



Her Lion Lover (Fated Mates of Mirror Academy #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Lily never expected to go to the ball...nor to catch the eye of the guest of honour, Leo King. But when the fairytale ends at midnight, she's forced to return home to her stepmother and stepsisters. Fed up with being forced to cook and clean for them, she decides to accept a job as a maid in another castle...where at least she gets paid, plus time off.

Leo King wants nothing more than to marry his fated mate, the girl he met at the masquerade ball. But when she disappears at midnight, he has no choice: marry a stranger, or lose his company to his uncle.

A marriage of convenience to his mother's new maid seems like the perfect solution...until his search for his fated mate leads him to the last place he expected to find her...

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ONE

Leo had no warning. A red laser beam shot out at random, arcing for his head. Leo ducked and weaved, following the beam as it hit a tree on the edge of the clearing. He leaped to make contact with the laser targeting dot before it blinked out of existence, only for it to reappear on the other side of the clearing, trailing along the ground like some harmless beetle.

Leo knew better, though. That red dot needed to die.

Plus, while he was chasing it, he didn't have to focus on everything else life demanded he deal with.

He leaped, somersaulted, planted both feet against the rough bark of a tree and launched across the clearing, catching the laser before it blinked out once more.

There! Up in the branches!

He had to leap, scrabbling for a hold before jumping for the next branch, ruthless in his pursuit until the dot skimmed from one tree to the next, almost too fast to track, but Leo kept after it anyway, even as the thin branches shuddered beneath him, threatening to throw him onto the ground below.

Instinct made him take a flying leap, an instant before the crack told him his branch was going down, but too late to take him with it. Leo was already well into the next tree, closing on that damned dot...

There! And...gone.

Leo grinned. This had to be the most exhilarating workout ever. It beat rock climbing, abseiling, skydiving and skiing. Snowboarding and kitesurfing came close, if only because both of those let him take flight from time to time, but he missed the thrill of the hunt. Now, spearfishing on a jet ski might compare...but no. It was one thing to use a weapon, and another entirely to use your whole body as a weapon...

The beam shot low this time, skimming off the leaves of a shrub before vanishing into the woods.

Leo climbed down until he was low enough to drop to the ground, landing on his feet, as always, before bounding off into the undergrowth after that elusive red dot. It had dodged between the gaps in the trees, so that it wavered on a particularly wide trunk, surrounded by impenetrable thicket. He could try to go under, but then he might lose it. Better to leap lightly over the undergrowth, trusting it to support his weight while he never lost track of that damn dot...

Behind him, something trilled, the sound growing louder with every second.

Damn, his alarm. His workout time was up.

The momentary distraction was enough to make him lose focus, crashing through the spindly shrub to the ground below. Getting out cost him a good two minutes, but the shrub definitely got the worst of it by the time he emerged, a little scratched, but still triumphant.

He padded over to his laser cat toy and shifted so he could shut it off. He didn't want the batteries going flat mid workout. Only then did he cross the clearing to where he'd left his phone, so he could shut off that pesky alarm.

He couldn't believe he'd been working out for an hour. It had felt like only minutes, but he couldn't wipe the grin off his face, it had been that good. Almost better than sex.

Which he should be getting more of, if only he had the time, and the inclination, to find a woman worth taking to bed.

As if on command, his phone chimed again with a message. His mother, of course.

Good luck in today's board meeting.

Of course, Mum would never be so condescending as to come out and tell him not to forget about the meeting.

His uncle, however, who'd sent him a message twenty minutes ago, had no such scruples.

Board meeting at 6pm sharp. Don't be late.

That didn't sound right. Board meetings were always right after lunch, and over by six, so everyone could head home for dinner.

Leo checked his schedule. Yep, 1pm, not six. He wondered what his uncle was playing at this time. Surely he wouldn't be stupid enough to give Leo the wrong time so he'd miss the meeting? Leo wasn't quite sure what to make of his uncle, who was his dad's older brother. They'd always gotten along fine while his dad was alive. Now, though...

Leo made a note to ask his assistant about the board meeting. She'd know the schedule better than anyone, and if his uncle was trying to cause trouble...well, Leo would be prepared.

No worries at all, he told himself as he headed into the house for a quick shower. Soap, shampoo, spray, and he was soon towelling himself off, before buttoning himself into one of his tailor-made suits.

Sometimes he went into the office in something more casual, but something told him today he'd need a bit more formality to remind the board that he, and not his uncle, was their CEO.

Leo snorted. He was willing to bet his ageing uncle couldn't catch a red dot even if it was targeting his own saggy arse. In the board meeting, his uncle wouldn't know what hit him.

No worries, he told himself as he climbed into his car.

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TWO

Lily surveyed the almost empty cafeteria. She'd finished sweeping and mopping most of it, except for the corner where two girls still sat, heedless of the fact that the cafeteria had closed.

Finally, one of the girls rose.

"I'll need another coffee if I'm going to be dancing all night at the ball," Anna said.

Elsa's eyes lit up. "Ooh, get me one, too, while you're up. Only make mine an iced coffee, with extra ice cream on top."

Lily considered telling them the soft serve machine was turned off, but decided they'd learn that for themselves soon enough. They'd probably only ignore her anyway, like they had the last two times she'd told them they were closed, and that it was time to leave. Sadly, the coffee machine stayed on all day and all night, because even at a prestigious college like Mirror Academy, some students pulled all-nighters when they'd left things to the last minute.

If these two were going to be sticking around, Lily might as well empty the mop bucket and knock off for the night. She could come in early tomorrow, before breakfast service started, and finish the job then. It wasn't like she'd be going to the ball tonight, drinking and dancing the night away.

Lily couldn't remember the last time she'd gone dancing. It must have been before her father died. She hadn't exactly been in the mood for dancing for a while back there,

and by the time she'd gotten over her grief enough to consider dancing again, she hadn't had the time or energy for it.

She could dance after she graduated.

Balls were for the girls who were at the Academy to catch a rich husband, like Anna and Elsa, or their mysteriously absent bestie, Candace. They certainly weren't studying computer science with any intention to graduate or work in that industry. No, they'd both made it very clear they had only chosen that course so they could meet rich tech husbands who'd provide for them to live the life of socialites and influencers, without having to work a day in their lives.

Lily couldn't imagine living like that. She'd enrolled at Mirror Academy because of their women-only engineering program, knowing she had a job waiting for her the moment she graduated.

In the past, she'd attended the balls, but not for the same reason as Anna, Elsa or Candace. She'd gone to dance and blow off a bit of steam, enjoying herself for a few hours before she went back to school.

Since her dad had died, though, she no longer had the money to spend on ballgowns or fancy shoes. In fact, she'd had to sell all the ones she already had, to pay her tuition fees. Working in the cafeteria earned her free room and board at the Academy, plus a small salary that covered the cost of her books.

She was so close to the end...

But it wouldn't do to celebrate early. Sure, she had a night off work, as all the students would have dinner at the ball, but that didn't mean she could be lazy.

Instead, she'd be taking advantage of the cafeteria's early closing to finish off her final

project. A project that was supposed to be purely theoretical, and as far as her lecturers knew, it was, but once she graduated, her plan would become reality. Well, possibly with some changes, depending on planning approval conditions, what the client wanted and any other speedbumps they encountered along the way.

If she just knew more about the power storage system...

A shrill scream jolted her out of her daydream.

Lily bolted back to the cafeteria.

"You can't just let it go like that!" Anna wailed.

"Well I don't see what else I can do. It's not like I can hold it back and I definitely can't keep it in! There's way too much for one cup!"

"Quick, let's go before someone sees!"

Lily arrived just in time to see the back of Anna's coat as they fled, leaving a trail of frosty footsteps all the way from...oh, fuck.

For the second time that afternoon, she shut down the soft serve machine. Much, much too late, as the sugary, milky mixture had overflowed the coffee cup sitting beneath the spout, before flooding the bench and forming a spreading puddle on the floor below.

Lily swore. She knew Anna and Elsa weren't exactly tech wizards, but they should have learned enough computer science to know that turning something off and on again often made it work. Of course, computers usually weren't filled with dairy or the hot sanitiser solution they used to clean the soft serve machine at the end of the day.

Normally, she'd stick a bucket under the spout when she drained the tank, to catch the frothy blue milk. There was no point doing that now. Better to fill a mop bucket with hot water and soap instead, because she had two sets of blue footprints to clean up, plus the entire flooded coffee bar, before she could clock off for the day.

Nothing good ever came from blue milk.

Lily sighed. The sooner she finished her project and graduated, the better.

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THREE

Leo grinned as he greeted everyone on his way up to his office that morning, from Larry, the night security guard at the front desk, through to his personal assistant, Catrina. Everyone else had mostly smiled back or wished him a good morning, but Cat squinted at him suspiciously. "What's her name?"

Leo stopped dead. "Who?"

"The name of the woman who put that dopey grin on your face. Was it a reporter at the Times ? Is that why you made the front cover?"

"I'm on the cover of today's newspaper?" Leo couldn't imagine why. He hadn't done anything particularly noteworthy lately.

Cat handed him the folded newspaper. "You're up to five thousand messages this morning already, and your personal inbox has crashed the office email spam filter twice. You can't imagine all the things I've seen, and it's only eight in the morning. So please tell me her name, so I can send her the bill for a lifetime supply of brain bleach." She coughed. "Oh, and congratulations on being named Times Bachelor of the Year, I suppose."

Leo unfolded the Times . At least it was a good shot of him. He dropped the paper back on Cat's desk. "My good mood is entirely because of you, and the best Christmas present any personal assistant ever got their boss in the history of...well, everything. I am officially in love with the Felix 5000."

Cat laughed. "It took you this long to try it out? I told you it was the best. My teenage sons can't get enough of it, and I've even caught my husband playing with it. Much more convenient when you can work out in your own backyard instead of venturing out in the woods where some conservationist might try to catch you for breeding purposes." She shuddered.

Leo shook his head. "That's what you get for being an endangered species. At least when someone sees you in the forest, they don't come at you with tranquiliser guns. Those things seriously sting, and even if you can shift and take the dart out in time, you're still out there, naked in the woods, which takes some explaining."

"Well, after this morning's cover story, I'm sure there are at least five...no, now it's six thousand single women who'd be happy to camp out in the woods near your place in the hope of catching a glimpse of you naked, so I'm sure it's best for everyone that you can work out at home." Cat glanced at the screen again, shuddered, and raised her head to meet Leo's eyes. "And if you like that, wait until you see what I've got you for your birthday." She winked.

"Any chance you'll give it to me early? Or maybe even just a hint? I have a board meeting today. I could do with a distraction." Leo turned his best persuasive kitty eyes on Cat.

Of course, being a Scottish wildcat shifter herself, she was immune. "Not a chance. Your birthday's not long to wait. Besides, you'll need something to look forward to after the board meeting. I've already ordered all your favourites for lunch, so you'll be raring to go when the meeting starts at one. Jeremy's had Shenzi asking me for daily updates on the Hea Sanctuary project, and I haven't had any news to give her. If you ask me, I think Jeremy knows something we don't, and he'll surprise you with it at the meeting. If you want to make some phone calls this morning, I've cleared your schedule. Just don't tell me what you find out until after I see Shenzi tomorrow. That way I'll have plausible deniability when she tells me everything she heard at the

board meeting."

Leo bowed low. "You are the epitome of assistants, the world over. What did I ever do to deserve you?"

"Yeah, just as long as you remember that, come Christmas bonus time. My kids saw there's a mouse plague in Australia right now, and they're begging to go there for our next family holiday. Flights to Australia are not cheap."

"Don't they have kangaroos there, too? I heard they're a challenge to hunt, and good eating, too."

Cat grinned. "You've been talking to my husband, haven't you? Ever since he was a boy, he's wanted to catch and kill a kangaroo, because apparently they taste like venison."

He had not heard that before. Maybe he should take a holiday in Australia. After Cat and her family got back, of course, so she could book him into all the best places to go.

"Phone calls first. You can think about holidays after the board meeting," Cat reminded him.

The woman was a mind reader. One who definitely deserved a big Christmas bonus.

"On it," Leo promised as he headed into his office and closed the door.

He ignored his emails and went straight to his contact list.

"Council Planning Office, this is Ed."

"Ed, my favourite planning officer," Leo began smoothly. "How are planning approvals going for you these days?"

Ed grunted. "King. I've been expecting a call from you, wishing I had good news so I could call you first. But if wishes were fishes..."

Leo laughed. "Yeah, we'd all be dining like kings on fresh sashimi, every night of the week. What's the hold up? Your office is the most efficient in the country. I could set my clock on how quickly you process development applications, your system has been such a smoothly run machine. At least until now." Leo paused. "What's gumming up the works?"

"Not what, but who," Ed gritted out.

"Ahhh." Leo knew the problem couldn't be Ed and his team. "Who have I pissed off this time?"

Ed laughed. "Oh, I doubt it's anything you've done. Councillor Clyde doesn't even know you exist. Or anyone who isn't Craig Tremotino. For years, he's mostly slept through council meetings, happily voting for anything that crosses his desk. Until this new Tremotino village project appeared. Now, he can't shut up about it. Every tiny detail he disagrees with, even when the plan's been revised a dozen times, it's still not good enough. He says if the heritage assessment is dodgy, then there's no telling what else might be wrong with it, so we have to check everything, then ask the project manager for a new plan, before taking a fine tooth comb to that, too, until the next council meeting, when he picks the new plan apart all over again..." Ed coughed. "It's driving everyone mad, but he's argued so loud and so long, now he's got some of the other councillors on his side, or at least willing to sit back and see how long he can keep this up, and he refuses to let the meeting discuss any other project until this one is either approved or dead in the water."

Interesting. If Tremotino could provoke such a strong reaction in a man who normally didn't care about anything, he was definitely someone to watch. The real question was whether he was someone to go into business with, or avoid entirely. Much like Blaze Argyros. The man was a glorified gardener, but what he didn't know about archaeobotany wasn't worth knowing. Not to mention his family had records dating back to before the conquest, so Leo had learned that bringing him in on potential heritage sites as a consultant was well worth his substantial fee.

A fee he'd reduced significantly to work on Hea Sanctuary, because he believed in the project as ardently as Leo.

"Any idea when he'll get bored and let the councillors discuss other projects again?" Leo asked.

He could almost hear Ed shrug. "When I know, you'll know. That I can promise you." He sighed. "If Councillor Clyde would just break his leg or something and be stuck in hospital or even just an elevator for the next council meeting, life would be so much easier. He'd only have to miss one meeting, and we could get rid of the entire backlog of projects. Not that I wish anything bad to happen to Councillor Clyde. He's always made sure we have the best food at the council staff Christmas party. Other councillors have tried to cut costs, but he won't hear of it."

"And you and your staff deserve it, I'm sure, what with all the hard work you do. I'd take your whole team out for lunch any day of the week to show my appreciation, but with the rules and regulations on what the government considers corruption, I wouldn't want to impugn your good name. If you ever choose to resign, though, the offer's still there."

Ed laughed, though it sounded forced. "When I retire, I might just take you up on that offer. But not before."

"It's a date. You know how to contact me. If you want that lunch, or if Councillor Clyde caves and Hea Sanctuary finally makes it onto the agenda. Whichever comes first."

They ended the call, leaving Leo with even more questions than before. He considered calling Shaw, the developer on the project, but he probably wouldn't know any more than Ed had already told him. What he needed was the equivalent of the village gossip, and in this industry, there was only one man who knew all the gossip.

"Roy Raiden, consulting engineer. How can I help?"

Leo grinned. "You can tell me why Councillor Clyde hates Craig Tremotino."

Roy let out a breathy chuckle that ended in a cough. Roy swore he'd die with a lit cigarette in his hand, and he wouldn't stop smoking until then. "Is that Leo? You're not usually interested in idle gossip, even when it's about your pet project."

"So you do know about the beef between them?"

"It's not beef so much as money. If the rumours are true, Clyde owes Tremotino quite a lot of money, and he doesn't want his wife to know."

That made no sense. "So why does he hate him, then? I would have thought he'd be doing his best to suck up to him, not make him public enemy number one."

"Oh, it's a fun one, this story. You see, Tremotino owed Clyde a favour, so when Clyde's new mistress wanted to cruise the Mediterranean in a yacht, Clyde asked Tremotino. Tremotino called in a few favours of his own, and got him the yacht, which Clyde promptly ran aground and sank, leaving Tremotino with a hefty rescue and repair bill. Now Clyde owes him the money, but can't risk his wife finding out about his mistress or the pleasure cruise, so he has to route the money from his secret

offshore investment accounts, which is taking some time. Time he's spending in Tremotino's pocket, furthering the man's agenda."

It still didn't make sense. "How is delaying Tremotino's project doing him any favours?" Leo asked.

"Well, Tremotino's other pet project got put on indefinite hold thanks to some do-gooder by the name of Blaze Argyros. You might have met him, seeing as he's one of the contractors on your Hea Sanctuary project."

"He is." Leo knew better than to give the old gossip any more information than he needed.

"Well, Tremotino is the sort of man who holds a grudge. And when he saw an opportunity to take an eye for an eye on one of Argyros's projects, he took it. Putting your project on indefinite hold, if I'm not mistaken."

"Son of a hatchet-faced harpy," Leo swore.

"Ah, so you've met Tremotino's mother. I think she lives on a tropical island somewhere now, all alone. I might have to look her up, now I'm retiring. Feisty lady, for sure."

"You're retiring?" That shouldn't have come as such a surprise, yet it did. Roy had been in the industry forever. Dad had always said Roy would probably die at his desk. Yet his father was the one who'd done that, and Roy would go on to retire at the beach house of Tremotino's mother.

"Yep. I figured it's about time. I only hung on because I agreed to sub in for Verre while they're on hiatus, but rumour is they'll be up and running again in a matter of months, well before your Hea Sanctuary gets council approval. You don't need me

any more, and I think I'm overdue some cocktails on a beach."

Weren't they all? Leo couldn't remember the last time he'd had a holiday like that.

"Enjoy your retirement, Roy. I take it my invite to the party is in the post?"

"No party. No point. I always wanted to ride off into the sunset, and now's my chance."

"I'll still send over a retirement gift. You can't ride off into the sunset without a proper hat. I'll make sure it's on your desk by Friday."

"Meanwhile, you make sure you have a happy birthday. Tremotino's been boasting that you'll be the guest of honour at his ball. Might be a good opportunity to talk to him about your project, and see what it'll take for him to focus his attention on something else."

Leo tipped an imaginary hat to Roy. "Will do. What will I do without you?"

Roy let out a hacking laugh. "Same as your father, I'm sure. Ask for my advice, then ignore it and do your own thing. I'd tell you to drop this Hea Sanctuary thing. With all the bad luck and delays, write it off as a bad debt and give your time to the projects that aren't cursed."

"It's not cursed. It's just...delayed, that's all. Blue sky projects like this one are a risk, but the good kind of risk, where they take on a life of their own. I want to be there to see it take its first breath, so to speak. I have a really good feeling about this one, Roy. You'll see," Leo said.

"Just like your dad. Keep building things until you can't any more, then leave a legacy, preferably with some offspring to pick up the baton. Like your dad and Verre did. There are worse things in life." Roy sounded wistful now.

"Have a cocktail on the beach for me, Roy."

"Will do. Good luck with your cursed project, King."

Fairytales and curses didn't exist, Leo told himself as he ended the call. But Hea Sanctuary would exist, if he had to burn Tremotino's petty vendetta to ash to do it.

FOUR

"Between easily avoidable project delays, plus the retirement of our main engineering contractor with no replacement in sight, you're evidently too busy posing for photos for the front cover of the newspaper to bother doing your job. You're not fit to be our CEO any more. I propose the board strip you of your status, so you can go back to tomcatting around the country, and appoint me in your place as the new CEO of Pride Holdings," Uncle Jeremy said.

Leo raised his eyebrows. "Short of bribing the council, which is illegal, I might add, I don't see how the delays to the Hea Sanctuary project could be avoided. Our main engineering contractor is and has always been Verre Electrical Engineering, and while we have been working with Roy Raiden who kindly delayed his retirement plans as a personal favour, I have it on good authority that Verre will shortly be coming off hiatus, which is why this afternoon I wished Roy well in his retirement. In fact, I've been so busy working today, I haven't seen the front cover of today's paper. Does anyone have a copy?"

