and have to go all the way back, not with all that damn traffic."

"Shit, Lila," I murmured. "I'm so sorry."

She offered a noncommittal shrug in return. "It was an oversight. They want me to work with a sketch artist. He's on his way in now. That's sort of why I..."

Lila winced and couldn't seem to finish the thought. "I'm really sorry, Harry. You shouldn't have to--"

I gripped her shoulders. "Lila, look at me."

She swallowed hard and guided her gaze up to meet mine. "Do not apologize for needing me after something this awful happened to you. Understand?"

She nodded. I guided her to sit and then dragged a nearby chair over. Then I held her hand and let her lean her head on my shoulder. Mouse curled up across our feet in solidarity. And together we waited.

Roughly an hour later, I left Murphy's work phone a voicemail about the incident to ask her advice and see if she had some pull to make sure the creep would get caught. The cops assured us that there was a good chance they'd get him with a sketch and a full description, and concerts required registration, so now it was just a waiting game. Through the whole process, Lila was quiet and unnervingly calm as she answered every question. It worried me, though, that she hadn't seemed to have cried during the whole hideous mess. I had the feeling she'd been holding it in, maybe to appear strong, maybe to avoid falling apart. It wouldn't be like her to become hysterical, but a subdued reaction to what had happened didn't bode well.

We walked outside of the precinct together and for once, the cool Chicago night was a relief. I breathed it in deeply and it helped even out my nerves somewhat. Then I turned to face Lila.

"Where'd you park?"

"One of the lots," she said, and then she winced again as she saw the time on her phone. "I should go. I have to open the shop in--"

"Lila," I said, frowning. "You are not going to work today."

She sighed. "Harry, it's my job--"

"Exactly," I said heatedly. "Which means it'll still be there in a couple days. Text one of your employees and tell them to open the store. You are not going in."

Stubborn lines crossed her forehead. "Harry, I told you, I'm not hurt."

"Lila, forcing yourself to work after something traumatic is a bad idea. I say that from experience. It sounds like a good idea, the distractions and whatnot, but it's going to make it worse. All day, you'll just be thinking about holding yourself together and you're just going to get more upset."

She started to protest, so I squeezed her hand. "I mean it. Take the day off. Just one. If nothing else, then you can get some rest."
She frowned up at me. "I don't like being told what to do."

I gave her a steady stare. "Lila, if I got my ass kicked by an assailant, what would you tell me to do?"

Lila opened her mouth, frowned harder, and then closed it. I just lifted my eyebrows. She rubbed her forehead in consternation, growling, "Fine, valid point. Alright, I won't go in. But don't you have to be at the office at eight?"

"Oh, I'm not going to work either. I'm coming with you."

Lila blinked at me, and Mouse wagged his tail. Somehow, he'd gleaned that he was going on another field trip. He was way too smart for his own good. "Harry, you don't have to stay with me. You've already done so much and I can't ask you to--"

"You didn't ask me anything," I said cheerfully. "I volunteered. Now where's your car?"

She peered up at me. "Has anyone ever told you that you're stubborn?"

I grinned and pointed at her. "Pot."

Then I pointed at myself. "Kettle."

She scowled. "Jerk."

I stooped and kissed her gently. "Yep. Lead the way."

Lila sighed again and glanced at Mouse. "Your owner sucks."

Mouse woofed happily. I eyed him. "Traitor."

Lila lived in a neighborhood of modest townhomes on the west side of Chicago. She had to buzz me in when I followed her into the parking garage. I felt a little better knowing at least her place had some form of security, since she lived alone and worked long hours. Her apartment was on the third floor off in the corner suite. I did my best not to act nervous. After all, it had been my idea.

She opened the door to reveal cream colored carpets and walls. Mouse immediately tugged me forward excitedly, sniffing just about everything he could. I took off his leash before he pulled my arm out of the socket and he wandered off on his own to inspect the place. It was a decent size, and she had good taste. There were warm colors of brown, gold, reds, and oranges woven into the decorations, and charcoal sketches in frames on the walls. The kitchen was to the right and the den was to the left, and straight ahead was the hallway to the bedrooms. She had a guest room slash office, she'd told me.

