

A BOX OF STOLEN MOMENTS

THE FAE AND HIS MORTAL, BOOK ONE



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

CHAPTER 1



“Beautiful fairies dance in watery rings, Round the riverbed, whence Achelous springs.”

She should have known better than to follow the children through the heather fields that day. She was the adult, after all, though sometimes she forgot. Perhaps this was because when she was a child herself, frizzy-haired and doe-legged and with a future before her that seemed to stretch endlessly into a far-off horizon, she forced herself to get there too fast. While the other kids were gathered on the playground in clumps with their heads bent low over paper fortunetellers, Shiloh Rain LaValley, Lo to most, and then LoLa in the professional world, was out making her own future.

She believed in magic when she was young; of kingdoms under the sea, pots of gold at the end of a rainbow, and 100-year spells. But after her mother died, and she needed to morph very suddenly into an adult, she gave up such notions of mermaids and leprechauns and witches. Instead she traded them for more

modern enchantments; smudge sticks of sage to banish negativity, crystal jewelry to attract luck and wealth, salt lamps to charge the air, essential oils to incite things like clairvoyance and clarity and calm.

So when the children mentioned something about a fairy ring, Lo was irresistibly intrigued, and slipped back to that silly state of frivolous fancies where she only now finally allowed herself to linger at twenty-five-years-old.

“What’s a fairy ring?” She had a vague idea, but wanted their explanations in the way only children could offer; long-winded and unabashedly candid and full of tiny details adults would have disgracefully omitted.

The children did not disappoint, intricately depicting the circle of heather flowers stamped down by the dancing feet of fairies. “Come, come,” they beckoned her, reaching out to grab her hands. Lo did not have enough hands to go around, so they each took hold of a finger instead.

“Well, okay,” she acceded, giggling at their mirth, even though she was supposed to know better. “But let’s hurry so your parents don’t worry, and try not to mess up the clothes.”

She was shooting for a French children’s fashion magazine, *Ma Petite Bebe*, but they were on location in Yorkshire, England. Lo was American, and though she’d shot in Europe before; all over Europe, from the snow-capped mountains of Zurich to the sun-bleached white beaches of Sardinia, it still captivated her that a half-a-day’s travel could mean winding up in a different country. She dreamt of these days, back when she was young and skipped school to study the way light fell, and made friends based on how willing they were to model for her. But she never quite imagined it would have all come hurtling towards her so quickly. It was like falling asleep on a train, waking up at the destination without remembering the journey.

“Look here,” the children pointed out. They were modeling the autumn line, their fleece lined capes and leggings too warm for the

early September day, their faces ruddy with exertion from their romp through the fields. Lo lifted her camera and snapped a few shots. She worked best when her subjects didn't pose, preferring to capture the fluid, natural moments others might not have the patience to see.

"That must just be how the plant grows," Lo said, musing, as usual seeing the world through her viewfinder. The trampled heather did make a very unusual dark path in the gray-purple fields; more elaborate than a circle even, more like a maze, or a labyrinth.

"How would it grow all stamped down like that?" a very serious looking little boy demanded of her.

Lo smiled wryly. "Oh, I know," she said teasingly. "You're all playing a joke on me, aren't you? You danced on the heather yourselves! You're the fairies! You all are!"

This set off a cacophony of protests as the children swore they'd done no such thing. "Oh, you did!" Lo insisted, jumping on the fairy ring herself and throwing her body into the beat of an invisible tune. "Just like this! Didn't you?"

"My granny said you should never set foot in a fairy ring," a little girl with a head full of dark curls that would barely be contained beneath a wool-knit hat spoke with her large, worried eyes trained on Lo. "They'll come and get you and trade you for a changeling!"

"Oh, is that so?" Lo asked, delighted to be in the midst of a culture still so steeply rooted in superstition and folklore. "Well, we'll see about that. Come and get me, fairies! Come and get me!"

She whooped and threw her arms back as if offering herself, and the children laughed and joined along, forgetting their fears. Lo caught shot after shot of their animated faces lit-up in the purplish hue of the sun setting against the heather until she was satisfied with a job well done, and led the children back through the fields to their parents. Tomorrow, she'd be on a train to London, where she was shooting another fashion line for Prestige,

adults this time, who could be so much less fun. And then, back to the red rock mountains of Sedona, Arizona, where her Lucas would be waiting for her with bubble bath and incense and wine.