Shenzi slid the folded paper across the boardroom table.

Leo made a show of shaking the paper open, before taking a good, long look at his own cheeky grin. "I remember this photoshoot. These were taken months ago, when the Times interviewed me about stepping up to take Dad's place as CEO. They've taken quotes from the interview, but they're completely out of context. Whoever put this together should be writing pulp fiction, not articles for the Times ." He dropped the paper into the recycling bin, forcing himself to feign a calm that belied his furiously boiling insides. "So, unless you all agree with my weird uncle and you'd

prefer to see me strip and take up pole dancing, instead of dealing with the business of this board meeting, the things that actually keep Pride Holdings profitable, can we go back to the actual agenda?"

Leo maintained his professional demeanour through the meeting and all through the drive home, but it took all his remaining self control not to claw the door off its hinges when he got home.

Mother was in the dining room, reading on her tablet. "Bad day at work?" she enquired.

"It was fine until that bloody awful board meeting. Has Uncle Jeremy always been so unhinged?"

Mother sipped from her wine glass. "Jeremy has always envied your father. Anything your father had, he wanted one, too. He married his first wife less than a year after I wed your father, and he insisted on being given a job in your father's company as soon as he graduated. What did he demand this time? Your father's controlling shares in the company?"

Leo snorted. "Not yet, but I'm sure he's working up to that. No, today he tried to get the board to give him my job. When they didn't, he spent the whole board meeting making snide comments about every small thing going wrong with each of the projects we discussed. Telling them I'm unreliable. I take too many risks. I'm leading them into ruin. When we're the most profitable we've ever been, even with the delays to the Hea Sanctuary. All because the bloody newspapers decided to name me their bachelor of the year."

Mother set her glass down. "Well, you know the solution to that, don't you?"

Leo drew a blank. Maybe he'd worked too much today, or spent too much energy on

his morning workout. All of Dad's careful training, all he'd learned in his business degree, none of it gave him the answer Mother evidently thought was so bleeding obvious.

Leo sighed. "No, Mum, I don't."

Her expression tightened for a moment, that he'd lapsed into using Mum instead of Mother, but she didn't mention it. "Show the board you're a family man. Find a wife and get married, like your uncle."

"I don't want to get married to some stranger. I want to wait until I meet my fated mate, like you and Dad did," Leo protested.

"Not everyone finds their fated mate, and not everyone has the fate of a huge company fall into their hands at such a young age, either. Leo, you've always been destined to step into your father's shoes, and being the boss means making the hard decisions. Your uncle has always wanted what your father has. He's been making passes at me for years, including at your own father's funeral. No matter how many times I turn him down, he keeps coming back because he believes he's entitled to everything your father had. Which includes his company. You're going to have to choose which means more to you: waiting to find your fated mate and marrying her...or forgetting about that, and choosing someone less than perfect for you, to keep control over your father's company. You're younger than we'd hoped, to have to face such responsibilities, but if you want, you can choose to walk away from the company. From your father's legacy, and all that he's built. You'll still have your shares in the company, and this house, and you could travel the world, searching for your fated mate. You might never find her, but if that's what you want..."

"Uncle Jeremy would trash the company. He's too conservative, but he's also not business minded. He takes on projects that appear perfect and low risk on the surface, but he's blind to the undercurrents that make them poor bets. He doesn't do his

research. If I resign as CEO, my shares would be worthless within a year. Maybe less. And Dad's dream, the Hea Sanctuary, would never be built. I can't leave, Mum. Dad would never forgive me."

Mother sighed, her smile sad. "I knew you'd say that. You've always had so much passion, so much heart, but you're so responsible, too. Like your dad and I never were, at least until you were born and we had to consider providing for your future. The Hea Sanctuary was his vision for you, and for our grandchildren."

Leo shook his head. "I'm not having children with a woman I don't love. There's a mate out there for me somewhere, I know it. I just...haven't met her yet."

Mother's smile widened. "Well, I might be able to help you with that. I can't promise you'll find your mate, but we can improve your chances. Mirror Academy has an almost mythical reputation for matching fated mates, and it just so happens that their students will be attending a fairytale masquerade ball at Tremotino Castle on your birthday. You've been invited as the guest of honour, and I think you should attend. Who knows? You might just find yourself a wife, or, better yet, your fated mate."

Yes, he'd heard the stories. The girls from Mirror Academy were whispered about as being the most likely candidates for being fated mates, but Leo had no idea how that was even possible. Unless there was a witch, or some sort of spell cast over the girls to send them straight to their soul mates, it seemed far too far fetched for his logical brain. More like the stuff of magic and fairytales than reality.

But the ball was at Tremotino Castle...where Craig Tremotino would certainly be, and Leo would be able to ask him about his petty vendetta, and maybe even persuade him to let the matter drop so the Sanctuary could get back on track.

"All right, Mother. I will go the ball," Leo said.

Mother beamed. "I'll message Cat, to make sure she has your costume ready."

And with Cat on the case, no way would he be able to back out, even if he wanted to.

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FIVE

Lily's legs ached as she dragged herself upstairs to her room, wishing for what had to be at least the hundredth time that she'd still had a room on the same floor as the other students, instead of two storeys up, in the attics where the other staff slept. The small rooms with low ceilings, along with the shared bathrooms at the end of the hall, marked the former servants' quarters for what they were, as opposed to the spacious, ensuited guest quarters that had been converted to house students. Fortunately, the headmistress had thought to install heating in the staff bedrooms, making the Scottish winters bearable, at least when the heating worked, seeing as the systems looked at least half a century old, if not older.

Even with summer approaching, she wouldn't have been able to sit at her desk most nights, like she did now, working on her project as the hours slipped past until bedtime.

There. Done.

Lily sat back, surveying her work. Everything was finished. The village, the utilities systems, even the concept elevations looked ready to go.

She just needed to check all the numbers and...ah. She knew she'd forgotten something. She'd calculated the energy output from the wind, solar and hydro systems, building in plenty of extra capacity for the village's predicted peak energy use, but the energy storage system specifications were missing. No, the entire system was missing. In her plans, it was still a black box, with no details other than the storage capacity it would have to have. Which couldn't be right, because you couldn't

possibly fit that many lithium battery cells safely in that space, especially not so close to houses or the community centre.

Lily leafed through her notes. She had to have something on the battery system. Anything...

In the end, she found it in her emails. An email from when her dad was still alive, no less. She'd asked him to check her calculations about the lithium battery system, and he'd said she should think bigger and brighter than lithium. There was new, safer technology that they'd be using for Hea Sanctuary, and he'd send her the specifications as soon as he was allowed to release details about it. All he could tell her was the size and capacity, until Eirwen Energy, the company who made the system, made the details public.

Lily wiped away a tear. Dad hadn't lived long enough to receive or send any such details. She'd been so busy working and studying, she'd probably missed any public announcement Eirwen Energy had made since Dad died.

So she ran a search of the news sites, to see what she'd missed. Nothing about Eirwen Energy, or any breakthrough in battery technology at all. The only newsworthy item on any of the sites that caught her eye was the handsome, grinning face of Leo King, the newly crowned Times Bachelor of the Year.

Even Lily wasn't immune to that gorgeous grin. She'd met him once, too, seeing as he was one of the project managers for Hea Sanctuary, and he'd visited her dad's office when she was there on prac. Of course, Dad had hustled her out of Leo's sight as quickly as possible, as the man's tomcat reputation made him want to keep his daughter far away from the confirmed bachelor. Lily snorted. Evidently Dad hadn't known that was code for the guy being gay. Yeah, a guy that gorgeous and unattached probably was gay, and so full of himself, no one was good enough for him.

Of course, that hadn't stopped her fantasising about him on the odd occasion, at night in her own bed, where no one would never know...

If everything went to plan and she did graduate in time to take over Verre Electrical Engineering in her dad's stead, she'd have to see him regularly, and even work with him. Good thing it had been years since she'd fantasised about him. Otherwise she'd never be able to look him in the eye and talk about all things engineering when her head was full of other long, hard, wet...

Lily stabbed her finger at the X to close the tab on Leo's grinning face. Like he was reading her mind and knew exactly what she'd thought of him as a teenager. She was a grown woman now, and almost a qualified engineer. She'd just have to focus hard on sewage pipes whenever she saw him, and she'd be okay. There was nothing sexy about wastewater systems. The smell alone was enough to put you off sex for days.

Power storage systems, however...

She combed the internet, searching for anything that might hint at Eirwen Energy's battery system, but the company didn't have anything more than the most basic one-page website, which said nothing about possible world-changing battery technology.

Lily sighed, then set up an alert for any news on either the company or breakthroughs in battery tech. She'd have to change her design to incorporate lithium batteries if the announcement didn't happen soon.

Her alarm chimed, telling her it was time to go to the staff dining room for dinner. Lily rose. She couldn't afford to skip a free meal, especially as she'd likely have to redesign her project tonight. It wasn't like she could afford to have food delivered to Mirror Academy to fuel her late night study session. Besides, she could probably cajole a big flask of coffee from the kitchen to keep her awake long enough to finish her project.

Better batteries were nothing but a fairytale, she told herself. She lived in the real world, and her plans needed to reflect that.

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SIX

Tremotino had offered Leo a guest room in his home, where the ball was being held, but Cat had known to book him a room at a motel in a nearby town, too, just in case. The clean but dated motel room was where Leo unpacked his overnight bag, eyeing off the large beribboned box that Cat had told him was both his birthday gift and his costume.

Logically, he should sleep in the castle. Proximity to Tremotino before and after the event would give him more opportunities to persuade him to loosen his hold on Councillor Clyde and stop delaying the Sanctuary. Or, if his mother's predictions came true, he might be grateful to have a bedroom nearby when he met his fated mate, the sooner to indulge in a mating frenzy of wild sex.

Yet this shabby room, decorated in various shades of cream and brown, felt right. With his business background, Leo would have liked to think he did things logically, but the truth was, he went with his gut feelings more often than not. Passion and instinct were more powerful when he shifted, than when he was human, but they were still his primary drivers, even when he wore a suit.

Or whatever costume Cat's wicked sense of humour had driven her to buy for him. It could be anything. Some version of Prince Charming, embracing the classic fairy tale theme, or she could have gone for something more aligned with the fairy side of it, as a fae king wearing little more than a few strategically placed leaves. Whatever it was, she wanted him to be eye-catching and memorable, so that if his fated mate was at the ball, she couldn't possibly miss him.

Only one way to find out.

He reached for the ribbon, and untied it. Then he lifted the lid, and laughed.

The golden brown velvet suit matched the bed spread beneath the box, though this looked brand new, and likely tailored to fit him. He'd look more like a 1970s pimp than Prince Charming.

The creamy shirt looked like she'd had it custom made, with faint golden spots across the front. A box in the bottom held matching shoes in brown suede, with one final, flat box revealing not a mask, but a sort of headdress that wouldn't have looked out of place on stage at a performance of the Lion King . Which was probably exactly where she'd gotten it, or at least the inspiration for it, because it came with a note, in Cat's neat handwriting:

"Enjoy your birthday and the ball! PS, the Lion King is a fairytale – just ask my sons!"

Leo could only shake his head. Trust Cat to pick the perfect costume. His fated mate couldn't possibly miss him, dressed like this.

He'd shower, dress, and go to the ball, for what promised to be a night to remember.

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SEVEN

After scarfing down a dinner that she'd barely tasted, let alone remembered, Lily headed back upstairs with an insulated jug of coffee in one hand and a box of leftover muffins in the other. Sure, she might not be a fee-paying student any more, but the staff at Mirror Academy certainly didn't starve.

The battery building would simply have to move, she decided. That much lithium was way too dangerous in such close proximity to homes and community buildings. Sure, she'd need to factor in more transmission lines, but if she moved the battery storage to somewhere down beside the lake, maybe near the fire suppression tanks, it would be a far more practical solution than the one she had now. Should some revolutionary new battery appear on the market after she'd submitted her project, she'd just resurrect the old plans and give those to the client. The client wouldn't care what she'd submitted for her final project, as long as it had earned her a good enough grade to graduate. That would make all her sacrifices, and all the late nights, worth it.

Lily turned to throw herself on the narrow bed, to better visualise the new plan before she had to draw it, only to find the bed already occupied by an enormous box that took up the whole width of the mattress.

A box with a note on top that said:

One night off won't hurt. Have fun. You deserve it.

No signature, of course. She didn't even recognise the writing.

Sighing, Lily lifted the lid. And gasped.

The fabric shimmered between silver and pale blue, embroidered with a thousand crystals that caught the light and sparkled like diamonds, even in the light of her bare overhead bulb.

She couldn't resist. She lifted the dress out of the box and the gossamer fabric seemed to float as she held it against her. Instead of a skirt that puffed out like a wedding cake, this dress flared out delicately, begging her to twirl.

One night. Just one night...

Lily stripped off her clothes, and donned the dress.

Soft as silk, as light as gauze, skimming her body without being too tight, it was a perfect fit. Or it would be, if she was wearing heels. She hadn't owned many fancy shoes before, but this was the first time she'd regretted selling the ones she had so she could pay her tuition fees. If she'd only kept one pair for sentimental reasons...but no.

She'd just have to take the dress off and put it back in the box, Lily told herself.

Her eyes darted to the box, and what had been hiding under the dress.

Her fairy godmother, or whoever had sent her the dress, hadn't stopped there. Sitting in the box was a mask and a pair of heels covered in cloth and crystals identical to the dress, sparkling like a freshly washed lead crystal champagne flute. A pair of glass slippers. She really would be Cinderella going to the ball.

She gave one last, longing look at her final project. The power plant could wait until tomorrow. The last coach back to the Academy left the ball at midnight, so she'd be back with plenty of time.

Her dad wouldn't begrudge her this. Sure, she hadn't gone to a ball since he died, and every day since she'd spent her every waking moment either working or studying so she could get first class honours and carry on her parents' legacy in the Hea Sanctuary, and whatever other projects came her way, but she could go out dancing for one night and not derail her whole future.

After all, what difference could one night make?

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EIGHT

The entrance hall was empty by the time Lily reached it, with no people or coaches to be seen. Her shoulders sagged. She was too late.

Just as she turned to head back upstairs, the front doors flew open, and a figure dressed in a fairytale ballgown staggered in.

"Arwen?" Lily gasped out, barely recognising the girl, she looked so haggard. "What happened to you?"

Arwen waved her away. "Nothing. Not to me, anyway. It's my dad. He's sick. I have to go home right away. I have to...pack..."

"I'll help you," Lily said instantly.

"No, I'll be fine. It's just the shock, that's all. I just spoke to him yesterday, and he was fine. To fall ill so suddenly...packing will help me get my head straight. You should go to the ball. The coach is outside. Don't let him leave without you." She stuck her head out the door. "Wait! Lily needs a ride up to the castle!" she shouted at the coach driver.

The doors hissed open.

"Are you sure?" Lily asked.

Arwen looked grim. "Absolutely. Have one of those fairytale cocktails for me while

you're there. They looked like magic potions, with little clouds of spun sugar on top. I'd just grabbed one when I got the message about Dad, so I didn't even get to taste it."

"I'll drink one, and I'll bring you back the recipe," Lily promised.

"Just enjoy yourself. That's all," Arwen said, as the coach doors slid shut.

"Sit down, miss. I can't leave until you're safely seated," the driver said. He was one of the ubiquitous men in grey who guarded the gates, drove the coaches and lived in the gatehouse, separate from the rest of the staff, so Lily didn't even know his name.

"Sure," she said, tucking her skirts in as she took the nearest seat.

The short coach journey was just long enough for her to brush her hair properly and wind it into a chignon at the back of her head. Only then did she put on her mask, glad it covered most of her face so she hadn't needed to bother with makeup, aside from some lipstick.

"This is Tremotino Castle. Enjoy the ball, miss," the driver said, as the doors hissed open.

Lily thanked him as she stepped onto the red carpet. Craig Tremotino had definitely outdone himself this time. She wondered who he was trying to impress. Certainly not the Mirror Academy students, who were waved into the castle without an invitation as though they weren't really guests at all. Given the Academy's reputation for providing brides for rich businessmen, Lily had long suspected the headmistress had some sort of arrangement with Tremotino to matchmake the right couples at these events.

In the past, she'd avoided the wife hunters by spending the evenings dancing with

Diana and Arwen, but seeing as neither of them was here tonight, she'd be on her own. Not that it mattered – she was hardly a society bride any more, if she ever was.

When Lily reached the ballroom, it was more packed than usual. An absolute crush. She turned to head right back outside again, only to find her way barred by two servants, closing the doors to the ballroom.

On the stage, the maskless master of the castle, Craig Tremotino, lounged on an actual throne. "Quiet, people!" he bellowed, with all the grace of the absolute boor he was. Rumour had it he'd been born into a bastard branch of the Lustro family, who'd owned this castle for centuries, and when their fortunes had faded, he'd bought the castle to prove to his long-dead ancestors that this bastard did deserve his birthright. What he hadn't been able to buy with the castle were the good manners any halfway decent host would show to their guests.

Rumour had it Candace Tunder had her heart set on marrying the man, though Lily doubted she was in love with him. No, Candace, Anna and Elsa viewed marriage as a mercenary contract, to be entered into with a man who had as much money and as many secret mistresses as possible, so when she uncovered his infidelity, she could divorce him for half his assets, and sell the sob story to the celebrity gossip magazines, and live happily ever after on the proceeds. It was a nice idea, if you could stomach sleeping with a husband like that.

Lily would rather scrub blue milk off the cafeteria floor for the rest of her life than get naked with a man she didn't like.

Luckily, she wouldn't have to do either of those things. Tomorrow, she'd finish her project, and it was only a matter of time before she graduated and was working in her father's office, managing multi-million dollar projects for men like Tremotino or...

"May I present our guest of honour at tonight's Fairytale Masquerade Ball, the

birthday boy and bachelor of the year, Leo King!" Tremotino roared.

And there he was, sauntering onto the stage like he owned it. Maybe he did, for he was certainly rich enough to do so.

"I bet all you ladies here tonight would just love to give him a birthday kiss, or something even better, because I have it on good authority he's looking for a bride for his birthday tonight!"

Off came the lion mask and Leo King's roguish smile romanced the room. A trio of girls near Lily sighed and nearly swooned.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, he's gay!" she hissed, just as the room fell silent.

She felt, rather than saw all eyes on her, including the calculating gaze of Leo King himself.

Lily wrenched the doors open and ran outside before he recognised her.

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NINE

By the time Tremotino invited Leo up onto the stage, he was ready to leave. The room full of simpering women, all wanting to get their hands on him, made him want to shudder, shift and run from the room. Preferably to go hunt prey. Which he absolutely could not do until he got home.

Then, just as he'd opened his mouth to deliver the speech he'd prepared, the most stunning woman he'd ever seen told the room he was gay.

Leaving him speechless. Because...did she know something he didn't? Was that the reason he hadn't found his fated mate? Leo had never been attracted to a man before, but he'd never fallen head over heels in love with a woman, either. Thrusting his cock into somewhere hot, willing and wet for some much needed release was one thing, but sex had never been more than just satisfying a passing urge.

Now, the only urge he felt was to find her, to ask why she'd said such a thing. He'd heard whispers that there were rare witches who could foresee fated mates, and bring the partners together, and he'd also heard rumours that there was one such witch at Mirror Academy, which would explain their success rate for matching mates, but...was this woman the witch?

If she was and she could tell him exactly who his mate was and where he might find them...he'd give her anything she wanted. Well, anything except his first born, as his mate might not agree to that. Besides, that only happened in fairytales, and his life was definitely not one of those.

If life was anything like a fairytale, he'd have met his fated mate the moment he entered the castle, and he'd already be halfway to happily-ever-after by now.

Logic told him he should cut his losses and leave, but his gut told him to stay. As always, he went with his gut.