"The furball might be too big for my bed," she mused, watching Mouse make his rounds. "He can either sleep on the couch or in the guest room."

"He'll be fine," I said. "Right, Mouse?"

"Woof!" he said with plenty of enthusiasm.

Lila chuckled slightly. "Sometimes I really think he understands us."

"Wouldn't be surprised," I said as I took off my duster and hung it on the coat rack near the door. "Dog's smarter than I am."
"That doesn't surprise me," she said, and some of her usual teasing tone peeked through. I stole an arm around her and kissed her, stroking her cheek.

"When's the last time you ate something?"

"Before the concert," she said. "Not hungry."

"You should at least try to eat a snack. And shower. You smell like weed and bad pop music."

Lila choked on a laugh. "Wow, what a charmer."

I bumped her forehead with mine. "That's me, alright. Regular lady killer."

"Fine, fine. But you're still not the boss of me, Dresden."

She turned to go. I gave her a little swat on the backside. She gave me a playful glare before heading into her bedroom. I took a little tour around the apartment while she showered. The sketches were gorgeous. Abstract shapes and bodies in motion. Some of them had accent colors of red, yellow, and blue, but most were just black and white. Simple, but bold. I'd seen a few of them hanging on the walls in the shop, and they were just as good, if not better. She really was talented.

Mouse plopped down beside me in front of the couch and dozed off. It was the wee hours, and I didn't blame him one bit. My own eyelids started getting heavy by the time she emerged, freshly clean and sans makeup. I tried not to gaze for too long, but it was difficult. She wore a tank top and boy shorts. Her sienna skin gleamed under the lights, particularly those long, shapely legs. I'd always had a weakness for girls with pretty legs, dammit. Sue me.

Lila shuffled in place a bit and bit her lower lip. "So do you wanna sleep in the guest bedroom or...?"

She left it open-ended. It was unexpectedly shy of her, but she'd been through a lot and this was new territory for both of us.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked patiently.

She raked her hair away from her face, avoiding my gaze. "Well, it's just...I know this is your first time over and I don't want you to be...uncomfortable."

I walked over to her and said her name gently. She looked up at me, still nervous and unsure and hurting. "It's okay if you want me to stay with you tonight. I want to be here. There is nowhere else I'd rather be."

I cupped her cheek. "And it's okay to need me. Even if it's just for tonight."

She shut her eyes and touched my hand where it lay on her face, her voice hushed. "Okay. Thank you."

She lowered my hand, but kept it in her grip, tugging me towards her bedroom. It was spacious and neat. She had a Queen-sized bed with a plaid comforter and pale blue sheets beneath it. The blinds were drawn and there were blackout curtains, so the room felt cool and private. I shut the door and all that was left was a bit of light from the walk-in closet.

Lila squeezed my fingers before letting go and climbing into bed. I gestured to my jeans. "Do you mind if I--?"

She shook her head and I undressed to just the boxer-briefs and my t-shirt, then crawled in beside
her. She immediately snuggled closer, tucking her face beneath my chin, throwing one leg over my hip and molding herself into me as much as possible. I wrapped my arms around her, not too tight, but just enough that she’d feel safe, and started humming. I let one hand run up and down her back in slow, smoothing motions, and bit by bit, she relaxed into me. It was a while before she drifted off, but she did eventually, and I followed her not long afterward.

Chapter End Notes

*coughs* I AM A MAN! *punch* Seriously, this entire fic is making me realize what a total fucking sap I am and I need to punch something just to not feel so soft.
I woke up several hours later, utterly sure it was the first time I'd slept this long or this well in months, possibly years. I slipped out of bed with the slumbering Lila, walked Mouse and grabbed him some grub from the convenience store across the street, and then returned to Sleeping Beauty. She hadn't moved a muscle by the time I crawled back in with her, and she only stirred once my arms coiled around her again. She nuzzled my neck and kissed my chin as her eyes finally opened. "Morning."

"Afternoon," I said with a grin.

She lifted both eyebrows. "Really?"

"Oh, yeah," I said. "It's half-past noon, in fact."