Except, when she went through her reel of shots, the photos were mysteriously overexposed, as if illuminated by a harsh white light from the ground. Lo scrambled back through the shots, but they were all ruined; complete garbage, junk. They'd have to reschedule the shoot, and though Lo knew she was revered enough in the photography world that everyone would be nothing short of understanding, she herself was horrified. This had never happened before. Not to her, not to *the* LoLa. She'd been one of the youngest photographers to ever be signed to a campaign, and was now a protégé in the world of fashion photography, her images plastering billboards in the biggest cities all over the world.

Her mind wandered suspiciously to the fairy ring, though she tried to tell herself it couldn't be so. She'd heard stories of photographers who'd captured otherworldly figures in their shot, a shadowy dark blotch in the shape of a human in the background, or a hazy white orb hovering just inside the frame. But of course this was much worse than that. If she'd actually caught the image of a fairy on film, the attention she would garner would mean the shoot wouldn't have been a total waste. But these photos were all unusable, ablaze in a blinding light that obscured the landscape and the children, showing only the outline of their forms. The type A personality in her wanted to cry.

Looking back on the event later, it wasn't like her to retrace her steps back to the fairy ring, and with her purse and phone in its bejeweled pink case left behind on a picnic table no less. Lo had always been the non-challenging kind, nervous at any sign of hostility or affront, who not only dutifully choked down the wrong meal when it was served to her at a restaurant, but committed to liking it. Her mother had instilled in her the benefits of having a positive outlook, and that it wasn't about the things that happened to her in life, but how she dealt with them. So Lo learned to turn

the other cheek when things didn't go her way, and try again wearing a smile on her face.

She knew going back to the fairy ring wouldn't restore her well-won photographs, but perhaps it could provide some kind of key to what went wrong. Even though her mother taught her to never focus on her problems, only solutions. That day in early September in the heather fields, Lo didn't listen to her mother's inner voice.

From the time she was a child, jotting furiously in her diary up on the roof of her family home that overlooked all the other identical roofs of the suburbs where she grew up, Lo felt a peculiar, manic, kicking sensation that was like something more trying to break its way outside of her. She had felt it so often, and so much, she hardly thought of it when she experienced it again in the fairy ring, discovering nothing sinister to it that might have ruined her pictures. Trailing the lengths of the inexplicably laid circles, she tried to come up with explanations in her head, like it could have been the way the sun hit the moors, or perhaps she was on top of an electrically charged current, but each explanation fell ridiculously short of all good reason.

The sun was nothing more than a red wisp of molten lava on the horizon now. A cool wind blew off the moors, and Lo was without her sweater and dressed only in a multicolored t-shirt and hot pink denim capris. She raced the darkening sky back through the fields of heather towards the parking lot, though suddenly became very lost. A faint, far-off sound filled her ears, pleasant and jarring all at once, like music she couldn't remember ever hearing before, but still sounded frustratingly familiar. It filled her head and senses, and for several moments Lo almost forgot the mission before her.

The parking lot, where the set director would be waiting with his car to take her back to her hotel. That's where she needed to go. She tried to remind herself not to forget, which for some reason was proving rather difficult, as if there were more pressing matters she needed to attend.

Lo tried to retrace her steps, but only succeeded in becoming more distressingly lost, making her confused and disoriented and frighteningly unhinged. Luckily, Lo was someone who often felt like she might be losing her mind anyway, so didn't think much of it now. Except, there should have been signs or markers guiding her way, and streetlamps dotting the air in the distance, and there was none of that now. Only the silvery, pale face of the nearly full moon was there to light her way, high in the sky despite the sun having just gone down.

Led by the eerily beautiful music that seemed at times to grow louder, just to diminish to the faintest of tinny instrumentals moments later, Lo told herself someone must be having a party. Any minute now she would stumble upon it, and there'd be people to offer her a phone or directions and maybe even something to eat. Lo was the type of woman who survived off nothing but yogurt cups and smashed avocado spread on flax crackers for days at a time, only to find herself ravenous all at once with the ability to devour several full meals in one sitting. It was one of those times now, but the moors of heather never gave way to streets or roads or houses as she hoped, but instead disintegrated into woods, darker than a vat full of motor oil.

When her emotions became too tightly stretched to make any reasonable attempts at an escape plan or a solution, Lo found there was nothing else she could do but collapse beside the cover of a gargantuan overturned tree, and sob into her arms until the well of tears inside her ran dry. Then, exhausted, she curled up as tightly as physically possible, and let the world of dreams steal her away from the dark.