Leo sighed. He'd grab a drink, go outside to get some air, and then return refreshed with his mind firmly focussed on his mission. If he couldn't find a wife among these vapid women, he still needed to speak to Tremotino. He'd start by asking about the new village Tremotino himself had planned, the one that was holding up the council in the first place. Tremotino's project wouldn't be anywhere near as exciting as Hea Sanctuary, but it was mundane projects like these that paid the bills whilst he was waiting for the blue sky stuff to pay off. Plus, learning about the pitfalls of someone else's project would help Leo himself to avoid those mistakes in the future.

That was his father talking, of course. He'd often said that the best mistakes were the ones other people made, that you didn't need to pay for. What would his father do in his place, with Uncle Jeremy slaving like a rabid dog for control of the company?

His father would have told him to do what was right, and to listen to his gut.

His gut said to go out to the garden, so outside Leo went. With a pink, fluffy cocktail in one hand that he hadn't been able to refuse, and a glass of water in the other.

Behind him, he heard the music begin again, the bass vibrating through the flagstones beneath his feet. He reached the edge of the terrace, intending to put his drinks down on the low wall as he surveyed the rolling lawns.

But what he saw on that lawn wiped all coherent thought from his head, for all he could focus on was the vision before him.

TEN

Lily slammed down the spun-sugar cocktail like it was a vodka shot. It wasn't until she'd swallowed that she felt the burn that told her that sticky sweetness was more potent than she'd first thought. Good thing she wasn't driving tonight.

She shivered a little, wishing she'd thought to bring a wrap. Not that she owned anything grand enough to go over this gown.

Moonlight turned the lawn silver, but it only highlighted the shadows where the grass ended in dark forest. She expected it to be quiet out here, after the noise and bustle inside, but the forest seemed to be having its own party in the darkness. Anything could be hiding in those trees.

Engineer that she was, Lily couldn't name a single creature that lived in the local forests, except maybe some sort of owl. Diana would have known, being a qualified veterinarian and all, but she wasn't here. Off on her honeymoon with the man she'd fallen for at first sight. The stuff of fairytales.

The sound of flapping made her turn toward the forest again. Owls were supposed to fly silently, weren't they? Whatever it was, it looked pretty big for an owl. Maybe an eagle of some sort, though it was hard to tell in the dark, especially as it was flying up toward the tallest tower. Probably hunting prey or admiring the view from up there. Lily envied it. Down here, she got the distinct feeling of being prey, not hunter.

She snorted. She was an engineer, or she soon would be. Cold, methodical and logical. Certainly not fanciful. Even if she was here to have fun, she had no intention

of letting her imagination run wild. No, she wanted to let her mind switch off for a few hours, and surrender control to her body. To dance to the music, if the interminable speeches would ever end and...ah, there it was. The beating heart of a bass line. Lily took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and began to dance.

And for a time, everything else went away. It was just her, and the beat.

Time meant nothing. It might have been minutes or hours, before she got that feeling again. The unfamiliar instinct that someone was hunting her.

She raised her eyes to meet the gaze of none other than Leo bloody King. Pimp suit, lion headdress and all.

His eyes widened.

Prey.

Who was the hunter now?

King held up a glass topped with spun sugar. "I thought you might like a drink."

Lily stalked forward. To his credit, King didn't back up. Ignoring his cocktail, she grabbed his glass of water instead, and downed the contents.

If there was one thing she loved about Scotland, it was the water. As cold and pure as fresh glacier melt. Hea Sanctuary might find its power requirements tricky as it reached capacity, at least until the miraculous battery system was revealed, but it would never run short of potable water.

"I feel like I should recognise you from somewhere," King said, his eyes narrowing. Then he shook his head. "But I don't think we've ever met. I'd remember." He stuck

out his hand. "I'm Leo King."

Lily inclined her head. "I know."

"Please, if you'll come inside with me, I could get you another drink. We could..."

Lily shook her head. "I'm not going up to your room with you so you can prove to all of them in there that you're not gay."

His eyes widened. "That's not what I...I want..."

"Go back inside. There are a hundred Mirror Academy girls in there who would fall over themselves to be your conquest tonight. To give you a very happy birthday. I'm not here for you."

"Why did you come to the ball, then?" he challenged.

Lily raised her arms. "To dance, of course." As if on cue, the next song began.

"Can I dance with you?"

Normally, she and Diana and Arwen would have laughed and shaken their heads, telling the hapless boy he couldn't keep up with them.

But something told her King wasn't the type to grope and grind. Besides, if he really was gay, he was probably a better dancer than she was. Maybe her father had been wrong about him. Not a tom cat...more of a pussy cat.

"If you can keep up," she said.

King knocked back his cocktail, then wiped the fairy floss off his upper lip. "You're

on." He stalked down the steps, stopping within arm's reach of her. "Let's dance."

Within a minute, Lily found herself laughing with delight. She could barely keep up with King, and she loved every minute of it. It was like he could read her mind, reacting to her movements before she made them. Matching her so perfectly, it was almost a pity he was gay. Because a man so in tune with her body when he had his clothes on would be an absolutely divine lover later...

A later she'd never know, because the last coach left at midnight.

Right on cue, the clock tower began to chime...

ELEVEN

Leo had never enjoyed a ball this much in his life. He'd danced with a lot of women, having to force himself to remember the steps and how to make polite conversation without stepping on her feet, whilst wanting nothing more than to walk out of the event altogether, but dancing with the Silver Lady was almost...effortless. Like his feet had wings.

Nor did she require small talk. No, it was all about the ballet of bodies moving so in sync with one another, it was like there was some sort of quantum entanglement going on. Of course, he hadn't done physics since high school, and it had hardly been his favourite subject, so he wasn't even sure how two bodies could be quantum entangled. He hadn't even touched her, so there was no way any parts of them could have tangled, though he wouldn't have complained if they had. And the more he danced with her, the more he became aware of his desire for her.

Several times, his suit pants had grown so uncomfortably tight that he'd had to excuse himself, telling her he was going to fetch them some drinks. The row of empty water jugs on the railing told the tale of how long they'd been dancing, but he just didn't want to stop. Nor did she, it seemed, though she did pause every time the clock struck the hour. And why wouldn't she? The loud, discordant notes from the centuries old clock tower drowned out the music they were trying to dance to.

This time, he'd just poured her the last glass of water as the bells began to toll.

"Is that...?" she asked.

Leo nodded. "Midnight. The witching hour." He wanted to say something about how she'd bewitched him, but that seemed too trite. If anything, it would break the spell of this enchanted evening. He held out her glass as he raised his. "To a magical night," he said.

Her fingers touched the glass, but it slipped right through, smashing on the ground, sending water and glass shards everywhere.

"I have to go!" she cried.

"Stay right there. I'll get your shoes," he said, crossing the grass to where she'd kicked them off.

But when he turned, shoes in hand, she was already sprinting away.

Leo wasn't sure what came over him. One moment, he was holding her shoes. The next, he was fully shifted, chasing after his prey. Prey he would not allow to get away.

TWELVE

Midnight already? Where had the time gone? She heard King say something to her, but she couldn't hear him over that bloody clock. She wouldn't hear the coach leaving, either, and she needed to be on it. Her shift started at nine tomorrow, and she'd need some sleep between now and then.

Thankful she'd kicked off her heels earlier in the evening, Lily flew across the lawn, her feet too cold to feel the gravel crunching beneath them as she leaped onto the coach steps, just before the door shut. She shoved her way in, though the door tried to close on her, before collapsing on the nearest seat.

Everyone else looked as exhausted as she felt. Well, they'd all been dancing all night, too, though they likely hadn't had her enthusiastic dance partner.

Rosalind's carefully coiffed ringlets now hung in sweaty tangles down her back and shoulders, picking up stray bits of gold glitter from her dress. Sienna looked particularly pale, now her signature red lipstick had worn off. Too many cocktails, or too much kissing? Given her gown didn't look any more mussed then the moment she'd zipped it up, Lily's bet was on her spending the night drinking, or trying all the food. Sienna wasn't into dancing.

Auren looked as fresh as a freaking daisy, but her attention was fixed on her phone, and all the beautiful photos she'd taken at the event. Candace fancied herself a social media influencer, but Auren was the queen of every platform she posted on. Every picture, every post was pretty and almost perfect, but in such an authentic way that you couldn't possibly doubt they were her work, her thoughts, her everything laid

bare for the world to see. Then Auren's eyes widened, as she pressed her phone to the window. "Are you seeing this?" she asked, pointing.

Lily cupped her hands to her eyes and peered out. There was a hulking shape in the forest. Like a pony or something, but with a huge...

"Is that a lion?" Lily gasped out. She and Auren watched, wide eyed, as the enormous cat bounded out of the shadows and right up to the bus. Claws raked the window and they both screamed, but the coach driver just kept going, accelerating away. The lion gave chase, but soon fell behind.

Hunter. Prey. If Lily had known a real, live lion lurked in the woods, she never would have stayed outside. What if it had attacked her and King while they were dancing? She'd known it was there, watching her. She should have listened to her instincts and left then. If she hadn't made it to the coach in time...who knew what might have happened?

"Damn. I didn't get a clear picture of it. Just the claw." Auren held up her phone. A massive paw with claws as long as Lily's fingers filled the screen, stretched across the bus window. Something that big could have taken her head off with one swipe. Auren let out a shaky laugh. "Well, that's one photo from the ball I won't be posting. I should delete it altogether, so it doesn't give me nightmares. I wanted to be a travel blogger when I was little, until I realised how many dangerous wild animals live in the prettiest wild places. Lions. Wolves. And bears! All sorts of things that could eat me alive." She shuddered. "Well, I guess I won't be going for a walk in the grounds until the zoo catches that lion."

Lily nodded, making a mental note to tell the headmistress or at least the coach driver, before she went to bed, so everyone was safe. She might not like Candace, Elsa or Anna much, but no one deserved to be mauled by a lion.

THIRTEEN

The moment Leo scented his mate, madness overcame him. That's the only explanation he had for his animal behaviour. Chasing after the coach like a dog pursuing the postman. When all he had to do was pay a visit to Mirror Academy, the nearby college that owned the coach, and ask to meet his mate.

Even better, he could say he was returning the shoes she'd left behind. He might not know her name, but her shoes carried her unmistakeable scent, and he'd know her by it anywhere, masked or not.

Tomorrow, he'd pay the school a visit. In the afternoon, when they'd all had a chance to get a good night's sleep. He wanted his mate wide awake and well rested when he proposed to make her his partner for life.

Meanwhile, he should probably take a moment to interrogate Tremotino, or at least get some information from him. Leo might not want to work with the man on any of his projects, as the questionable legality of his methods left a sour taste in his mouth, but if he could find out what the holdup was with Tremotino's latest development, then maybe he could help Hea Sanctuary get closer to being more of a reality than its currently delayed construction, stuck in the planning stages.

Leo headed for the nearest door to the castle, so that he might sneak in unnoticed.

He emerged inside a bare passageway, the sort that was meant to be used only by servants and not the lord of the castle. The clatter of utensils on metal and the smell of something overcooked told him the kitchen was in that direction, so the ballroom

must be the other way. The sound of voices spurred him on, before the words became clearer, and he stopped dead.

"You look like shit." That was definitely Uncle Jeremy's voice.

"Well, so would you if you'd just gone several rounds with a dragon. How did he even get on the property? I'm going to have to fire my whole security team after this. If I wasn't a shifter, he would have killed me," Tremotino slurred, almost like he was drunk.

Tremotino wasn't a shifter. He was human, or as least he had been the last time Leo saw him. Unless someone had bitten him and he'd become one. In that case, Tremotino was lucky to have survived the bite and subsequent transformation. Most humans didn't, and many of the ones who did went mad, or failed to transform back into human form afterward. The exceptions were those who had shifter ancestry, but not enough shifter genes to complete the transformation themselves. That's why all supernatural births, matings, and successful transformations were recorded by a team of lore keepers, who both maintained the records and made them available to the supernatural community, as required. Leo had never had any contact with the lore keepers, but he supposed he would now he'd found his mate.

"Well, you know you owe me for that. I hope you're still holding up your end of our bargain," Uncle Jeremy said.

"For how much longer? You said it would only be a couple of weeks, and it's been more than three months. I'm losing money on this deal, I hope you realise. It better not be much longer."

"Relax. Your party tonight should be the last nail in my nephew's coffin. Not only is he the Times Bachelor of the Year, but he's a gay playboy who's been hiding his true sexual proclivities from everyone. The papers will eat it up with a spoon, and the

board will kick him out so fast, he might actually need a parachute." Uncle Jeremy laughed. "Once he's gone, we'll both sign the paperwork, and we can look forward to a profitable future working together. This silly sanctuary will never happen, and all the shifters who see it fail will fall all over themselves to buy into your shifter-only community instead. By the time they realise they'll be in the middle of a huge housing development instead of virgin forest, filled with ordinary humans, it'll be too late for them to back out, and we'll already have all their money. We can't lose."

No. Pride Holdings prided itself on its reputation for delivering high quality projects that were exactly as advertised, not pulling a bait and switch on its customers. Pride Holdings would never work with Tremotino and his dodgy dealings. Not now, not ever. It would ruin the company's reputation, and send them broke in a year. Two, at most. Not to mention Hea Sanctuary had been his dad's dream, and Leo would deliver on this project if it killed him. For his dad. Damn Uncle Jeremy for shitting on Dad's legacy. How dare he?

Leo clenched his fists, willing himself not to shift, because he knew if he did, he'd maul both Tremotino and Uncle Jeremy. They might both be shifters, but not even a shifter would survive his claws. He'd make sure of it. But that was the problem, wasn't it? Uncle Jeremy was dad's brother, a shifter who couldn't shift, and Tremotino was...a bitten shifter, even weaker than his uncle.

Only a small step up from ordinary humans, really – the sort of people Mum and Dad had always told him to protect. That was the duty of supernatural people like himself – to protect the world from the supernatural who would prey on them, preserving the secret of their existence. It would be like killing a puppy – something Leo just couldn't do.

His claws retracted and his shoulders slumped. What was he doing here, anyway? He should go back to the motel room, get a good night's sleep, and go find his mate in the morning. With her at his side, everything would come clear and he'd see his way

through untangling this plot between Tremotino and Uncle Jeremy.

No worries.

FOURTEEN

Lily woke up early, put the finishing touches on her final project and submitted it, before changing into her work uniform and heading down to the cafeteria. She wasn't surprised to find it practically empty – most of the students had been at the ball last night, and they probably wouldn't emerge until lunchtime.

"Do you want me to fill the soft serve machine before I bring out more plates for the lunch service?" Lily asked Brenda, the head cook.

Brenda shook her head. "Haven't you heard? The school's closing early. All the students have to leave before noon. Even the staff are supposed to be out of here by the end of the business day. If you want a ride in one of the student coaches, you should go and pack your things now. Don't worry about work. We're only packing things into the deep freeze, or dividing up what won't keep to take home with us. Thank the heavens no one had mixed up any of the soft serve mix this morning before the announcement came."

Lily nodded slowly. "Probably for the best. We wouldn't want anyone getting mauled by the lion."

"Lion? What lion? The school's closing because a girl disappeared from the ball last night. I've heard plenty of wild stories, up to and including some hysterical girls saying Rapunzel got kidnapped by a dragon who flew off with her, but if you ask me, some of them probably had a few too many cocktails or inhaled some fairy dust, if you know what I mean."

Dragons. Lions. Now kidnapping? Lily wasn't sure what to make of any of this. "Do you know the name of the girl who went missing?" Eden had been talking about Diana going missing at the last ball, but that wasn't last night. Unless the police had decided that Diana really had gone missing, and they'd just started to investigate now...

"It was one of the scholarship girls. Someone with no family to send her things to. One of the maids was grumbling about it earlier. Some sort of garden name...Eden, I think."

First Diana, now Eden? That was definitely suspicious. Especially as Eden had been asking questions about Diana's disappearance. Maybe she'd been right, and Diana hadn't eloped after all.

Lily wasn't sure what was worse – being mauled by a lion, or kidnapped by heaven knew who. Eden wasn't the type to elope. Her big dream was to run an animal sanctuary, as Lily well knew. She wouldn't give that up for some guy she'd only met last night.

"Go pack. See you when school comes back next term," Brenda said.

Lily nodded obediently and headed out. It wasn't until she was well past the student rooms and on her way up the stairs to her own that she remembered she wouldn't be coming back. Assuming her final project received a high enough grade, she'd be graduating this year. Oh well, if she packed quickly, she could stop by the kitchen and say goodbye to Brenda and the others before she climbed onto the coach.

She wondered if she'd see the lion in daylight, or whether he'd hunted overnight, and was now sleeping off his meal in the woods somewhere. A deer or a rabbit, she hoped, and not someone as nice as Eden. Candace or Anna or Elsa, maybe, but not Eden.

Lily sighed. No, probably not even them. Just because they were mercenary people who cared more about money than anything else didn't mean they deserved to be mauled to death by a wild animal.

Besides, those girls wouldn't be her problem any more. She'd get to go home, and all she had to do was wait for confirmation that she'd graduate, before restarting her parents' business. Her days of mopping up milk were over.

With a smile lifting her lips, Lily made quick work of her packing, and made it to the coach without having to run. Completely the opposite to last night. Things were definitely looking up.

FIFTEEN

So much for no worries. Leo's head was full of them by the time he reached the motel.

First was the fact that he was more excited about finding his fated mate than saving Pride Holdings from Uncle Jeremy. Did that mean that Uncle Jeremy was right, and that he wasn't the most suitable person to lead the company?

Dad had always done a brilliant job. He'd instinctively done the right thing, fighting for projects that no one believed were possible, and delivering them on time and on budget. He'd turned Pride Holdings into what it was today, and Hea Sanctuary had been his pride and joy, his personal retirement project. He'd said that as soon as the place was built, he and Mum would move there and retire, leaving the company and the family home to Leo.

Mum wouldn't move there without Dad. After Dad died, she'd taken on more and more of the housekeeper's role as Mrs Parker's hair turned from salt and pepper to solid white. Even her fur stayed white when she shifted now, instead of changing with the seasons, like a normal arctic fox. When she retired, which she'd probably have done years ago, if not for Mum, Mrs Parker would be hard to replace. Finding another shifter who was both a capable housekeeper and someone who had the discretion to keep all of their family secrets...though that would probably be Mum's problem, not his. Mum had been an HR manager, and Pride Holdings still employed many of the staff she'd hired, long after she'd retired from the role.

But if Mum no longer wanted it...would it be such a bad thing to let Dad's dream die

with him? The Hea Sanctuary was so plagued with delays that even he'd begun to doubt that it would ever be a reality. Maybe Dad had been wrong about it. In a lifetime of always being right, it had to happen once, right? At least he hadn't lived to see it.

But he had wanted to see it. The concept art for the sanctuary was still all over his office walls, just the way he'd left it. He'd used words like magnum opus, passion project, dream come true...the sort of stuff that had made Leo look at the house plans, to see if he might be able to justify buying a small cottage there, too. Not a home, but maybe a holiday home, for when he came to visit. Somewhere cosy to sleep after running around as a beast for half the night, hunting.

Maybe he should take Dad's dream as his own. Claim the house he and Mum were going to retire in, sell his shares in Pride Holdings to Uncle Jeremy or whoever else wanted them, invest the money and live off the proceeds. Maybe create an online startup or two if he wanted to keep working, though he wouldn't need to. Let Uncle Jeremy do whatever he wanted to with the company while Leo settled down to a comfortable life with his fated mate. He could be a stay at home dad, bringing up their cubs while his mate did...whatever she found the most fulfilling. Knitting. Oil painting. Fishing in the lake. Dancing, seeing as she was pretty good at it, if last night had been anything to go by.

Leo lay back in bed. He didn't even know her name, let alone what her passions were, but he couldn't wait to find out. She'd be perfect for him, as all fated mates were. Like a fairytale.

He should thank Uncle Jeremy, for helping him see so clearly. If it weren't for his betrayal, Leo might never have gone to Tremotino's ball, or met his fated mate. Thanks to Uncle Jeremy, now he'd get to settle down in the heaven that would be Hea Sanctuary, without worrying about project deadlines ever again.

Or council approvals, or lining up the right contractors, or dealing with the million and one details that made Pride Holdings projects the best.

But first he had to stick around long enough to see Hea Sanctuary built. He couldn't retire until Dad's dream was a tangible reality.