She frowned. "I haven't slept this late since college."

I chuckled. "That's a shame. There are few things as nice as staying in bed all day long. Especially with a pretty girl."

A sly look entered her eyes then. "Done that often, have you?"

"Nope," I said. "Now's a good time to start, though."

"You won't hear any protest from me." She kissed me. "Thank you. For last night. I'm...not sure I could have held it together if you hadn't been there."

"You're welcome," I told her. "And you don't have to hold it together. Not on my account. Yours either. It's okay if you're scared or angry or anything, really. It was ten different shades of fucked up. I hope the son of a bitch rots."

She flashed me a little smile. "Are you always this overprotective?"

"It's a character flaw," I said wryly. "And I'm not overprotective. I'm just...concerned."

She snorted. "Potato, potahto, Dresden. Still, I guess you were right about me. I'm too trusting."

"Nothing that happened last night was your fault," I said. "None of it, Lila. Okay?"
She nodded after a moment or two. "Would you really spend the whole day in bed with me if I asked you to?"

"Damn right I would."

She smiled, and it was the smile I'd come to know. Thank God for small miracles. I'd do anything for that smile. I knew that now.

"You are so damn cute," I said, kissing the dimple in her left cheek. She giggled.

"Stop it, your scruff tickles."

A wolfish grin pulled at my lips. "Oh, it does, does it?"

"Oh, no, don't you dare--" She yelped as I buried my face in her neck and rubbed my chin across it, as well as her collarbone. She collapsed into helpless laughter and I peppered her skin with kisses in between until we were both giggling like idiots. At some point, the laughter subsided and I stared down at her, curls all disheveled, her smile bright in the faint afternoon light from the window, and realized I'd wanted this for a long damned time. Somewhere that the horrors of the supernatural underworld couldn't touch. Somewhere to...hell, belong, I guess. I knew I was supposed to be here.

With her.

She seemed to notice my sudden epiphany and she said my name very softly, in a tone I hadn't heard in a long time. She kissed me, gently, tenderly, almost cautiously as if she worried I'd break. I answered her kiss with my own, and it was long, slow, and completely consuming. Heat flashed through me. I heard her gasp slightly as I leaned into the warm, plush space between those shapely thighs of hers. She met my gaze, reading the hunger in my expression, and lifted her legs on either side of me. She rolled her hips up against me and I groaned quietly into her mouth, shuddering. Blood pounded through my ears as I rutted against her on the bed, slow, deliberate, kissing her the whole time. The friction drove me mad with want. She felt so soft underneath me. I could listen to her rushed breathing and little noises of arousal forever.

"Harry," she whispered. "I don't--mm--I don't want to rush you if you're not ready--"

"Trust me," I murmured. "I don't get more ready than this."

She licked her lips. My eyes followed the movement of her tongue closely. "Are you sure? Are you sure you want me?"

I caught her hand and lowered it between the two of us, letting her feel what she'd done to me already. "Does this answer your question?"

I kissed her throat, my voice low and hoarse enough to nearly be painful. "Yes, I want you. I've wanted you since the first time I laid eyes on you. You're so goddamn beautiful, and smart and funny and dynamic, and all I want to do right now is make you feel so good."

She pulled me up to her lips again and went after my shirt, yanking it up. Her fingers sent sparks of electricity down my chest. I pulled it the rest of the way off and peeled her tank top away, revealing so much smooth, luscious bare skin that I had trouble deciding where I wanted to touch first. She hissed as I licked and sucked a kiss mark into her neck and then traveled down to her collarbones, then to the center of her chest. I licked the spot between her breasts and watched her shiver underneath me with pride, and then slid my hands behind her back. The bra popped loose and I flicked it over one shoulder, taking a moment to drink in her naked upper body. God. Beautiful didn't even begin cover it.
She'd been squirming impatiently throughout, so I flattened my hand to her belly and held her down to the bed as I slipped her right breast inside my mouth. Lila exhaled quickly and wrapped her arms around my neck, moaning on every odd breath as I let my tongue circle her nipple. I slid my hand up and cupped her other breast, gently tweaking the areola enough to coax more cries out of her. I switched my attentions to the left one and lavished it with attention until she mumbled my name in that perfect tone like I was about to make her fall apart in my arms. Good. I wanted to do exactly that.