Which meant even if he wasn't the right choice to lead Pride Holdings into the future, he couldn't leave just yet. Couldn't let Uncle Jeremy or Tremotino win.

He had to realise his dad's dream. Take the concept all the way to reality. That's what he and Dad had promised the shareholders on the project, many of whom were the contractors who'd pledged to build the place. Because it wasn't just Dad's dream. A whole lot of other shifters were counting on him, too, sinking all their savings into the project. If he let Uncle Jeremy permanently shelve the sanctuary, they'd all lose a lot of money. Maybe all they had. Not everyone was like his family, or the Argyros family – rolling in old money that they'd carefully invested over the centuries. He had to see this through, no matter what.

He wasn't sure how, though. Talking to Tremotino was out, seeing as he was already in bed with Uncle Jeremy. Confronting Uncle Jeremy was out, too. What with Uncle Jeremy's inability to shift, the age-old rite of fair combat couldn't happen, and Uncle Jeremy would probably just deny the whole thing anyway. He'd be right, too, because Leo didn't have any proof of his uncle's duplicity, except for the conversation he'd overheard.

If he wanted to turn the tables on Uncle Jeremy and have him kicked off the board of directors, he'd need rock-solid proof to show the rest of the board. And he had no idea where to look for it. What he needed was a private investigator – someone who did know where to find evidence of wrongdoing. Finding a good investigator, though...hiring good people was Mum's forte, not his.

Leo blew out a frustrated breath.

He ached for his mate. Dancing with her, then that glorious chase...if he'd caught her, they'd still be making love right now. They'd be holed up in this motel room for a week, not wanting to leave.

Which would only prove Uncle Jeremy right – that Leo was more of a playboy than a suitable CEO.

What if Uncle Jeremy was right, and he'd never live up to his dad's expectations? Hea Sanctuary was his dad's greatest dream, bigger than anything Leo had delivered by himself before. What if he couldn't do it?

Round and round it went in his mind, until dawn finally broke through the motel window's worn blinds, and Leo fell into an exhausted doze.

SIXTEEN

As Lily lugged her suitcase up the stairs to the room at the top of the tower, she considered whether she should have claimed one of the guest rooms on the lower levels of her parents' house. Well, her stepmother's house, now.

But that would mean sleeping closer to her stepsisters, Courtney and Chloe, and being surrounded by the bland, impersonal furniture her mother had deemed fit for guests, while the tower had been fitted out for their little princess, with a custom made bedroom suite topped with crowns and crenelations that her mother had hand painted.

So when she threw open the door and breathed in the musty air from the untouched room, she told herself the tower was nowhere near as high as the looming edifice at Tremotino Castle, and she'd be fine here, thank you very much.

Once she'd taken down all the dust sheets, made up the bed, and set off the robot vacuum cleaner that had delighted her mother since the day her father had brought it home as a gift, Lily had no desire to sleep anywhere else. Not even her room at Mirror Academy had ever felt this much like home.

The robot played a little tune to tell her it had finished vacuuming, so Lily picked it up, to take it downstairs to empty the now rather full dust filter.

She made it all the way to the kitchen rubbish bin before the stench hit her. Worse than the dumpster outside the Academy kitchens on a hot, sunny day, just before the rubbish truck came to collect the waste. Not the sort of smell she'd ever expected to

encounter in her mother's kitchen. Had someone murdered her stepmother and stepsisters, then left their corpses here to rot?

A quick search behind the benches revealed no corpses, thank goodness, but between the overflowing bin, and the dishes piled up in the sink and on every available surface, she wasn't sure if dead bodies could smell worse.

Well, at least there wasn't a flood of blue milk all over the floor, Lily told herself as she set to work.

Four dishwasher loads later, she'd handwashed the rest, disinfected all the surfaces and the sink as well, and brought down the vacuuming robot to start on the floor. The mopping robot was still charging, but by the time the vacuuming was done, it would likely have enough power to do the kitchen, at least.

Rubbish collection day wasn't until tomorrow, but she'd filled up the bins already, so she took them out to the kerb, ready to be emptied in the morning.

Only then did she dare open the fridge, to see what state that was in.

Empty. Not even a bottle of soy sauce inside. The freezer was the same.

Maybe her stepmother and stepsisters were away on holiday, and they'd told the cleaner not to come until they got back. That didn't explain why there were so many dishes, but that was a mystery she could solve tomorrow. In between doing the laundry, as the fine weather forecast for tomorrow meant she could line dry the dust sheets and keep the dryer for her clothes and the mountain of cleaning cloths she'd used in the kitchen.

"What are you doing here?"

Lily turned around. Evidently her stepsisters weren't on holiday, which might explain the mess. "Wondering why you haven't done any dishes," she said.

Courteney – or was it Chloe? The girls were identical twins, so they were hard to tell apart on the best of days – shrugged and spread her hands wide, flashing her talon-like nails. "I can't wreck my new manicure, and you know dishwashing is terrible on nails. My followers would never forgive me if I ruined this before they could see it. I have to go do a new video right away!" Courteney – for it had to be her, as she was the one who claimed to be a nail art influencer – took off before Lily could say anything else.

Chloe sauntered in, sniffing and screwing her face up. "What is that smell?"

"Detergent and disinfectant," Lily said drily. Funny that the rotten food smells hadn't disgusted her as much as the cleaning chemicals.

"Ugh. Can't you use natural products? I have a reputation as a healthy lifestyle influencer to maintain." She brandished a bag of what looked like takeaway food. "Get out of my way. I need to plate these up and take pictures before they get cold."

Well, that explained all the dirty dishes. Lily wondered what Chloe would have done if she hadn't cleaned the kitchen.

"Don't forget to load the dirty plates into the dishwasher when you're done," Lily said as she left.

Chloe just made a rude noise. She probably didn't even know how to open the dishwasher, let alone load it. Lily couldn't remember either of the girls knowing how to cook when she'd left for school, either. Or her stepmother.

Lily added grocery shopping to her list of things to do tomorrow. Brenda had given

her a bag of apples and some sandwiches to take home with her – all the staff were taking things, to stop them from spoiling or getting thrown out, so she hadn't felt bad about taking them – so she'd be able to stretch those into dinner and breakfast, but tomorrow she'd need to get supplies.

One thing was certain: she had no intention of surviving on Chloe's leftovers for even a single day. Who knew what sort of fad diet she was showcasing this week?

Come to think of it, Lily didn't want to know. So she headed up to bed.

SEVENTEEN

It was late afternoon by the time Leo finally woke, and he seriously considered going back to sleep. Of course, the beast part of him would sleep all day if it could, but Leo knew he had work to do. A true CEO never really got a day off, even when he was on holidays.

Yet another reason he might not be cut out for running the company the way his dad had.

But he couldn't leave it to Uncle Jeremy, either.

That problem could wait until tomorrow, though. First, he was going to indulge himself and go find his fated mate. He'd set the shoes on top of the desk, where he couldn't possibly miss them, and he'd head up to Mirror Academy as soon as he'd showered and dressed. She'd be waiting for him, he was sure of it, as eager to see him again as he was to dance with her. And more...

The sun was already setting by the time he reached the gates to the Academy. High stone walls surrounded the property, too high for even him to leap over. And perched on top of the gates...

Leo swore. Of all the supernatural creatures, he hated gargoyles the most. Oh, dragons could best him in battle, but at least they were flesh and blood. Gargoyles were made of living stone, and every bite was like crunching gravel.

"If you're here to enrol, you're too late. Come back next year, when you're done

transitioning. You'll have a better chance then," advised the gargoyle perched on the gatepost.

"Transitioning? Huh?" Another one landed on the wall, beside a third.

Number Three hissed, "Are you still stuck in the dark ages? He's talking about gender transitioning. Going from being a boy to a girl, because only girls can study at Mirror Academy." He whacked his friend across the back of the head.

Of course, the blow wouldn't hurt a gargoyle. He just rubbed the back of his head and said, "You can do that? Why would anyone do that just to come here?"

"To find their mate, of course!" Number Three snapped. "Idiot." He addressed Leo, "That's what you want, isn't it? It's all anyone wants from this place. Not an education. Just their magically fated mate."

Leo nodded. "I'm looking for a student. She was at the ball at Tremotino Castle last night. She left her shoes." He grabbed them from the passenger seat and brandished them.

The first one shook his head. "You won't find her here. All the students have been sent home. Some dragon kidnapped a girl. The second one in a row. Wish he'd come here so we could show him what for. No dragon's a match for the three of us." He turned to his friends. "You remember that dragon who was here a few days ago? We saw him off the premises quick smart, we did. No dragon's getting over these walls with us on guard!" He puffed up his chest and spread his wings in what was probably an impressive display among gargoyles.

Leo wouldn't know. He avoided the unnatural creatures as much as possible. Unlike shifters, gargoyles were created with blood magic, stealing them from the very brink of death. Or maybe even after. He'd heard stories...

"But I have to find her. She's my mate!" Leo insisted.

Number Three shrugged. "Come back next term. We'll have dealt with the dragon by then, and all the girls will go to the next ball. Get a ticket to that, and try your luck with her then."

"When does next term start?" Leo vaguely remembered the start dates for his own university, but Mirror Academy was a private college. They could start and finish on any dates they wished.

One and Three stared at each other, before both shrugged. "Two or three months, maybe? The dates will be on the Academy website."

"What is a web...sight?" Dark Ages Dude asked.

Three sighed. "It's on the internet, idiot."

Dark Ages Dude's face lit up. "You mean the mirror you use to watch the naked people? Because the internet is for porn?"

One rolled his eyes. "Seriously? If the headmistress finds out you've been watching porn over the school internet connection, she'll take our computer privileges away. And I am not willing to forego my web comics because you needed to watch Andy's Anal Adventures episode sixty nine for the dozenth time."

"But it's the best one!" Three protested. "Watch it with me in the morning, and I'll show you!"

"No, thanks. I have better things to do than watch that filth. It's addictive, and rots your brain. Besides, people have been cavorting naked since the very first people. If you really wanted to fit in with the people of this time, you'd be using the computer to

study philosophy and science and history, so that when you meet someone you connect with, they might be interested in getting naked with you, instead of you watching other people pretending to do things you can only dream of." One sniffed.

"I'll watch it with you," Dark Ages Dude said eagerly. "I love it when they..."

Leo just shook his head. Gargoyles were unnatural. And apparently addicted to porn. "Excuse me. If you could stop discussing porn for just a moment and tell me who I need to ask to get the address of the girl who left her shoes at the ball last night, I'd appreciate it." He shook the shoes, hoping that would get their attention.

"Email the headmistress. She probably won't tell you, but she might tell you the school's mailing address, so you could send them to her, and maybe let you include a note to the girl in with them, so she can contact you if she wants to. Maybe." One looked him up and down. "Don't hold your breath, though. If you're not really her fated mate, you won't hear a peep. Or you might have to wait until school goes back next term."

Leo nodded his thanks and returned to the car.

He'd draft up an email to the headmistress, all right. He'd write something so persuasive that the woman couldn't help but help him. Then he'd give it to Cat, who'd turn it into a plea so irresistible, Leo would be on his mate's doorstep by morning, shoes in one hand, engagement ring in the other.

Hmm. He should probably stop by a jeweller's on the way home, then. He knew his mother had a collection of heirloom jewellery that would be perfect for a wedding ring, but he also knew it was better to let his mate pick her own ring, if she was going to be wearing it for the rest of her life. An engagement ring she'd only wear for a few months – less, if he had any say in it – before he replaced it with something better.

An engagement ring had to send the right message. It had to say he loved her, cherished her and would provide for her all their days together, but it also had to be pretty enough that she couldn't resist putting it on. Definitely a diamond, something as flashy as the crystals adorning her lost shoes.

Leo grinned and gunned the engine. He couldn't wait to see her face when he got down on one knee. Actually, he couldn't wait to see her face, full stop.

He hoped she liked cats...

EIGHTEEN

Each day at home brought new horrors to light. When Lily had opened the garage to take her father's car grocery shopping, she'd found it was gone, along with the little hatchback Lily had inherited from her mother.

Her stepmother, Cadence, had sold them both to fund her lavish lifestyle.

Mum and Dad's housekeeper, Maria, had answered her phone when Lily called her, but flatly refused to come to the house, as Cadence hadn't paid her for the last month of work. Even when Lily herself offered to pay Maria whatever Cadence owed her, Maria wouldn't take it.

"You should get out of there before she loses the house. Go find yourself a job and somewhere else to live. Don't let that woman take you down with her," Maria told her.

Lily thanked her, both for the advice and all her hard work over the years, and ended the call. Of course she couldn't leave. This was the house she'd grown up in. No matter what Cadence and her daughters had done to it, she owed it to her parents to stay.

The next day, cleaning up the chaos in the living room, she found a pile of papers that told an even more desperate story than the empty garage. Page after page of overdue bills, final notices from every utility, plus credit card statements for dozens of credit cards, all unpaid, in between letters congratulating Cadence on opening a new credit account, with the gum still stuck to them from where the new cards had been

attached.

Several times a day, Courteney appeared with her nails painted a different colour, before filming them on her phone in whatever room had the best light.

Every night, Chloe came home with bags of food, clothing and fitness equipment she'd bought with one of her mother's collections of credit cards.

Cadence spent her days visiting friends at their homes, or at various health and sporting clubs where they still accepted her myriad credit cards.

The day after that, the power went out, followed by the water being cut off.

Grimly, Lily took Maria's advice, searching for a new job that included accommodation using the waning power on her phone.

She scrolled down the job ads. She only needed something for a few weeks, until her graduation confirmation came through. Then she still had to register as an engineer, which might take a few more weeks, before she could start up Dad's company again. So two months, maybe three. She didn't much care how much it paid, as long as she had food and accommodation.

There were plenty of jobs for kitchenhands and cleaners, but most of them were casual jobs with hourly rates, and they expected applicants to have their own car.

Then she saw it: an ad for a housekeeper at Moray Castle, a place she'd never heard of, but the pay was much more than the other positions. Only applicants who had experience maintaining historical buildings and were willing to live in for the maternity leave cover position would be considered.

The job was probably already taken. It sounded so perfect...still, it was worth a shot.

Lily called the number.

"Hello?" a posh voice answered.

Lily explained that she was calling about the job ad for a housekeeper.

"What experience do you have with historic buildings, my dear?"

"Well, I've been working at Mirror Academy as a maid and kitchenhand for the last year, for my room and board while I was completing my degree. But now the school is closed for the holidays, and I'm due to graduate at the end of this year, so I find myself in need of a new position for a few months, and..."

"Can you start tomorrow?"

Lily didn't hesitate. "Of course, but don't you want to at least contact my references, or see my CV?"

"Laima and I are old friends. If she accepted you as both a student and a member of staff, that's recommendation enough for me. You'll be on a month's probation, of course, while my housekeeper is taking care of her daughter, who's just had a baby. After that, we shall see."

A month should be enough. "That sounds lovely."

"See you tomorrow, then. Text me your arrival time, so I'll know when to expect you."

The woman hung up before Lily could answer.

Lily laughed softly to herself. She didn't even know her new employer's name, but

she suspected it would be better than watching her parents' home crumble as Cadence and her daughters destroyed everything they'd built.

And if Moray Castle's kitchen looked anything like this one had when she arrived, she could decline the job offer and find something else, Lily told herself.

Meanwhile, she'd better pack her things and get onto the next bus out of town, because Moray Castle was a long way from here, and she didn't want to be late.

NINETEEN

"How has your week been?" Mother asked over dinner.

Leo growled. "I've sent three emails, and haven't heard a word back from her. Laima is meant to be your friend. Can you talk to her? She's deliberately keeping me from my fated mate and it's driving me mad!"

Mother coughed. "I meant your week at work. How is the new sanctuary project coming along?"

"It isn't. It's still stuck waiting for council approval, among other things, and I caught Uncle Jeremy's secretary printing out copies of a contract for working with Tremotino on his new dodgy development, which even I know will be a colossal failure, but he's been talking it up with other board members as though it'll double their dividends this year, instead of driving the company to bankruptcy. The gossip rags have got hold of this crazy idea that I'm gay, and they've photoshopped my head onto a screenshot that's obviously been stolen from episode sixty-nine of Andy's Anal Adventures. Cat's been fending off a veritable flood of emails from people who want to help me recreate that iconic scene, including the production studio who made the movie in the first place...you wouldn't believe the obscene amount of money they offered me to do it. Maybe we're in the wrong industry, if adult entertainment can pay someone that much for only a few days' work."

Mother's expression looked like her food didn't agree with her. It took her a moment, but she forced a smile onto her face. "So you're giving up on the sanctuary that was your father's dream to become an actor? You'd be handing the company to your uncle

on a platter if you do. Is that what you want?"

Trust Mum to ask him the very question that had kept him awake the night of the ball. What did he want? "I could sell my shares. It's not like the company needs me. Not really. I could settle down somewhere with my fated mate and just live a quiet life."

"After you become a porn star."

Leo squirmed. He'd considered it, for one mad moment. How could anyone justify paying him that much money to get naked in front of a camera? But none of those actors would be his mate, and she was the only one she wanted to get naked with.

"What would your mate think?"

"She wouldn't need to know." The moment the words left his lips, he regretted them. He'd meant that his mate didn't need to know he'd offered the starring role in a kinky film. Not that he'd actually do it.

"Your father and I did not raise you to shirk your responsibilities. You're talking about Pride Holdings, the company your father and I built, so that we could pass it on to you. The company you've been learning to run since you were a child, because that's what you wanted. Your father entrusted Pride Holdings to you, not your uncle. It's not just a company with shares you can sell to the highest bidder. Pride Holdings is all about its people. People who will lose their jobs and entitlements if your uncle is left in charge. What about Cat and her boys?"

And there it was. Leo couldn't shirk his responsibilities to go off and become a porn star, or even a stay at home dad. Not unless he found Pride Holdings a better CEO than he could ever be, and no, that wasn't Uncle Jeremy.

"What do I need to do?" he asked.

"You need to get married. Look like you're ready to settle down, and that you plan to take up residence at Hea Sanctuary. That was always your dad's plan. Oh, he talked about retiring there, but could you see him in a small cottage, going fishing every day? Your dad didn't even go out hunting any more, unless you were home, and then only if you went with him. The house in the sanctuary was for you and your family, not us. Which is exactly what this is about. Starting a family to prove to the board you're in this for the long haul, to create a legacy to hand over to your children. So what we need is a society wedding, as soon as possible. No press invited, but we'll send out a press release with some photos. Shots that show you at your best, so they'll definitely feature prominently on the news sites. None of this photoshopped pornography nonsense."

Leo slammed down his fork. "Well, if I could just find my mate..."

"Oh, there's no time for that. Meeting and courting and planning a wedding to mark the start of forever...not to mention the honeymoon! Oh, no. What you need is a marriage of convenience. Someone young and pretty and unknown, who'll sign a prenup and accept the arrangement for a small fee, and then divorce you quietly when this is all over and you do find your fated mate."

Leo thought of his overflowing email inbox. Full of offers from women he couldn't stand to look at, let alone live with. He couldn't marry some stranger. Not even for Pride Holdings. "Mother, no one would agree to that."

"Oh, I have just the person. She's perfect. Wait until you meet her," Mother gushed. "Lily, dear, would you come out and meet my son? This is Lily, our new maid while Mrs Parker is off visiting her grandbaby. Lily, this is my son, Leo King."

TWENTY

Moray Castle was an impeccably kept Victorian mansion, with most of the rooms shrouded in dust sheets except on the monthly tour days, when the public was allowed to visit for a tour, guided by the housekeeper, of course. Tours Alica King, Lily's new boss, didn't expect her to actually give as part of her duties.

"I'm sure I remember enough of the family history to conduct a tour or two, as long as you make sure the rooms are presentable. Mrs Parker always dusted and vacuumed the morning before, and the morning after a tour, of course. People will bring their children to these things, and there's always one with sticky fingers!" Alicia shook her head as she gave a delicate shudder.

"I take it you don't have any children, then?" Lily asked, crossing her fingers. If it was just her and Alicia in the castle, her job was going to be an absolute breeze.

"Just my son, but he's not a child any more. He's very busy with work at the moment, so I'm sure you won't see much of him. If he's any trouble, just let me know. He might be a grown man, but I'm still his mother, and if he needs a scolding, I will see that he gets it."

Lily believed it.

Alicia would scold the king himself, if she thought he deserved it.

Lily was both maid and housekeeper, but Alicia kept a cook and gardener on staff, too, though neither of those lived on the property, so Lily would have occasional

kitchen duties, which mostly involved heating up whatever the cook had left for dinner, as per her strict instructions, and loading the dishwasher after dinner.

Much like at Mirror Academy, meals were included as part of her room and board, and Sher the chef had barely shaken her hand before demanding a list of both her dietary requirements and favourite dishes, which he insisted he would make better than anything she'd ever tasted.

Lily suspected Brenda could give him a run for his money, but dutifully gave him the list. She wasn't going to turn down a free meal made to order that she didn't have to cook. After choking down a couple of Chloe's leftover supposed superfood meals, Lily would happily eat just about anything.

Until Alicia's son arrived home.

Alicia King's son was Leo freaking King. The man she'd danced with at the ball, Bachelor of the Year, and all around hottie. Pity he was gay, but all the best ones were, right?

Lily did her best to avoid him – what if he recognised her? – and she managed fine until dinner on the third night.

The first course was something the Mirror Academy cooks had often made for the headmistress, which Lily had tasted, found she liked, and requested whenever it was her turn. Barszcz was a clear beetroot soup with mushroom dumplings, and as long as you didn't wear a white shirt, it was wonderful.

Well, until Alicia called, "Lily, dear, would you come out and meet my son?"

Then Lily had choked, spluttered, and spilled soup down the front of her shirt. A black uniform shirt, thank heavens, but it was still soaked. She swiped at it with a tea

towel, but short of changing shirts, there wasn't much she could do.

She dragged herself to the dining room and met the eyes of Leo King.

Who looked her up and down with a complete lack of passion – well, he was gay, wasn't he? – before he turned to his mother and said, "They'll take one look at her and know I married the maid."

Alicia blew out a frustrated breath. "If she were wearing her uniform, maybe, but in a grand wedding gown, with full hair and makeup...Lily will make the perfect bride. Won't you, dear?"

"I'm sorry, what?" Lily blurted out. She couldn't have heard right.

Leo gave a tight smile. "My mother wants you to marry me."

Lily smelled a rat. "So you don't really need a maid. What you want is a mail order bride."

Alicia laughed. "Oh, no, I do need a housekeeper. But my son needs a bride. You can be both, I'm sure. Look at it as a business arrangement. A few extra duties for a lot more pay. Whatever wardrobe you need for the role will be included in your pay, of course, and you can keep the clothes afterwards. Just the wedding and the occasional public appearance on my son's arm, until he's successfully squashed this hostile takeover at work, that's all."

Lily hadn't ever considered getting married – she'd been more focussed on getting her degree, then reviving her parents' company, but this just didn't feel right. "Why do you need to marry me?" She met Leo's eyes and held them. She'd happily scrub floors and toilets all day, but she'd be damned before she'd marry a man who didn't want her. Even if he was an amazing dancer.

Leo sighed. "I'm the CEO of Pride Holdings. My uncle is trying to get me thrown off the board so he can replace me as CEO and cancel the project that was my dad's dream before he died, so he can do some dodgy deals with another developer instead. I have to stop him, and the only way to do that is to demonstrate that I'm not the playboy porn star he says I am, and instead I'm a steady, family man who's looking toward the long term future of the company."

A playboy porn star? Really? Lily tried and failed to stifle a laugh. The man probably looked amazing naked and damn, could he move, but a porn star wouldn't have danced so chivalrously with her at the masquerade ball. It had to be the only time she'd ever danced with a guy who hadn't even tried to grope her.

But there was no recognition in his gaze now. What with the mask then and the maid uniform now, he evidently didn't remember her, so she needn't have worried. But it was one thing to work as his maid, and another entirely to marry the man. What if she had to dress up and dance with him? Surely he'd recognise her then?

If he even remembered her at all from that night. He probably danced with dozens of people at plenty of parties, and remembered none of them. It had just been a good time for him, and nothing more.

It wasn't like there'd been anything between them, either. She'd been there to blow off steam, one night of fun before finishing her project and graduating. The extra money might come in handy, too, especially if it took some time to bring her dad's company back up to full capacity, or if her graduation got delayed.

Leo held out his hand, just as he had the night of the ball. "Please, Lily? Will you marry me and help me save my dad's dream?"

She was seriously considering this. It was crazy, but... "What was this dream project he didn't finish before he died?"

Leo coughed. "Well, he wanted to build a sanctuary. A sort of eco village, where he wanted to retire. He called it Hea Sanctuary and..."

Hea Sanctuary? The eco village she'd done her final project on? The only project still on her dad's company books that was the key to resurrecting the company and building its reputation again? And Leo's uncle was going to shut it down?

Oh fuck that for a bag of bananas. She'd marry the devil himself to stop that shit from happening.

She took Leo's hand and shook it, closing the first business deal of her new career. "Sure, I'll marry you."

TWENTY-ONE

"I move that we shelve this sanctuary project, so that we can redirect all our resources to work with Tremotino on this significantly larger and infinitely more profitable project, which will likely see a return to investors before this year is out, which will continue over a number of years into the future," Uncle Jeremy said.

Leo intended to cross the boardroom to take his seat at the head, but instead he stopped in the doorway and folded his arms. "I propose that we have our HR department investigate Uncle Jeremy here for inappropriate use of company resources. He used a company credit card to buy the entire Andy's Adventures box set, and have it delivered by strippergram. Unfortunately, he gave the delivery address as my office instead of his, and both my assistant and myself were subjected to a performance that was entirely inappropriate for a work environment, before the poor delivery boy, in his enthusiasm, inserted a sex toy a little too far and Cat had to call an ambulance for the poor man. Between his screams of pain, he did say it was a requirement of the order, and he was just doing his job, which is also a clear violation of our company occupational health and safety policy. You'd better hope he doesn't die of an infection, Uncle Jeremy. I'm told a perforated bowel can be quite nasty."

Uncle Jeremy paled, but he still managed to say, "I know nothing of your wild escapades, nephew. Based on your past behaviour, I'm sure this is all your doing, and has nothing to do with me."

"Except that your credit card was on the order, which was sent from your work email address," Leo said.

"Evidently I've been hacked. Call IT and get them to sort it out." Jeremy blustered.

"Still doesn't explain the signed purchase order, with your handwritten signature on it," Leo said.

"Forged, I'm sure." Jeremy insisted.

Daniel, the finance director, coughed. "Perhaps we can investigate this matter later, after the board meeting?" From the way he pressed his lips together, he definitely intended to investigate.

Leo was counting on it.

Jeremy cleared his throat, though he still looked pale, as though he hadn't expected Leo and Cat to be able to trace the incident to him so fast. The man trusted Shenzi far too much...and didn't realise how much she needed this job, even at the cost of Jeremy's own position.

"If we could continue discussing the proposal at hand. The Tremotino project?" Jeremy prompted.

"Oh, no, let's start from the beginning. As I was late, dealing with an incident, I missed the justification behind the reallocation of resources that would allow us to take on the project, when I thought we were currently at capacity," Leo drawled, sinking into his seat.

"As you would know, if you'd read your emails this morning, the electrical engineering contractor on the sanctuary project is about to declare bankruptcy, and this, combined with the delays in council approval, the ongoing negotiations over the land sale, and the technical delays in the power system, will mean additional costs and delays that..."

Leo pulled out his phone, ignoring his uncle, and scrolled through the morning's emails. Nothing from Uncle Jeremy. "You must have forgotten to send me that one. Maybe because it only would have showed your ignorance about a project you have nothing to do with? The power system is constructed and currently in storage at a secret facility, where it will remain until the patents are approved, which will likely be well before we need to fire it up onsite. The sale contracts don't need to be signed until we get council approval, which the council assures me will be as soon as this controversial Tremotino project is squared away. This high risk project, with so many red flags the council want to go through it with a fine tooth comb just in case they've missed anything. I mean, they're planning to build on an important archaeological site, with a high density development on land clearly zoned for rural use, and don't get me started on the hydrogeology assessment...those buildings will sink into the ground like the House of Usher within the first year. And those are just the issues I know about. At this rate, it's the Tremotino project that should be set on a high shelf in a quarantine facility, and isolated like Chernobyl."

Jeremy spluttered. "Have you even seen Tremotino's business plan?"

Leo laughed. "Oh, yes. For both this new project, and the last two that still haven't gotten off the ground. He has a talent for picking land no one else would build on because a development simply isn't feasible, then writing business plans that read like fiction. A return on investment within the first year, before he's even obtained council approval? Really? When every single one of our successful projects has a timeline of two years at least. HEA Sanctuary is possibly the only exception, because it was set up with equity as full or part payment for most of the contractors involved, plus no land or infrastructure sales are final until the council approval comes through. So even if we wait ten years for the sanctuary, which we won't, but if we did...there would be no cost to the company, as we haven't paid for anything yet."

"But the engineering contractor is still bankrupt!" Jeremy snapped.

Leo sighed. "A person can be bankrupt, but not a company. I think you mean insolvent, and I don't see how that's even possible. VEE owns all its assets, has no debts or significant expenses while it's on hiatus, not to mention no directors who can call for voluntary administration even if the company was in trouble, until their offices reopen, which I have it on good authority will be well before we get council approval." Leo rose from his seat, planted his hands on the table and leaned forward. "You see, before his death, my father was in negotiations with VEE to acquire their company, as part of our own, and I still have all of their financial records for the due diligence, before the process was paused and the company went on hiatus. When it reopens, I'll be negotiating in Dad's place with the new directors, but if any deal is likely to see us earn profit within a year...it's that one. Which is why I cannot believe you could entertain even the slightest rumour that they're in financial distress. The company could liquidate its assets and all its staff could live like kings!"

"They are going bankrupt – you don't know what you're talking about!" Jeremy blustered.

"It sounds like all you have are rumours, and unfounded ones at that, so I propose we put this discussion on next meeting's agenda, where I hope you'll have proof of these baseless accusations, and I can hopefully give an update on the health and safety incident, and subsequent investigation." Leo glanced down at the agenda. "I see the performance reviews have all been completed. Shall we discuss the possible promotions?"

Jeremy rose from his seat, shaking with fury. "I'll give you rumours! Their bankruptcy will make the front cover of this weekend's papers! Then who'll look like an idiot?"

Leo forced himself to smile. "I doubt I'll have time to read the news this week, Uncle. You see, I'm getting married on the weekend. But don't worry, I'll be back at work on Monday, taking care of the company just as well as Dad used to do. I have a

responsibility to the board, as well as our staff...and by Monday, to my family as well."

"Who's the lucky man?" Jeremy snapped.

"The lucky lady's name is Lily, and I'm sure you'll see her pictures in the papers, instead of some imaginary bankruptcy announcement." Leo coughed. "Now, those promotions? I do like to see staff rewarded for their work."

TWENTY-TWO

As they approached the village bridal shop, Alicia paused. "Are you sure you don't want anyone else to come shopping with you? Your mother, or a friend, perhaps?"

Lily suspected her mother would turn in her grave at the thought of Lily marrying for any reason other than love, and her friends...well, the agreement she'd signed said she couldn't tell anyone this was a fake marriage, so even if she could, she didn't want any of the girls she'd gone to school with to witness how far she'd fallen. Let them see the pictures on the news and think it was a love match. Because if she saw any of them – even Anna or Elsa – she'd blurt out the truth in a moment, and the deal would be off.

"I'm doing this for the company, to make sure the project goes ahead," she told herself, as she pushed open the door.

And walked into a world made of a million meringues.

Lily blinked. Wall to wall racks were filled with white wedding dresses, with a few extra poufy numbers displayed on mannequins, like giant warnings of what not to wear on your wedding day, lest the guests mistake you for the cake. Then again, if you were going to knock over the cake, like that gay prince in that movie, no one would notice...

In the place of honour was a white and gold dress that ended in an actual train that stretched several metres behind the mannequin, in a widening puddle that did Lily's head in. How could you even walk in something like that? Let alone dance...

"I know what you're thinking. Unless you're a princess with a dozen bridesmaids behind you at all times, how could anyone wear that? But that's the secret, you see. I designed it for an engineering competition. It didn't win – I was beaten by a sort of folding chair with a built in drink cooler, as if anyone needed such a thing – but it did get second place. I think it's about your size, too. Would you like to try it on, so I can show you the magic those men simply didn't appreciate?"

Lily considered saying no, but then she glanced at Alicia. "Is it too much?" she asked.

Alicia laughed. "My dear, you're marrying Leo King. None of Fleur's dresses will ever be too much for that. The question you should be asking is whether you'll be happy wearing it on the front cover of all the papers." She clasped her hands to her chest. "My new daughter in law will be the most beautiful bride my son's ever seen, so he can fall in love with you all over again as you walk down the aisle."

Well, at least she had a clear project brief. Be beautiful, eye-catching and newsworthy, so even a gay man would take notice. She could work with that.

"Let's do this," Lily said.

TWENTY-THREE

Sitting in the dim little village church, just him and the vicar, Leo began to feel nervous. Like actual butterflies lived in his belly, multiplying and turning his insides into a mad rave, the longer he waited. He flexed his claws, then put them away. Hell, what he'd do for an hour with the Felix 5000 right now, but Mother had insisted he wasn't allowed to shift while Lily was with them, because she was human, and if she saw him in his beast form, he'd be responsible for breaching the secrecy of the supernatural world.

But she wasn't here yet. What if...?

"She'll be here soon. The car's coming up the drive, and my wife's waiting for her in the foyer, to make sure she looks her best," the vicar said, as if reading Leo's mind. "Then your photographer might want to take some pictures, too, but then she'll be here and we can start."

Right. The photographer. One Mum had hired specifically because of his reputation for selling stuff to the gossip rags.

Which meant he had to look at Lily like he at least liked her. Love was a stretch, for a human who couldn't possibly be his fated mate, but if he imagined for a moment that she was, maybe he could maintain the right misty-eyed expression his mother hoped for.

Sounds in the vestibule drew his attention. He turned, and time stopped. A rare ray of sunlight streamed through the church door, haloing her figure like she was an angel.

White...with rays of gold?

His mother and a strange woman he assumed was the vicar's wife bent over and did something to her skirt, before the vicar's wife hurried into the church toward the organ beside the altar. But she didn't sit down. Instead, she pulled out her phone, frowning at it for a moment, before tucking it into the dock that sat on top of the organ. A wedding march began to play through the church speakers.

Someone flicked on the church lights, and Leo truly saw his bride for the first time.

Her dark hair tumbled down her shoulders, covered by a gossamer thin veil shot through with threads of gold that glittered in the light. He hadn't imagined the gold on her dress, though it was mostly white. Gold hearts and curlicues emphasised her shapely breasts and narrow waist beneath the bodice, before arrowing down to meet the barely-there gold stripes that highlighted every curve of her fluted, bell-shaped skirt.

The light reflected off her veil, hiding her face, until she finally reached him, standing before the altar. Then she lifted the veil, flipping it so it hung down between her shoulders, and looked up at him.

Leo's heart jumped into his throat. She was beautiful. Cupid's bow lips the colour of roses, beneath golden brown eyes that looked more than a little worried.

Right. He was staring at her like he wanted to devour her. Probably because he kind of did. If he hadn't met his fated mate...he could absolutely fall for this girl. If he'd met her at Tremotino's ball instead...he'd have danced with her all night, then begged to see what she looked like beneath the dress.

Idly, he wondered if her underwear had gold embroidery on it too. Whether it was as sheer as her veil, or completely opaque, only hinting at the treasures that lay

underneath while clinging to her skin to tantalise him with the outline of her perfection. He'd peel each layer off, one at a time, feasting with his eyes before tasting her with his tongue...

Someone cleared his throat. The vicar. Right. Yes.

"If you're ready, we can start the ceremony," the vicar said.

Leo adjusted his suddenly too-tight pants as he dragged his eyes away from the bride he couldn't wait to bed and to the man who was about to marry them.

"Now turn to face each other, hold hands, and repeat after me..." the vicar said.

Leo waited for Lily to say her vows, before it was his turn. She didn't stumble, but his mouth was so dry his voice failed him twice before he'd finally succeeded at getting the words out.

He managed to get the ring onto her finger first try, though, even though he stumbled over the words. Oh, what did his bride think of him? He could charm the board or a shareholders meeting without hesitation, but with her golden eyes on him, he was a stammering teenager all over again.

Yet not once did she look annoyed or upset. She just regarded him patiently, until it was her turn to do what the vicar said.

"You may now kiss the bride."

Thank fuck for that. This was something his mouth wouldn't mess up. He slid his hands around her warm, silk-clad waist, wishing he was stroking skin and not just fabric, pulling her closer. Then he ducked his head, as she lifted hers, and their lips met.

Fireworks blazed behind his closed eyes, so he forced them open, so that he might see the delicate brush of her eyelashes on her faintly blushing cheek – for she still had her eyes closed – as her heavenly taste hit him.

Oh god, he didn't ever want to stop kissing this woman. He didn't care that she was his mother's maid, a human and not his fated mate. He wanted her more than anyone or anything he'd ever desired in his life.

Someone cleared their throat.

Leo tore his lips away from Lily's, a growl rising in his throat, ready to tear out the jugular of the man who'd dared to interrupt them.

"You still need to sign the register," the vicar said, paling as he stepped back.

Leo forced his claws to retract. "Of course."

Leo, then Lily stepped up to the altar to sign the register, before his mother and the vicar's wife witnessed it, followed by the vicar adding his bit to make the marriage official. All the while, a weaselly man with a camera snapped endlessly, from every angle. He wanted to growl at the man for getting too close to Lily, but then his mother said, "Put your arm around her and smile for the camera, son," and he'd remembered why he wasn't allowed to dismember the man.

Then he'd curled an arm around Lily's waist and his fake smile turned real as her softness pressed against his side. His bride. His, damn it, his!

"While the sun's still shining, why don't we go out to the churchyard for some more photos?" Mother suggested.

As long as he didn't need to let go of Lily, that was fine by him.

He posed, he smiled, and he even got to kiss her again, though it was far too brief, in his opinion. But when the vicar's wife played more music and insisted he dance with Lily, Leo had never enjoyed a waltz more in his life. The song, alas, was too short, and it wasn't long before he was forced to pose again, until the good weather ended and the drizzle began.

Finally, Mother said, "Shall we go home? The cook has prepared a special wedding dinner, and I'm sure you're both eager to enjoy your wedding night together."

Oh, fuck yes. He couldn't wait to get her out of that dress.

TWENTY-FOUR

Leo King was the best actor Lily had ever seen. Anyone who'd seen him today might have actually believed he was in love with her, from the moment she entered the church, through the ceremony, photos and dancing, and every glance he shot her way in between. The photographer clicked feverishly with his camera, capturing everything, as Lily did her best to remember all the things she'd learned in her deportment classes at Mirror Academy. How to angle her head, how to smile just right, how to make sure her figure showed to its greatest advantage – stuff she thought she'd only use at job interviews and work-related media coverage, like the opening of one of her company's projects, yet here she was, using it all. She sent a silent thanks to Headmistress Laima for making the classes compulsory.

By the time Alicia announced it was time to go home, Lily almost believed Leo was attracted to her. She couldn't deny that she was attracted to him. Pressed up against his hard body for photo after photo, the searing heat in his kiss, the possessive way he pulled her close...and then when they waltzed! She'd loved dancing with him at the ball, but this was something else. Much more intimate, as he led her effortlessly across the lawn in the steps she only vaguely remembered from dance classes.

When they climbed into the car, Leo's arm went around her so naturally, she lifted her face for a kiss. It was their first moment of privacy as a married couple and she intended to enjoy it, as if this was a real marriage, and there was actual love, as well as lust, between them.