I dragged my palm down the center of her lithe frame and followed its wake with my lips until I hit the hem of her boy shorts. She stared up at me from underneath those wild tresses, panting wildly, shaking with anticipation. I smiled at her a bit wickedly as I hooked my fingers inside the shorts and pulled them off aggravatingly slow. She bit her lower lip and pressed her knees together, maybe out of sudden instinctive modesty.

"Lila," I purred in a sing-song voice as I ran my hands down her outer thighs.

"W-What?" she answered breathlessly.

"Spread your legs for me, Lila. I want a taste."

She shuddered. "Harry."

I drew my fingertips over her upper thighs and cooed her name again. "Let me taste you. I bet you taste so sweet, don't you?"

I lowered my lips enough to kiss her navel, and the soft, sensitive skin underneath it. She trembled under my touch and gradually parted her knees for me. She was wet already and my mouth watered at the sight of her naked and all mine at long last. I was going to savor every single second of this.

I lifted her legs onto my shoulders and pushed them further apart, holding my weight on my forearms. I slid my hands underneath her plump ass and gave it a little squeeze just to get another sweet moan out of her before I got started.

I drew my tongue along the outer petals of her at first, taking my time. She hissed sharply and tensed all over, her breathing stilted, her voice throaty. "Fuck."

A wave of pleasant thrills crawled down my spine. I'd definitely gotten off to a good start.

I explored her leisurely before journeying inward, and it was well worth the wait. Once I slid my tongue completely inside her, she arched up from the bed and moaned so loud I heard the frame on the wall behind us shake. Either she'd had selfish lovers before or it had just been a while for her; she was thoroughly enjoying herself. Couldn't blame her. So was I.

She rolled her hips up against my mouth, gasping, crying out for me as I moved back and forth in steady strokes. She gripped my biceps and squeezed, her head rolled back against the pillows, that beautiful body undulating as I licked and sucked and teased and tasted her again and again. Sweat beaded on her lovely skin before long and she whimpered my name in warning.

"Harry, please," she whispered. "Please, Harry, fuck, please, I'm so close."

I slid my hands from beneath her and pushed her legs further apart. I smoothed one hand down her stomach and let my thumb settle over her clit, and then rubbed it in small, tight loops. She arched up from the bed and soared into her climax with a sudden cry of "ah!"

She tried to close her legs on instinct, but my shoulders were in the way. She looked positively
appetizing as she reached her orgasm, and I helped her down from her peak one caress at a time until she stilled on the bed. I kissed her inner thighs and rubbed my stubble against them just for good measure, grinning as it made her fidget--she was ticklish for sure--and then licked my lips clean before I climbed up to meet her.

Lila swept her hair out of her eyes enough to give me an astonished look. "My God, you're an animal."

I shrugged. "I try."

"You succeeded." She shook her head. "God, that was...insultingly good."

I chuckled. "Thanks, I think?"

"Insulting to the rest of the male species," she clarified as she pulled me down to her again. "I've never--not once--come from getting head before. Holy shit, Harry. You should take this show on the road or something."

I laughed then. "Oh, is that what I should do?"

"Maybe that's how we fix your business cards," she mused. "We can call you the Pussy Wizard."

I laughed harder. "That's sick and wrong and also hilarious."

She grinned and kissed me. "I aim to please. Speaking of which..."

I didn't notice she'd rather stealthily lowered her hand to my boxer-briefs until her fingers brushed my stomach on the way inside them. She gripped my cock in her hand and I couldn't help the strangled moan of surprise as heat suffused my entire body at once. My breathing got ragged enough that she murmured my name.

"Easy, big guy," she said soothingly. "Relax."

"Sorry," I ground out. "It's...been a while."

"Well, you're not alone," she admitted. "But generally it ruins the experience if you have a seizure just from this."

I let out a weak laugh. "Right. Sorry."

"Stop apologizing, you dork," she chided. "And just enjoy it."

I had no qualms there. Lila had long, lovely, slender fingers, and she knew exactly how to use them. She had me purring in seconds with how she stroked me in steady, smooth motions. God, I'd forgotten how good it felt to be touched this way. She scooted a bit until she could reach me with both hands and I damn near lost it then once her other hand found me. It took everything in me to stay focused.

"Roll over," she whispered, but I shook my head.

"Won't last a minute if you do that," I told her. "Maybe later."

Lila chuckled. "Well, at least you're honest."

She nipped my lower lip to get me to look at her. "But you don't have to last, Harry. This is about both of us, remember? Not just me."
"God, you're killing me, woman," I groaned, and then I surged up towards her. I shoved the boxer-briefs the rest of the way off me and flattened her to the bed with my weight, my cock aligning with her slick heat at long last.

"May I?" I breathed against her lips.

Lila wrapped her arms around me, her breath shallow and excited. "Yes. I want you, Harry. So damn much right now."

Her permission had been all I needed. I sunk into her one slow inch at a time. And it was every bit as perfect as I'd imagined.

Lila's mouth fell open and her eyes fluttered shut. "Oh, fuck, Harry. God."

I concurred. Heartily.

Her satin skin rubbed against me everywhere, so good it was damn near overstimulating, to say nothing of just how phenomenal it felt inside her. Like sweet, slippery velvet on my cock. I shuddered once I'd come to rest as far as I could reach and diverted my full attention to staying in control. I'd truly forgotten. She was heavenly.

And I was going to worship her if it killed me.

Lila licked her lips and squirmed a bit to get used to me, sending pleasant thrills all down my spine, and then loosened her death grip on my shoulder blades. I'd been waiting for her cue.

I kissed her as I let myself fall out of her, nearly all the way, and pressed in again, still going slow, allowing her to adjust. One moment at a time, she relaxed against me and I heard the change from slight discomfort to genuine pleasure in her sounds. She went from tense, short breaths to slow exhales, and she let her thighs fall open completely to give me more room to move. I took full advantage.

I dropped my mouth to the side of her throat, licking and biting gently, and then sunk into rhythm above her. I withdrew nearly all the way with every stroke and then circled my hips each time I completed one, driving my cock just a bit deeper each time. I let the bulk of my weight rest on my forearms and it allowed me to stay flush to her curvy frame on the bed.

And apparently, Lila was a fan of that.

"Ah...ooh...mm, Harry, yes, holy shit..." she panted out in between breaths, her nails finding purchase along my back. I quickened my pace for a few thrusts just to test her and she writhed on the bed in the sexiest possible way, which only made me want to see even more reactions from her. I chased after her tongue and caught it, holding the kiss for a long breath as I rotated my hips atop hers. Lila mewled into my mouth. Boy, did I like that a lot.

I shifted enough to slide my forearms beneath her knees, lifting her legs on either side of me, and let gravity do the work of gliding my cock further than before with each thrust. Lila let go of me entirely and grabbed at the sheets frantically, her head rolling back against the pillows. "Oh, God, Harry, ah, yes, yes, yes!"

She tightened around my cock and then gripped my forearms as she climbed towards her orgasm, whimpering from the effort of holding out for so long. I chuckled at the very idea that she was trying to last longer when she'd been the one to scold me about it. So I decided to be just a bit evil.

"Lila," I whispered, letting my voice drop about as low as I could get it to go. She struggled, but
managed to get her eyes open enough to look up at me. "I want you to come for me, Lila."

She shook her head. "Mm, no, don't do that, you bastard, that's not fair."

I laughed quietly. "You're holding out on me, gorgeous. That just won't do."

I lifted her legs onto my shoulders, which effectively folded her in half, and she cried out, half in ecstasy, half in frustration as I pulled her down onto my cock harder and faster than before. On about the seventh thrust, she screamed my name and finally gave in to her climax. I'd seen a lot of beautiful, rare things in my time, but this was definitely up there with the best of them. Lila in ecstasy put everyone else to shame. She let go so completely. Her pleasure was intense and unapologetic, matching her personality. It was nothing short of fascinating to experience.