Then Alicia opened the door, insisting Leo move into the middle, and the moment was broken. "Well, I think that went well. I saw a selection of the photos he took, and

they are perfect for a news story about a secret wedding. Lily, I don't know how we can possibly repay you, aside from doubling the sum we'd already agreed upon, of course, which I'll do the moment we get home. I wouldn't dream of asking you to serve dinner after a day like this. I'll see to dinner, and you're welcome to join us, if you wish. Sher said he'd prepared one of your favourites for us all, so it's only fitting."

Leo's side, warm and hard as he pressed against her, suddenly became rigid as he strained to put some distance between them. Ah, the act was over, and he was himself again. As gay as Dick's hat band, and more attracted to the chauffeur than he was to her.

"No, it's fine. I'll deal with dinner. Especially if it's something I'm more familiar with. I'll know how to prepare it properly," Lily said. She glanced down. "I just need to get out of this dress. I wouldn't want to damage it." There were already a couple of grass stains on the train, which the photographer had insisted on laying on the damp grass for some pictures. Lily much preferred it folded and tied up, making the skirt even more fairytale-like with its added volume, which had made dancing in it surprisingly easy. The woman in the bridal shop had been absolutely right about the dress being a marvel of engineering. Definitely deserving of first prize. "I would prefer to send it out for dry cleaning instead of washing it myself. I don't have much experience with silk."

"Of course, dear," Alicia said. "We'll need to arrange a suitable wardrobe for you, for when you're accompanying Leo to events, too. Would you prefer to visit the designers in person, or have them come to you?"

Neither. Wedding dress shopping had been weird enough. Lily was much more at home in practical clothing, or a business suit when circumstances required one. "Maybe we should wait to see if there are dress requirements with the invitations before we order anything?" Lily suggested. "I'd hate for you to waste money on a

dress I won't get to wear." The cost of the wedding dress had been eyewatering enough, but Alicia had been adamant that Lily look like as much like a princess as possible, and as she was paying...Lily hadn't been willing to argue. Besides, the wedding dress was rather lovely. If she ever got married for real, she might have picked something just like it. If she could afford it. Maybe Alicia would let her take the dress with her when it was time for the inevitable divorce.

When they arrived back at Moray Castle, Leo stalked off without a word. Probably in need of some alone time, after today's marathon acting role. Lily didn't blame him.

It had to be hard to pretend you were in love with someone, for all the world and the photographer to see, when your tastes ran elsewhere.

Of course, as she watched his shapely backside perfectly outlined in his suit pants as he stalked off, she had to suppress a sigh. A wedding night with a man like Leo King would be wonderful. She hoped when he found the right man, he appreciated the well-muscled perfection properly.

Meanwhile, she had to get back into her maid's uniform, and see to dinner. Back to reality. It was for the best, Lily told herself, as she stroked the silk skirt one last time.

TWENTY-FIVE

Leo flexed his claws around his cup of coffee. He'd never gone so long without shifting before, but he'd promised Mother he wouldn't, with Lily in the house, so the Felix 5000 had stayed in the cupboard and he was frustrated in more ways than he could count. Saturdays were Lily's day off, so he had to make his own breakfast today, but it wasn't like putting smoked salmon on toast was hard, so he wasn't going to complain. Well, until the gate intercom buzzed.

Three women who looked like they'd stepped out of a beauty salon got out of a car. The driver then unloaded a stack of suitcases, before driving off in a spray of gravel, leaving them standing at the gate.

Leo imagined that rideshare driver wasn't going to earn five stars, or whatever the top rating was. The women did not look happy. Instead, they looked huffy.

He pressed a button so he could hear what they were saying.

"Of course this is the right place. It said in the paper that she's the new lady of Moray Castle. It has hundreds of rooms. Plenty of space for us. She has to take us in – we're the only family she has!" the platinum blonde said. Or maybe it was just grey. She dressed like one of the members of Mother's tennis club, but her voice betrayed the fact that she didn't share Mother's aristocratic breeding. Actually, he suspected she had more in common with the rats they hadn't been able to eradicate in the old stables.

"Do they even have internet this far out? I barely have one bar on my phone, and I

need to make a video for my channel or my views are going to plummet." One of the girls held her phone up in the air, as if searching for a better signal.

Something clattered to the floor and shattered. Lily stood in the doorway, staring at the intercom, her face whiter than the broken china shards at her feet.

"Do you know these people?" Leo asked.

Lily looked like she wished she didn't. "That's my stepmother, and my two stepsisters. How could they know I'm here?"

"I think our wedding photos finally hit the front page of the tabloids. I imagine everyone knows where you live now. Now, I don't know if Mother mentioned this, but our staff normally don't bring guests to the castle without asking us first, and while it's a little different for you, being the lady of the castle, at least on paper, it would be nice if you'd mentioned your family were coming to visit. Mother's been the lady of the manor so long, she'll want to greet them properly, and she'll be most put out that they arrived before she was up this morning. Next time you invite them..."

"I didn't invite them! I came here to get away from them!" Lily blurted out.

Leo understood that family could be complicated. Look at Uncle Jeremy. But he wasn't sure what to do in this situation. He'd had women try to stalk him at home before, and a quick run up to the gates in his shifted form usually scared them off quickly enough. His mother would kill him if he shifted in front of Lily, though.

Not to mention...he didn't want to scare her away. He'd reminded himself dozens of times a day that theirs was a marriage of convenience, and not the real thing, not to mention she was technically his employee, so it was all kinds of wrong for him to lust after her, but his dick had other ideas, and his dreams...oh, god, if Lily knew about his dreams...

"What do you want me to do?" he asked her. He knew what he wanted to do, and it definitely involved ignoring the women outside the gate.

"I don't know. Get rid of them. I don't want to see them. They probably just want me to come home and clean up after them!" Lily snapped.

This was the first time he'd seen her angry, and by god, she was beautiful. But she was his employee, he reminded himself.

"Clean up after them, like you do for us here?" Leo asked.

She made an angry sound in her throat. "No, not like here. The contract I signed with Alicia provides me with room and board, fair pay and time off. They want to leech off me the way they did my dad. Until he died."

"I'm sorry about your father," he said.

Lily shook her head. She looked lost. "And I'm sorry about yours, too. But I...can you just get rid of them? Trust me, you do not want them in your house."

Leo nodded. Deliberately broadening his brogue, he activated the microphone on the intercom. "Please state your business at Moray Castle."

The silver-haired one leaned in close to the camera, so Leo could see the wrinkles at the corner of her eyes that denoted her as the stepmother. "I'm here to visit my daughter, Lily. I can't believe she forgot to invite us to the wedding, but we're willing to forgive her and we've come to help her settle into her role as the lady of the house."

"My arse she has," Lily hissed.

Leo had to fight not to laugh. Good thing he hadn't activated the camera, so they

couldn't see his face, or Lily behind him. "I'm afraid Mr and Mrs King are away on their honeymoon."

The stepmother swore. Then she summoned a smile. "Can you tell me when they'll be back?" she asked sweetly.

Exactly like one of those vipers at the tennis club. "Dunno. Could be weeks, could be months. They're newlyweds, you know."

She fought to keep the smile on her face. "Well, then I suppose we'll just have to wait for her to return. Can you prepare three guest rooms and send someone to pick up our luggage?"

Lily shook her head furiously, mouthing an emphatic NO.

"Canna do that, ma'am. The house is all closed up while the laird's away, and there's just me, the caretaker, and no room in my cottage for you to stay. There's only one wee bed, nae big enough for me to share with three lassies like yourselves." He pretended to perk up. "I can call you a cab to take you down to the village. The pub has a bunkhouse above the bar, but they're only allowed to use it for staff accommodation, so you might have to pour a few pints if you want to sleep there." Leo pulled out his phone, and ordered a taxi. "There'll be a car coming for you in a few minutes, ma'am. Tell him Old MacDonald sent you, so he'll know it was me." He thumbed off the microphone, before he burst out laughing.

Lily's arms wrapped around him in a hug he was already returning before he'd realised it. God, she felt good in his arms. Like heaven and forever all bundled up into the sweetest package. "You are the best actor ever! I thought you pretending to be straight on our wedding day was amazing. But this...Old MacDonald? Really?"

Leo just laughed right along with her, enjoying the embrace for as long as she

allowed it. Surely she'd come to her senses in a moment, and realise this probably wasn't appropriate, but for now...wait, what had she said?

"What do you mean...pretending to be straight? I'm not gay, lass. Never was, never will be. I'm..." He stepped back, gesturing at the bulge in his pyjama pants, then turned away as he tried to think unsexy thoughts to calm Little Leo down as fast as possible. "I like ladies," he finished.

"But I thought...that's why you married me, wasn't it? So people would think you're straight?" Her voice had this slightly hysterical edge to it.

"I married you so I could keep my job as CEO of Pride Holdings. The board want someone steady and trustworthy. A family man who's looking toward the long term future of the company. The papers have been full of crazy stories, saying I'm a playboy, or I'm gay, or a porn star..."

Lily laughed. "Seriously? What movie are you supposed to have starred in?"

At least they'd stolen a screenshot from a classic. "Andy's Anal Adventures episode sixty-nine."

Lily screwed up her nose. "I haven't seen that one. Okay, I haven't watched much porn ever, to be honest. But I haven't even heard of Andy or that he had so many adventures..."

"They. Andy's genderfluid, and their pronouns are they and them," Leo said. God, listen to him. He'd watched one episode, and Andy had turned him into an acolyte. What was the world coming to when a porn star could teach the world more about non-binary pronouns than any other public figure? "I'm sure we have it on one of the streaming services, if you ever want to watch it."

Lily's cheeks reddened. "I...think I'm okay, thanks. Oh, look the car's here. Please, please, let them get in and leave..."

When the stepmother looked to be shouting at the cab driver, folding her arms and shaking her head, Leo leaned into the intercom microphone and turned it on. "If you don't get in the car, ma'am, I'll have to call the police down at the village. The laird's very particular about trespassers, and there are dangerous wild animals in the woods. You won't want to be still outside the gates come night time."

The three women dashed for the car, leaving the poor driver to load their suitcases into the back.

In a moment, they were gone.

Leo found Lily staring at him. "Alicia didn't mention anything about wild animals. What should I be watching out for in the woods?"

Him, mostly, but he couldn't tell her that, especially as he wouldn't be shifting around her. "There are a lot of deer, and we do see wild boar on occasion. It's private property, so only we're allowed to hunt them, and I don't have much time for sport lately." He wouldn't for a while, not with Lily here. Not that he needed to eat fresh venison any time soon. He was pretty sure he'd caught the last wild boar a few months back, and he doubted the ones outside his lands would be looking for new territory before autumn. "As long as you keep to the gardens and stay out of the woods, you should be fine."

Lily nodded, colour returning to her face as she knelt to sweep up the broken cup she'd dropped earlier. The shards tinkled into the dustbin, then she washed her hands methodically, like she was scrubbing up for surgery. Only when she'd dried her hands did she turn around and meet his eyes. "Thank you for sending them away. I'm sorry you had to see that. Is there anything else you need me to do? I can load the breakfast

dishes in the dishwasher, if you want."

Leo shook his head. "No, it's your day off. Mrs Parker has spent most of my life training me to stack the dishwasher properly when she's away. I'll never hear the end of it if I was lazy enough to leave my plate in the sink instead of dealing with it."

Lily gave another curt nod. "I guess I'll go do whatever I was doing before we got uninvited guests." She marched out of the kitchen, and up the stairs.

Leo let out a breath he hadn't even realised he'd been holding. She'd seemed more scared of her stepfamily than the animals in the woods. He'd been this close to telling her he turned into a lion, just to see her reaction. Supernatural secrecy, blown in a second. Almost, but not quite.

Something tinked against china. Leo looked down and swore. He'd somehow extended his claws right through the salmon and the toast, and cream cheese was oozing everywhere. He'd better eat it before she came back, or he'd have some explaining to do.

TWENTY-SIX

Leo King wasn't gay. He was straight. And he was attracted to her.

But he was such an amazing dancer...

Lily had to remember theirs was only a fake marriage, not a real one. All men had morning wood, and she'd hugged him, which probably hadn't helped. His hard-on hadn't meant anything. Lily flung herself backward onto her bed, hugging herself.

Leo's arms had felt good around her, as had his muscles when she'd been pressed up against him.

She let herself relive the moment, just once, because she knew she couldn't let it happen again. If she did, it was only a matter of time before she fell for him, and it would break her heart when their arrangement ended, as it must. Fake marriages only ended well in romance novels, and hers wasn't that kind of story. No, in her story, she became a CEO of her own company, instead of falling for the CEO of another.

Her phone beeped, like it agreed with her.

Lily reached for it. The alert was for a message from Rosalind:

Did you get your degree yet? Oh, and congratulations. Did you meet him at the masquerade ball?

If her stepmother knew, then so did the rest of the world. Lily sighed. If only she

could tell Rosalind the truth, but there'd been a non-disclosure clause in the prenuptial agreement.

Still, it would be nice to talk to someone who might understand...

Lily hit the button to call Rosalind instead of replying.

The phone rang twice before Rosalind answered. "You met him at the ball, didn't you? That's why you were rushing to get to the coach. Was it love at first sight? Is he good in bed? I mean, they say he's a porn star who's done it in every position, including a few of his own invention. Have you done it the royal way yet?"

Lily couldn't help but laugh. "I don't know. What's the royal way?"

"Apparently you sort of sit on him side-saddle and..."

Lily laughed so hard she almost choked. Rosalind was such a visual person, she could probably draw it in a few strokes so accurately, she'd make a porn star blush, but the way she described things with words...it sounded like this style of sex required six legs, eight arms and possibly at least four people to work. Not something Lily would ever do – even if Leo King was interested.

"Anyway, is it good?" Rosalind finished.

Lily had to take a moment to catch her breath. "Um, I wouldn't know. I...we haven't done anything like that."

"Well, when you do, can you tell me? Because if it's amazing as it sounds, I totally need to try it one day. Well, if I'm ever with some who...one day. When finances aren't so tight and I'm not so worried about my dad and his business and...so do you have your degree yet? They're posting them out, because the school closed before

they could hold the graduation ceremony, and I was really looking forward to crossing the stage in one of those hideous graduation gowns, though we probably couldn't afford to go now, anyway, so it's probably for the best." Rosalind didn't sound entirely happy about it.

She'd been asking Lily a while back about working at the Academy to cover her room and board, too. Lily thought back over all the things Rosalind had said. "Wait...you said you're worrying about your dad and his business. Is he all right?"

Rosalind sighed. "Physically, yes. Though I think the stress is getting to him. I can't believe the difference a year can make. A year ago, when we started the school year, he was absolutely over the moon about this huge deal he'd scored to build an entire prefabricated housing development. But it wasn't just any housing development. It was this ecovillage, with state of the art technology to minimise environmental impact, and live in harmony with the surrounding forest. It was so amazing, I even did my final design project on it. A modular housing design that could be sized up or down to meet the owner's requirements, as well as the north-south orientation of the block. Of course, they couldn't use a student design in the ones he built this year, but the architect was looking to use a version of my design for stage two of the development. Only the whole thing's been delayed, so Dad now has a construction yard full of finished houses he can't ship to the site and get paid for, bills for all the construction materials he can't pay for, and he can't take on any new projects because there's no space in the yard to build anything, and his suppliers won't deliver any more materials until he pays them for the last lot."

Lily's relief curled into a tight knot of dread in her chest. This was the first she'd heard about delays, other than Leo's uncle. Then again, they couldn't send the houses to the site unless all the power infrastructure was in place, and that was definitely her job, once she got her hands on her degree and her dad's company. "Is this the Hea Sanctuary project, by any chance?"

"Yes! Have you heard of it?"

"I'll be one of the consulting engineers on the project, as soon as my degree arrives," Lily bit out, hoping the delays weren't her fault. Having her dad's company in a precarious position was one thing, but putting other people at risk of bankruptcy, like Rosalind's dad...

"Ooh, then go check the mail now. I'll wait," Rosalind said.

"The letterbox is at the end of the drive. It's a good fifteen or twenty minutes' walk, one way. The cook usually brings the post up with him when he arrives, but he had yesterday and today off, so I don't know if anyone else checks it. It could be somewhere in the house already, only I haven't seen where."

Rosalind sighed. "All right. I won't wait, then. You go hunting for the mail, and text me when you find it, okay? And promise me you'll go dancing to celebrate when you get your degree. If we were back at school now, I'd totally book one of the dance studios so we could dance till we drop, but I'm sure there's somewhere you can dance where you are."

Oh, yes. The moment she had her degree in her hands, dancing was definitely on the agenda. "I promise." Lily took a deep breath. "And tell your dad not to worry about the project, okay? There are delays in any project, and when you're trying to do something no one's ever done before, there are usually a few extra bumps along the way. These ones will get sorted and everything will work out. You'll see."

"I sure hope so. Now. Check. Dance. Then text me." Rosalind ended the call.

Lily had to laugh. Rosalind had done a wonderful job of distracting her. Who cared if Leo King was gay, straight, or anything in between? She'd come here to do a job, until she was ready to take over her dad's company. If her degree was sitting in the

letter box right now, she needed to get her hands on it, because she had a whole lot of work to do.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Leo just couldn't seem to sit still. Normally, on his days off, he'd shift and run around the estate in his beast form, but he couldn't do that with Lily here. It was enough to make him want to go into the office and work.

If he had a cottage at Hea Sanctuary, he'd be able to take off and run around there instead, but it would be a long time before that was a reality.

Maybe he could persuade his mother to send Lily out on some errands in town. Picking up the dry cleaning, or buying a new dress for the next charity ball he'd no doubt been invited to, which meant she'd have to come, too.

He hurried downstairs to his mother's morning room, where she always sat to have her first cup of tea of the day. He found her sorting the mail, a half-full teacup at her elbow.

"Is there anything interesting?" he asked. "Any invitations to events Lily will need a new dress for?"

Mother glanced up over the top of her reading glasses. "No. Apparently, she's not even going to her own graduation. She had her degree posted here instead. Did you know our housekeeper is also a licensed engineer?"

An engineer? Why was she working as a housekeeper? Engineers could earn way more money, or at least the ones Pride Holdings contracted did.

Even more reason to send her away, so she wouldn't see anything that would reveal his secret.

"Could you ask her to go and pick up my drycleaning?" he asked. "Or take my suits out for drycleaning, then pick them up?" Whatever got her off the property.

"It's the poor girl's day off. If it's so important to you, take your own drycleaning into the village. You might even see her there. She's gone out, she said, and she won't be back until dark."

"She's gone?" he blurted out.

Mother returned to sorting the mail. "That's what she said. So if you're getting the zoomies like some common house cat, I suggest you shift sooner rather than later, so you can get it out of your system before the poor girl comes home."

"Yes, Mum."

Leo didn't wait. He was out the door and headed for the woods within moments, running as fast as his legs would carry him. Once he reached the shelter of the trees, he shed his clothes and shifted to paws. He'd come back for the Felix 5000, once he'd had a proper run through the forest. Maybe even a successful hunt...there were way too many deer about. One less couldn't be a bad thing.

He leaned forward to snuffle at the leaf litter, to see if he could scent some suitable prey. A deer would do, if he couldn't find a boar. Even a rabbit or a badger, but they weren't as much of a challenge as a big buck or a boar with some fight in them.

Only...it wasn't prey he smelled.

MATE! His senses went into overdrive, no longer hungering for the taste of some

animal. His mate had been in these woods, and recently, too. Perhaps she was still here.

He forgot about Lily, his uncle and Pride Holdings, even Hea Sanctuary. No, his thoughts were consumed entirely with the hunt, and what his mate would taste like when he caught her.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Apparently, the only place to dance in the village was at the pub, and the music was from an old jukebox that had been old when Alicia had first moved to Moray Castle. Yet Lily had dutifully trooped upstairs to change into a dress suitable for dancing with her newly minted Bachelor of Engineering in the envelope tucked under her arm.

Alicia had even graciously offered her the use of the castle's collection of cars, so she wouldn't have to walk to the village. Lily had seen all the fancy cars lined up in the old stables, but she wasn't game to drive any of them. Plus the village pub was probably home to a bunch of drunk old men, the sort she didn't want staring at her as she danced. Or worse, joining her. It was like the masquerade ball all over again – she wanted to dance, but she wanted to do it outside, alone, where there was space to move and no one to judge. Somewhere like Moray Castle's ballroom, if the place hadn't been shrouded in dust sheets.