She drifted down from her high leisurely and I eased her legs back to the bed so she would be comfortable in her afterglow. She slid her arm up to cover her eyes and told me in a hoarse voice, "I hate you, Dresden."

I grinned. "Well, that's unfortunate."

"I mean it," she said, and her tone was somewhere between disbelieving and indignant. "Not once have I ever had a man work me over that good. You're pure evil."

"If only I had a mustache to twirl," I mused. She finally dropped her arm enough to glare at me.

"You are not allowed to weaponize your voice like that, dammit. That just ain't right."

My shoulders shook with the effort not to laugh again. "I'll make a note of that."

I kissed her, and despite her faux outrage, she didn't dissuade me. She sighed against my lips. "You're dangerous, you know."

"Mm?"

"You're thoughtful and protective and great at sex. A gal doesn't stand a chance against that."

Something warm bloomed in my chest at her words. "Is that right?"

"Yeah," she said as she ran her hands down my back, which felt amazing. "We definitely shouldn't have sex again. Then it's just a done deal. I'd be a goner."

"You're right," I said as my hand mapped the flat expanse of her belly until my fingertips reached her clit. I swept my fingers over it with loving patience. Her pupils dilated and her breathing quickened. "We should just quit, cold turkey, before this goes any further."

Lila hooked her legs around me and rolled me onto my back. "Good. I'm glad you agree."

She kissed me just as I slipped two fingers inside her. Her body rolled against me and I swallowed her moan, wrapping my other arm around her to keep her in place as I moved. She rode my hand to another shuddering orgasm and then she yanked me up to meet her as she settled over my lap. By now, I couldn't keep a cool head. We were both panting and grinding up against each other as the lust simply took over and called the shots. God, I wanted her.

She balanced carefully across my upper thighs and took me inside her. I fought not to squeeze her too hard in my arms as the pleasure spread through me like wildfire. She must have felt my restraint; she kissed me, hard, her thick lashes low over those dark eyes as she gave me a dangerous look.
"If you hold back on me, I'll kick your ass."

I choked on a laugh. "I don't take too kindly to threats, you know."

"It's not a threat. It's a promise." She widened the stance of her legs, and that one movement sunk her the last couple of inches onto my cock. I groaned before I could stop myself. "I want all of you. Show me."

Well, the lady had asked for it. Who was I to deny her?

I let my fingers rove into the silken ringlets of her hair and drew her head back. My mouth found the column of her throat again right before I lifted and dropped her onto my cock again. Lila hissed and clung to me, her voice triumphant. "Yes, Harry, please, don't stop."

For once, I didn't try to control myself or overthink it. I took her. I rocked her into me again and again, harder each time, faster each time, listening to the melody of her moans and the cadence of our bare, sweaty skin connecting. She met me thrust for thrust, riding me, her touch unafraid. I didn't realize just how rough we'd gotten until I heard the bedpost smack the wall behind us, but by then, it was far too late to slow down or stop.

Her fingers trailed up into my hair, running across my scalp, and she pulled me up to her lips, trembling in my arms. "Come. Come for me, Harry. Please come."

Shit, shit, shit, it felt so good, and I wanted to keep going, but there was just something about that honeyed voice and her soft lips and her luscious body that made me give in before I could stop myself. My hand slid all on its own down over the curve of her spine to her ass and squeezed it hard, pushing her down against my pelvis at just the right angle. She cried out for me, and I cried out for her, and we both went tumbling off the edge into the abyss together.

I didn't stir out of my sex coma until I felt Lila move. Apparently, I'd toppled over onto my side at some point. She laid her head on the inside of my arm and grinned at me as my eyes creaked open. "It wakes."

"You tried to kill me," I said accusingly, and she giggled.

"Hey, you tried it first, buster."

"Touche." I wound my other arm around her and dragged her to me, and she draped her leg around my thigh so we fit neatly together. She kissed my forehead and then my lips. I almost didn't hear her voice, it was so soft.

"All mine, aren't you?"

I smiled back at her. "Damn right."

Chapter End Notes

Harry Dresden deserves nice feelings and great sex kthxbye.
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