So when she headed out the front door, instead of taking the drive to the garage or the gate, she headed for the woods. All she needed was a small clearing, where she could dance her heart out with no one watching.

As if in answer to her unspoken prayer, a path led from the garden gate, through the trees, to a clearing almost as big as the ballroom in the house. The sort of place where she imagined the castle's medieval residents might have celebrated bonfire night, or some pagan ritual.

She'd brought a tiny portable speaker, but there was no way that would work for such

a large space, so Lily slipped on a pair of earbuds instead, cranking up the volume just enough before tucking her phone into her pocket. She wanted to get lost in the music, and with no one around, it would be perfectly safe to not pay any attention to her surroundings. Any sensible wild animal would sense her clumsy stomping a mile away, and head in the opposite direction.

Right. She had the perfect song at the start of her favourite dancing playlist. It was time to celebrate.

"This one's for you, Dad," she whispered as she began to dance.

TWENTY-NINE

At the edge of the clearing, Leo stopped. In the exact spot where he'd normally place the Felix 5000 stood the prey every shifter dreamed of, but few found.

His fated mate.

Only she wasn't standing still, she was dancing. Just as irresistibly as she had at the masquerade ball.

How she was here, how she'd found him, he did not know...he was supposed to be the hunter, on his private lands that were spelled to keep out intruders.

Then she turned around, and he knew.

Lily.

She'd been his mate all along.

He roared in triumph.

Lily stilled. She turned, and met his heated gaze.

He expected her to run. After all, wasn't that what any normal human would do, faced with a beast of his size and ferocity?

But Lily was no ordinary human. She was his mate, the one human he was allowed to

reveal his secrets to.

Leo padded forward.

Lily held out her hand, like she might to a housecat, so that he could sniff it.

Her scent was unmistakeable. He scented her, then licked her hand. He wanted to taste all of her, but not in this form. No, to do what he wanted, he needed to shift back into a man.

THIRTY

The roar was loud enough to hear over the music, and Lily's heart stopped for a moment, waiting for her brain to catch up. The only time she'd heard a roar like that had been at the zoo, a long time ago, and while Leo had said there were wild animals in these woods, he hadn't mentioned...

A lion.

A massive lion who stood as high as her shoulder, with a mane she wanted to sink her fingers into and stroke, to see if he was really as soft as he looked.

The rest of him didn't look soft at all. The powerful predator could take her down in one swipe of his enormous paw. He'd be on her in one bound, he was that close, so she knew it was far too late to run. Even climbing a tree was pointless, as she suspected the big cat was better at that than she would ever be.

If she was going to die, then she refused to go out cowering in fear. Nope. She was going to find out what that mane felt like, even if it was the last thing she did.

Lily stretched out her hand.

And the lion came to her. Like he wasn't a ravenous beast, but he was just as curious as she was.

This had to be the lion she'd seen at Tremotino Castle. Lions were hardly a species native to Scotland. The real question was...how had he followed her here?

His mane was rougher than she expected, like her own hair after she'd been swimming in the sea, before she washed out the salt. His fur was softer, more like velvet, but still resistant, like she was rubbing him the wrong way.

He licked her hand with his scratchy tongue, and she held her breath. Her stepmother had owned a cat when she'd first moved in with Dad, and licking was always followed by savage biting. Was this a precursor to the moment when he'd bite her hand off, or worse?

At least she could say she'd spent her last moments patting a real, live lion. If there was an afterlife, that was definitely something to tell her parents, if she'd be seeing them very soon. Lily close her eyes. She'd accept death now, if it came at the point of those enormous paws or fangs, but that didn't mean she had to watch him attack.

She felt his hot breath on her face. "Just do it," she grumbled, before she actually caught a whiff of that breath. She expected rancid meat, or fish, like her stepmother's cat. But he smelled incongruously like fresh brewed coffee. That couldn't be right. Caffeine wasn't good for cats.

Lily forced her eyes open.

The lion was gone, and in front of her, stark naked, crouched... "Leo? What the hell?"

He rose to his feet, not even bothering to hide...oh, hell, he was huge. And definitely turned on. Definitely not gay. She raised her gaze to his face, so she wasn't looking at his...weapon, only to find herself caught in his unblinking, burning desire.

Desire that seemed to burn her from the inside out, completely ignoring the fact that she'd almost died and the lion couldn't be far away. She should be thinking about running to somewhere she could barricade herself inside, before the lion returned, instead of climbing her boss like a tree and rubbing herself against him like a cat

marking its territory.

He grinned. "You're my fated mate. I didn't know for sure until I scented you again, but now I'm certain. I'm going to shred that prenup the moment we get back to the house. But first...we have a marriage to consummate." He advanced, backing her up until her back hit a tree trunk. Then his lips claimed hers and Lily lost the ability to think.

That hard body pressed against hers. Hot and hard and...why was she still wearing clothes? She'd never wanted a man more in her life. One who was obviously ready for her...

But not here. There was still... "The lion. We should get inside before he comes back," she said breathlessly.

Leo chuckled. "He won't come until he's called. And if you claim me as I intend to claim you, it'll be your call he comes to far more eagerly than mine. You'll see."

His words made no sense, but then he was kissing her again, and he was the one rubbing against her. Rubbing her in exactly the right places, or they would be if she wasn't wearing so many clothes. She shimmied out of her knickers, until they tangled around her ankles for a moment before she kicked them away. Hiking up her skirt, she hitched first one leg around his hip, then the other. Hot and hard and oh god she wanted to feel him inside her so much.

Who was rubbing against who now?

"Leo," she moaned, so close to coming she could taste it.

"Come for me, my mate," he growled.

God help her, she did. She came so hard, she tasted blood, like she'd bitten her lip to hold in the scream.

Then she opened her eyes to see Leo touching a hand to his own mouth, which came away bloody.

She'd bitten him? Oh, fuck. "I'm so sorry!" she began.

But Leo only grinned, licking his bloody lip. "I'm not. You're fiercer than I'd dreamed possible. You're perfect. But if I don't take you now, I'm going to explode. So you'd better tell me now – do you want this?"

Hot, hard and huge, he rubbed his cock against her clit, teasing her with another orgasm even as the aftershocks of the first still left her knees too weak to stand.

Her knees might be weak, but her resolve was stronger than the steel struts that would support the infrastructure of Hea Sanctuary. Lily looked Leo in the eye. "What I want is for you to give me another orgasm as big as the first one, so I know I'm not dreaming. And when I come, I want to feel your cock deep inside me."

His thrust took her by surprise, but then she was so lost in the sensation, the sheer size of him stretching her, that her gasp turned into a moan of pleasure. He was a perfect fit, like he was made for her.

"Anything for you, my mate," he growled, as he began to pound into her.

Another orgasm? God, it hit her like a wrecking ball, as did the second. And still, he kept up his relentless rhythm, as she heard her breathless voice begging for more.

When she came for the third time, she couldn't hold back her scream, but he drowned it out with a loud roar, reminiscent of the now absent lion. It wasn't until she opened

her eyes that she became aware of a slight sting at the side of her throat.

Blood stained his lip again, but also his sharper than usual teeth. "Now I've marked you, as you've marked me. We're mated, as was fated. I can't wait to hear you roar, or to hunt with you at my side."

Her thoughts still coalescing after that final, mind-shattering orgasm, Lily struggled to piece together what he meant.

Then he withdrew, leaving her leaning against the tree, and he seemed to blur before her. A moment later, where Leo King had stood in all his naked glory, now the lion stood, his eyes still burning with desire.

Wait...Leo was the lion?

He could have said something, instead of scaring the life out of her.

Fear morphed into fury. Lion or man, she wasn't going to stand for this. Not after they'd just had the best sex of her life.

She let out a roar of her own, wordless, but giving him no illusions about how angry she was. Her whole body tingled as fury burned through her. She was going to kick his furry arse.

Lily leaped, paws outstretched. Paws? With claws, too. Lion. Somehow, she'd turned into a lion, too. No, a lioness. The real hunters in the pride. Oh, he was in such deep shit right now.

Leo grinned, then turned tail and ran, with Lily hot on his heels.

THIRTY-ONE

The next morning, Lily woke in an unfamiliar bed. Well, only for a moment, until she realised it was Leo's bed, and he was sprawled on it beside her, ready for round...actually, she had no idea what number this would be. She'd chased him as a lion, and caught him on the lawn outside the house, where they'd wrestled for a bit as lions before shifting back to human and rolled around on the lawn a bit more...then he'd carried her upstairs to his room where they'd made love several times through the night, until she'd fallen asleep, so thoroughly sated her body was damn near singing.

After a night of so much gratuitous sex – not to mention turning into a lioness and back again – she shouldn't be eyeing Leo's morning glory and wondering whether to wake him to slake the burning need between her thighs.

She sighed. She was back on duty today. She had breakfast to make, dusting to do...doing Leo was not in her job description, no matter how much she enjoyed it. Lily sat up, setting her feet on the ground, where they belonged.

A strong arm circled her waist, pulling her toward him.

"Where are you going? I've been waiting for you to wake up. I've been wondering what you taste like, and I've spent the last hour fantasising about what sounds you'd make if I buried my head between your thighs and made you come with just my fingers and my tongue."

Oh fuck. If she'd been wearing underwear, it would have evaporated at the heat rising from her core at the very thought...

She turned. Just one look at the sheer perfection of his naked body, laid out on the bed beside her, was enough to make her mouth very, very dry...a terrible contrast to the wetness between her thighs.

She wanted to straddle his lap and ride him to Valhalla.

"I have work to do," she reminded him.

The arm around her waist tightened. "No, you don't. I'm firing you. You can't be my wife and my maid. Three months' severance pay in lieu of notice, or whatever you want. What's mine is yours now, anyway, or it will be as soon as I dig out that prenup and destroy it. You won't need to work ever again." He grinned. "Here, I'll even make you late for work, to give Mum grounds to fire you." He lifted her almost effortlessly, setting her down exactly where she wanted to be, with his hot, hard cock poised to give her as much pleasure as any woman could want.

How could any woman resist Leo King?

Lily angled her hips just right, before impaling herself on his length. God, he felt so good inside her. Exactly like they were made for each other.

THIRTY-TWO

Leo had reluctantly left Lily in the shower, so that he might explain things to his mother before Lily appeared.

The moment he appeared in the kitchen, though, it was Mum who spoke first. "Congratulations. So you found your fated mate after all."

Well, they hadn't been particularly quiet last night. Both on the lawn and when they'd come inside.

But Mum didn't look the slightest bit surprised.

"Did you already know?" he demanded.

Mum shrugged. "Laima said it was likely. But nothing is ever certain about these things, especially when fated mates are involved, so we had to let fate take its course. Or not, as the case may be. She said she's been wrong before, though it's rare."

Leo blew out a frustrated breath. If she'd only told him sooner, he and Lily could have been together on their wedding night. Now he had an employment contract and a prenup to get rid of. "I hope you factored that in when you drew up her employment contract. I will not have my wife working as a maid in her own house. She doesn't need to work at all."

Mother coughed delicately. "I believe that is Lily's decision to make, not yours. Though I did receive a call from Mrs Parker last night, saying that her son-in-law is

entitled to paternity leave, and he's going to be at home with her daughter and granddaughter from next week, so she won't be needed there any more. She'd like to come back to work on Monday."

"So you don't need me any more?" Lily appeared in the doorway, dressed in her maid's uniform.

"I won't need your services as a housekeeper as of Monday," Mother said. "I will, of course pay you in lieu of the short notice, but maternity leave cover is one of those things you can never be certain about. Sometimes it's only a few weeks, and other times, it's the full year, with job share afterwards. Of course, if what my son tells me is true, that you are his fated mate, you have a place here indefinitely, not just for the duration of the marriage contract."

Ah, yes. He'd almost forgotten about that. "I'll go find that contract and make sure it's destroyed," Leo promised, heading for the library.

THIRTY-THREE

Leo hurried out, leaving Lily alone with Alicia.

"I believe congratulations are in order. If my housekeeper were here, she'd have prepared you a proper wedding breakfast, something suitable for the first morning of your honeymoon. Of course, after your first hunt together, most couples rarely want breakfast, but such things are tradition..." Alicia eyed Lily. "What did you catch? I'm grateful you didn't leave the carcass on the lawn. The gardener does hate disposing of bodies."

So Alicia knew what her son was. What she now was. Lily sat down before her knees gave way, but only just. "I only chased Leo, and that was more out of instinct than anything else. He keeps saying I'm his fated mate, like something out of a paranormal romance book, but nothing I've ever read suggested I might turn into a lion. Until yesterday, I thought shapeshifters were only found in fairytales. Or horror movies. Now, I don't know what to believe."

"Coffee?" Alicia asked.

At Lily's nod, Alicia held out a brimming cup. Lily's fingers brushed hers, only to feel...fur. She glanced down and almost dropped the cup as she saw the enormous clawed paw where Alicia's hand should be.

"You're one, too?" Lily squeaked.

"As was my husband, Leo's father. We were fated mates, too, which is as much a

fairytale to our kind as it is to humans, you should know. In fact, even I thought that the stories saying a bite between fated mates could turn a human were merely a myth. You proved me wrong, as I saw yesterday." Alicia shook her head, then shook her paw until it turned back into a well-manicured, beringed hand again, before picking up her cup of tea to take a sip. "We'd always hoped for the same thing for Leo, but he was so focussed on his studies and then the business, and when none of the other shifters he'd dated over the years seemed to attract him...well, it's lovely to see him finally happy."

"But what is a fated mate? And how do shifters even work? I mean, the size difference between Leo as a lion and him as a man..."

Alicia took a seat at the kitchen table. "As far as the shapeshifting process goes, I can only tell you what my parents told me when I first shifted. It's magic. No one knows how or why the first shifters came into being. Some say it was a gift from a witch, while others say it was a curse placed on the first shifters' entire bloodlines. What we do know is that the ability to shift is genetic. Not everyone who has the genes can shift, but they have the potential to do so. For example, my husband's brother, Jeremy. He was born of the same two shifter parents as Leo's father was, but it wasn't until he reached adolescence that the difference between the two brothers became apparent. My husband managed to shift into a gangly, juvenile lion on his first try, but Jeremy has never shifted at all, and likely never will. But he does carry shifter genes, which means he or his descendants might still find their fated mate, and if that mate claims them properly, then the shift might be shared. Like you."

Lily still couldn't fathom what Alicia was telling her. "So...you're telling me I was secretly born a shifter, I just didn't know it until I bit Leo?" She shook her head. "No, that doesn't make any sense. I mean, I've seen movies and shows where werewolves turn people into werewolves by biting them, but that's the werewolves doing the biting, not the people..."

Alicia chuckled. "You might have inherited the shifter gene from someone generations back. You can ask the lore keepers when you report your successful mating with Leo. I have no doubt you'll be in their records, seeing as you gained entry to Mirror Academy. As for our bite turning people...yes, a shifter's bite can transfer the curse to another, but if they don't have the right genes, more often than not, it drives them mad. They cannot handle their dual nature, and if they do manage to shift into their animal form, they do not retain enough of themselves to change back. They are little more than a mindless beast, driven by instinct they do not understand, while plagued with the memory of the person they once were. A quick end is a mercy for the bitten, which is why the bite of a shifter is a death sentence to anyone who is not your fated mate."

"And this fated mate thing...Leo said it was something like the human concept of soul mates, two people put together on this Earth who are lucky enough to find one another. But I've never heard about soul mates transforming one another into animals..." Lily could barely believe the words coming out of her own mouth, but she'd seen her own paws, as well as Alicia's and Leo's. Shapeshifters were as real as the coffee cup cradled in her hands.

"Fated mates have taken on an almost mythical allure for shifters, especially among those who lack the ability to shift on their own. Because it is the ultimate fairytale for someone who cannot shift, that if they meet and are claimed by their fated mate, the stories say they will miraculously be able to shift. As you demonstrated, so evidently there is truth to the tales after all."

"So, that's it, is it? Now I'm a lion for the rest of my life, and Leo and I will be together for eternity." Definitely not the future she'd envisioned for herself.

Alicia frowned. "You have a choice, you know. Leo is my son, so of course I'm biased in believing that he'd make a wonderful mate for any woman who truly loved him, but fate sometimes gets things wrong. Or people can change, and what was once

perfect can turn to ashes. In those cases, it's better to reject your fated mate than live in a relationship that makes you unhappy. But know that you will never be as happy in a relationship as you will be with your fated mate."

Lily struggled to find the words. "Yes, but...all my life, I knew I'd grow up to be an engineer, like my parents. I'd finish school, graduate, and join their company. It's all I've been working towards since they died. I should be doing the necessary paperwork to get my licence, and to register the company again. Instead, all I can think about is that I have claws and a tail and a husband."

Alicia patted Lily's hand. "It will take your mind some time to adjust, but once you do, you'll realise that being a shifter doesn't change much at all. You're still an engineer, and you can hold down a normal job and live a normal life, just like you'd planned. Just...with a little bit more. Overnight and weekend hunting trips, where the venison is so fresh it's still warm..." Alicia sighed. "Go and do your paperwork. We'll manage without a housekeeper until Mrs Parker returns on Monday. If you have any trouble with the bureaucracy, get Leo to help you. He has contacts everywhere, so if he can't help, he'll know someone who can."

THIRTY-FOUR

Leo went through all the filing cabinets in the library, and then the estate office, but the contract was nowhere to be found. He didn't dare give up, though. He'd found his fated mate, and no way would he give her up. He'd give her everything he owned, just to make her happy. Starting with the shredded prenup, as a sign of his commitment. Sure, he'd already married her, but that was when he'd thought it was just a marriage of convenience to an ordinary human. Marriage between mates was forever. Her transformation into the fiercest, most beautiful lioness he'd ever seen confirmed it. He'd never look at another woman again.

But first he had to find that damned contract.

Finally, he'd given in and asked Mother for help.

Another search through the filing cabinets turned up nothing.

"I can't think where else I could have put it," Mother said, shaking her head. "Unless it's in the payroll files..."

Another frantic search of Mother's office finally found a folder with Lily's name on it. Not in a filing cabinet or desk drawer like they'd expected, but in her in-tray beneath a pile of unopened correspondence she'd planned to deal with next week.

Leo wanted to put the contract through the shredder right away, but he thought Lily should witness the destruction, too. Maybe she'd want to light it on fire, to make the destruction complete. Either way, he should ask her.

He found her in her bedroom, sprawled across her bed, frowning at an older model laptop.

"What's wrong?" he asked immediately.

"Nothing," she said, her eyes never leaving the screen. "I'm now officially a licensed engineer, and the principal in my parents' old company. The business has been reactivated, and everything's ready to take on new clients as of an hour ago, though I'd prefer to wait until Monday morning to start work. It seems almost too easy. The only thing I can't do is get hold of the office manager, Faye, to let her know. She isn't answering her emails, which isn't like her."

"Perhaps she's off sick today, or she's taken a day off to enjoy a long weekend," Leo suggested. "I'm sure she'll get back to you by Monday."

"No, Faye wouldn't ignore me like this. Emails from clients or suppliers, sure, she'd let those wait until Monday, but she's my godmother. She said to call any time, even if it's the middle of the night. Something's wrong, I know it."

"So call her," Leo prompted.

Lily dug her phone out of her jacket pocket, only to frown at that, too. "The battery's flat. I thought I charged it yesterday." She plugged it into the charger, then stood staring at it for a long moment.

"Use mine," Leo offered, holding out his phone.

"The number's on that phone, I'll have to wait until it's charged enough to turn on," she said.

Silence swelled between them, which Leo just couldn't stand.

"So, what kind of engineer are you? Pride Holdings works with a number of engineering firms, but we're always on the lookout for new ones to build lasting partnerships with. Perhaps we might be able to contract you for one of our upcoming projects," Leo said.

Lily snorted. "That depends on how much work there is left to do on your Hea Sanctuary project. Has Eirwin Energy delivered the battery tech they promised yet? I want to finish existing projects before I take on any new ones."

Leo's breath caught in his throat. "Wait, you work for Verre Electrical Engineering?"

"I am Verre Electrical Engineering. I own it, and I'm now their principal engineer. Their only engineer, for the moment. And Hea Sanctuary is the only project on the books right now, which is why I was willing to do anything, including marry you, to make sure it goes ahead."

Leo's heart plummeted to somewhere down near his boots. "And last night?" She was his mate. She'd claimed him, and he'd claimed her, and she'd shifted, just like the legends said she would. But if the only reason she was with him was all about business...

Her cheeks turned pink. "Last night was...was...wonderful. I never imagined sex could be that good."

"We could do it again tonight, if you want. Every night, even. Or I could take you hunting...there are lots of deer in the woods here. Wild boar, too, if you want a challenge." Even as he said the words, he knew what her answer would be. Why wasn't she as excited about finding her fated mate as he was? Was it because all of this had been about her business, and she didn't care about him at all?

"Leo, I'd love to do all sorts of things with you. And we will. But right now I'm

worried about my godmother, and I'll never forgive myself if something terrible happened to her while I was getting up to naked hijinks. It could already have happened, while we were...while we were..." Her eyes glittered with tears, but before they could fall, she reached for her phone and ducked her head to focus on that instead. "I'll try to turn it on so I can get her number and we can call her." A pause. "It looks like she tried to call me last night. So many missed calls. No wonder the battery went flat. Wait, there's a message..." She held up her phone, squinting at the screen. "It's hard to make out with all the typos. There's something about an eviction notice, I think, and that she's locked herself in, but if she's not out of there by 5pm Friday, they'll call the police..." Lily stared at him in horror. "It's already after three. We need to go help her."

"I'm sorry, but if there's a court order evicting her, there's not much we can do. I mean, we can fight it in the courts, but if her landlord has the court order, then the police will side with him."

Lily shook her head. "I'm her landlord. Faye lives in the flat above the VEE offices. She gets the place rent free as part of her salary package while the business was on hiatus. I don't know anything about a court order, because I didn't file for one. Unless someone tried to terminate her employment contract, but even then, I'd have to sign off on it, and I haven't. None of this makes any sense."

It sounded like something Uncle Jeremy would do to discredit him. "Is there anyone you know who might try to forge your signature, or forge a court order?"

Lily looked grim. "If she's going to lose the house, my stepmother might be desperate enough."

"I'll put together a security team, and tell them to meet us there. We'll get to the bottom of this, and make sure your godmother is safe."

"I can't ask you to do that! This is my mess. I'll fix it. Somehow."

Leo grinned. "You don't have to ask. You're my mate. What's mine is yours. If your family is in trouble, I will move heaven and earth to make sure they're safe. They're my family now, too." He held out his hand.

Lily hesitated. Fated mates and forever weren't anything she'd considered until yesterday, but she couldn't imagine anyone better to face the future with than Leo King. He was everything she'd ever wanted in a partner, and more.

She laid her hand in his. "Let's go."

THIRTY-FIVE

Three hulking men stood outside the office building when they arrived. Lily hung back, unsure, but Leo just marched up to the trio. "Did Badger brief you?"

The man in the middle nodded. "Protect the lady at all costs, plus any additional security duties as required." He hooked his thumbs into his belt, which bore an ornate horned buckle that Lily thought would have belonged to an American cowboy, instead of the Scotsman he clearly was.

Leo grinned. "Badger sent his best, I see. Let's get this over with, and I'll buy you a round in the nearest pub when we're done." He gestured for the men to lead the way.

One of them did, with the other two falling into some unspoken formation behind Leo and Lily.

"Who are they?" she whispered.

Leo laughed. "They're Highland cattle shifters. Bulls bigger than I am. Implacable and impossible to ruffle in either form. With one of these boys as your bodyguard, you'll be safe as houses. With all three...even I might find them a challenge."

One of the men behind them failed to smother a chuckle. "A challenge we'd accept, sir, when we're not on duty. Always up for a good fight."

They reached the entrance, and Lily fished around in her bag for the keys, but the first man simply pulled the door open and held it for her. It hadn't been locked. That did

not bode well.

A greasy looking man with a combover who swam in a suit two sizes too big for him spun slowly on the spot, holding up his phone to capture the whole panorama. Not that there was much to see – just an office with bare desks, all stationery and personal items tucked away in the drawers so as not to gather dust.

Most of those desks would remain bare for the foreseeable future, until Lily found her feet enough to consider hiring more staff. Or managed to win projects enough to keep said staff busy. It would be just Faye and herself to start with, working on the final plans for Hea Sanctuary. After that was put to bed...

Cadence flounced into the room. "I found the boardroom and a quaint little kitchen area, but no sign of stairs to the next level. Must be external access only."

So she hadn't found the trick bookcase that hid the stairs to the second storey. If she'd only pulled out the standard operating procedures manual, the bookcase would have swung open for her immediately. Of course, her stepmother would rather commit fraud than do anything by the book.

"What are you doing here?" Cadence demanded, setting her hands on her hips. "Taking one last look before it's all sold? Who told you?"

"I'm here to see what needs to be done before we reopen for business on Monday," Lily replied, forcing herself to pretend to survey the office instead of keeping her eyes firmly on Cadence. "I'll need to ask Faye to order fresh flowers for the reception desk, and see what the supplies are like in the kitchen. Can't run an office without tea and coffee, of course, but it won't hurt to have something on hand for Friday night drinks, after a hard week. Or for an evening client meeting, if it comes to that." She folded her arms across her chest. "What are you doing here?"

"Why, putting the place up for sale, of course. Mr Minik is here to take photos for the listing. Apparently offices with housing above them are very hot right now, and he says it'll be snapped up right away, for a very good price, too. Maybe even enough so that we can keep the house." Cadence sniffed. "Not that you care about any of that, living in a mansion with your rich husband and all."

"I don't see how you can sell this place, seeing as it's not even yours. You might have persuaded my father to sign over his house to you in his will, but this building belonged to my mother, and now it belongs to me. I don't know how you got in here, but you're definitely trespassing, and if you don't leave right now, I'll have to call the police."

The greasy real estate agent was already gone before Lily had even mentioned the police, but Cadence didn't seem to know when to quit.

"Lily, darling, we'll lose the house if we don't sell this building. It's not like you need it. It's just been sitting here empty since your father died. You wouldn't choose to keep some dusty office if it meant you'd lose your childhood home. Think of all the memories. With your mother and father. What would your father say if he knew it was your fault we were losing your family home?" Cadence wheedled.

"I already lost my father's home, the day you inherited it. But this place...this is where I took my first steps. We lived in the apartment here for years before my parents could afford to buy the place you now call home. You might have sold my father's things and mortgaged his house to pay for this lavish lifestyle you think you and your daughters deserve, but I won't let you steal any more from me. This is my property, and my future, and you have exactly ten seconds to leave the premises before I drag you out of here myself!"

"You ungrateful little bitch!" Cadence screeched, marching forward with her hand raised.

The blow never landed. One of Leo's bodyguards caught Cadence's wrist in his enormous hand. "Mrs King said it's time to go, ma'am." Another bodyguard appeared at Cadence's other side, taking her other arm, before they half carried, half dragged her out, still screeching.

As if by magic, a police car appeared outside. It took barely a moment before Cadence was bundled into it, and they drove off.

The bodyguards came back inside.

"Anything else you need, Mrs King?" one of them asked.

Lily shook her head. "No. Thanks, though."

"Did you want to check if you need to order more coffee?" Leo asked.

Again, Lily shook her head. "Oh, no. Faye would have already taken care of that. If she's okay. We need to go upstairs and check on her!" She raced for the records room, and the trick book case.

One of the bodyguards was only a step behind her. "Let me go first, ma'am."

Numbly, she stepped aside and let him ascend the stairs first. He even knocked on the door at the top.

No answer.

"Faye, it's me. Lily. They're gone. Are you okay?" Lily called through the closed door.

She had the keys to the flat, but she didn't want to have to use them. Much better for

Faye to open the door herself, and invite them in. Then she'd know she was okay. Whereas if she had to use the keys, she had no idea what she might find.

"Faye? Are you in there?"

The seconds stretched, until the door cracked open. "Lily? Is that really you?"

"Of course. Who else would it be? No one else knows about the secret bookcase. Well, except for my husband and his security staff."

Lily glanced at the bodyguard who'd come upstairs with her.

"Standard NDA applies to all our clients, ma'am. None of us will breathe a word about anything that happens here tonight. You could have taken your claws to that screeching woman and we'd have all sworn she was attacked by a stray cat." He coughed. "We work exclusively for the supernatural, ma'am. Secrecy comes with the territory."

Lily felt lightheaded. "You mean there are more things out there than just shifters?" She wouldn't even have believed in shifters if she hadn't seen her own paws. It still felt like a dream.

"Takes all kinds, ma'am. Including fae." He nodded toward Faye, who now stood in the open doorway.

She spread her arms wide for a hug. "Oh, Lily, it's been too long. Congratulations on your graduation. Your parents would have been so proud."

Wrapped in her godmother's arms, for the first time Lily felt like she'd come home. But she ended the embrace sooner than she would have liked. "Wait until you've seen what I have planned for the Hea Sanctuary project. Did you get my emails?"

Faye swallowed. "Yes. I think you'd better come in."

THIRTY-SIX

Lily listened to Faye with increasing horror. "You're telling me the Hea Sanctuary project is so plagued by delays, it might never be built at all?" She turned her hard gaze on Leo. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Leo coughed. "Well, I didn't know you were involved in the project at all until a few hours ago, and we've been a bit busy since then. I would have briefed you the moment you asked, and while the project doesn't yet have council approval, that doesn't mean it will never be built. Council haven't even looked at the proposal. Once they do, I'm sure they'll have no problems approving it. The delays are nothing to do with us or our project at all. It's Craig Tremotino who's behind the delays, using a combination of blackmail, bribery and extortion. That's why I agreed to attend his blasted ball – I'd hoped to persuade him to cooperate. Instead, I found he was colluding with my uncle, Jeremy, the man who's trying to take over Pride Holdings."

Lily bristled. "I'd like to meet this uncle of yours, so I can kick his slimy arse."

Leo turned thoughtful. "Actually, I think I might be able to arrange that. He's been insisting that Verre Electrical Engineering is bankrupt, which is impossible, so if I were to bring the new owner of VEE to the board meeting on Monday, you'd be able to tell them how things really stand with your company. Of course, they'd have questions, but as long as you feel up to answering them..."

"You bet I am. Dad had me working on the Hea Sanctuary project since he first signed the contract. Even if I've missed some important email updates, you could probably catch me up over the weekend, if it's not too much trouble." Lily turned to

Faye. "I guess my first official day in the office will have to be Tuesday instead. Could I trouble you to call a locksmith to get the locks changed as soon as possible? I don't trust Cadence or her dodgy real estate agent not to come back."

Leo snapped his fingers. "Badger has an emergency locksmith on staff. While we wait for him to arrive, I'll have his men do a security audit on the building, and see that any upgrades are made."

"Which VEE will pay for," Lily added smoothly.

"But you're my mate. Nothing is too much to pay to keep you safe, and what's mine is yours anyway," Leo insisted.

Faye's eyes widened. "Truly, you're fated mates? Oh, if only your mother were here to hear it! She'd always hoped for that for you, which is why she was insistent that you attend Mirror Academy, to give you the best chance of finding a fated mate, and shifting, though she never could."

"My mother was a shifter?" Lily gasped.

Faye nodded, smiling sadly. "You come from a long line of stoat shifters. Your grandmother was taken by an owl when your mother was only a little girl, which may have contributed to her inability to shift. Seeing as your mother isn't with us any longer, it falls to me, then, to warn you: watch out for owls when you shift. They're ruthless."

Leo nodded gravely. "We will."

Faye coughed. "It was your father's wish to give you a graduation gift, too, but I'm sad to say it isn't ready yet. A large part of VEE's fee for the Hea Sanctuary project was to be a house in the village. A house just for you."

Lily blinked. "I knew about the house, because Dad asked me to handle all the interior design decisions, but I always thought we'd live there together. Well, until Cadence came along...which is why I never minded her keeping the old house. Dad was planning on selling the place when we moved to the Sanctuary."

"Wait, you have a house in Hea Sanctuary? Why did you agree to marry me for money, then?"

Lily winced. "It was never about the money. I agreed to be your mother's housekeeper because I needed a job and a place to stay until my qualifications came through and I could reopen the business, and you said you needed a wife to save the Hea Sanctuary project. I'd have agreed to marry Tremotino himself, if it meant saving my parents' dream project."

Leo pulled her into his arms. "Never. Not my mate."

He followed his embrace with heated kisses, driving Lily wild, so that she quite forgot that they weren't alone.

Faye cleared her throat. "In the absence of your Sanctuary house, I do have a guest room prepared for you, if you'd like. It's quite small, but if you and your mate need some privacy..."

Leo bowed his head in apology. "I have a house of my own, with more rooms than I know what to do with. I should probably take Lily home, while Badger's team get to work on making sure this building is secure. You're welcome to stay, too, so Badger's men won't disturb you."

Faye shook her head. "No, this is my home. I'd prefer to supervise any security upgrades, if only to make sure your men don't run afoul of any of my own defence measures. I should probably disable some of them entirely, at least while they're

here..." Her head bobbed from side to side, almost like a bird's, as if she couldn't decide what to do first.

"Then now we know you're safe, I'll take Lily home, and we'll leave you to it," Leo said smoothly, taking Lily's arm.

"Thank you for everything. We'll catch up again properly on Tuesday," Lily promised, as she bade Faye farewell.

THIRTY-SEVEN

After another night making love with Leo, Lily expected to wake up aching and exhausted. Instead, when the sun rose, she felt like she could run laps around the grounds. Or dance all day.

When she told Leo over breakfast, he only grinned. "So you feel it, too? We should go hunting together, and run off some of that energy. I'll even let you choose the prey, and follow your lead."

He had talked about deer and wild boar, but the thought of hunting a wild animal, especially while she was eating breakfast, only made her queasy.

"Maybe we could go dancing instead?" she suggested.

"In the clearing? Oh, I have a much better idea. I'd like to introduce you to the Felix 5000." Leo's eyes glittered.

Lily balked. "Is that some sort of super sex toy? No, thanks, I'm not into that sort of thing. You're all I need in the bedroom, honestly. And we can absolutely do that later. But right now, it feels like my blood is fizzing and if I don't do something seriously energetic, I'm going to explode or something."

"Come with me. You'll love it, I promise." He took her hands and drew her outside. It was such a lovely day – with the sort of sunshine you rarely saw in Scotland. She found it even harder to resist as he pulled her toward the woods. Finally, they reached the clearing, and he pulled something out of his pocket that she was sure was some

sort of dildo. "Now take your clothes off."

"Leo, I told you I'm not into sex toys..." she began.

He set the toy on the ground in the middle of the clearing and pressed a button. Then he started shucking off his own clothes.

"Leo..."

A red beam shot out of the toy and splashed against a tree on the other side, bouncing a few times before streaking high into the branches of another tree.

Lily was naked and furry in an instant, crouched low on the ground as the red spot came closer...closer...until she pounced.

The red beam streaked out from under her paws and ran up a tree.

Leo let out a roar of laughter. He swatted the beam with both paws, but it kept running, unfazed.

Lily growled. That red spot was going to die, if it was the last thing she did.

THIRTY-EIGHT

"Are you ready? It's time," Cat said.

Leo nodded and rose. He might not be the perfect CEO, but he was the best Pride Holdings had, and he intended to do what he must to ensure the company endured into the future. Until the completion of Hea Sanctuary and many future projects, too.

He marched to the conference room, turning his head at the enticing scent that told him Lily was in one of the smaller meeting rooms across the hall, but not hesitating. She would join him soon.

This part he had to do alone.

He pushed open the double doors to the conference room, revealing the entire board already present and seated, waiting for him.

"He finally deigns to join us. Not too busy whoring with your porn star mates, nephew?" Jeremy snarled.

Cat's footsteps behind him stuttered to a stop.

Leo was torn between wanting to stalk forward and punch his uncle in the face, and the desire to run off with his mate and play with the Felix 5000 for another day. But he knew he could do neither – this wasn't just some family feud. The livelihoods of a lot of people depended on him doing what was right for Pride Holdings. Not to mention Lily would never forgive him if he messed this up. Their future depended on

it.

"Good to see you here, Uncle Jeremy. We have some business to attend to before the board meeting begins," Leo said, holding the door open to allow Cat to scurry inside to her seat. She'd offered to take the minutes for this meeting, in Shenzi's place. Shenzi had other duties.

Jeremy harrumphed. "The meeting started five minutes ago, boy. As I was saying..."

"Mr Jeremy King? You're under arrest for embezzlement and fraud."

Two police officers stepped into the board room. To Leo's delight, one of them already had her handcuffs out. Behind them, Jeremy's former personal assistant, Shenzi, hurried away. Leo made a mental note to thank her later for all the evidence she'd pulled from Jeremy's phone and email messages.

"You've got the wrong person. I haven't done anything wrong!" Jeremy blustered, as the cuffs were fastened tightly around his wrists. Behind his back, too, just to make him that bit more uncomfortable. Evidently the police knew all about how he'd bullied Shenzi into silence about his crimes.

"Make sure he doesn't escape. He's a slippery one," Cat said.

The female police officer licked her lips with a distinctly forked tongue. "Let him try," she said.

Snake shifter, or something more sinister? Leo wasn't sure, but he could always ask Cat later.

Right now he had a board meeting to run.

The two officers dragged Jeremy off, still protesting his innocence, trailed by two of Badger's security guards, as Leo carefully closed the doors.

"Now that security have taken out the trash, as the Americans say, shall we get down to business? I've brought a guest today, to address any concerns you might have," Leo began, taking his seat at the head of the table.

Right on cue, the door opened again. This time, Lily stepped inside, taking Leo's breath away.

Oh, he'd seen her naked, and he'd seen her in her wedding gown, but now she stood in his boardroom in a sharp business suit, looking every bit his equal, he wanted to bend her over the boardroom table and fuck her into tomorrow.

"May I introduce Lily Verre, Principal Engineer at Verre Electrical Engineering?" he gritted out, wishing his pants weren't so tight.

"Are you here to verify the reports about your company that Jeremy was just telling us about?" Daniel asked.

Lily laughed, a delightfully throaty sound that shot like a lightning bolt through Leo's cock. "Let me guess. Something about bankruptcy, insolvency, and administration? A thrilling story, I'm sure, but I'm here to tell you it's fiction. VEE's just as solvent now as it was when it went on hiatus, after my father's death. We don't have any debts, but we do have significant assets. What we also have is a relatively empty slate. The only project currently on our books is the Hea Sanctuary, so I'm able to give Pride Holdings my full attention, for that project and any future ones like it. You see, our design for the Sanctuary is unique, but I believe it can be adapted to a number of possible future lifestyle villages also in the planning stages, and as Pride Holdings is our preferred partner in such projects, I believe we can look forward to a bright future working together."

Leo wanted to roll over on the table and show her his belly.

"And what will this cost us, Miss Verre?" Daniel asked.

"Standard rates, of course, but you'll still be my first preference. After all, I now have a personal stake in Pride Holdings, too." Lily slid into the seat beside Leo and clasped his hand, allowing her wedding ring to catch the light. "We can't wait to move into our home in Hea Sanctuary."

THIRTY-NINE

The board members trooped out of the conference room, pausing only to shake her hand on the way out, leaving Lily alone with Leo, who sprawled in his chair like he'd been stunned.

Lily sank onto the chair next to him, feeling a little drained, but nowhere near as exhausted as she thought she'd be. Maybe because she'd experienced worse grillings after her presentations at Mirror Academy. The only question she hadn't been able to answer was about the power systems, as that was firmly contracted to Eirwen Energy, who she still hadn't heard anything from.

She checked with Faye, who hadn't been able to contact them, either.

Probably time to use her personal contacts to see what she could find out.

The last time she'd seen Arwen was before the ball, when she'd gone home early due to her father's illness. She'd sent a text message earlier that morning, asking if Arwen was okay, but she'd received no response. Time to call.

She dialled Arwen's number, but the call went straight to voicemail. Like it was turned off, or somewhere there wasn't phone service.

"Who are you calling?" Leo asked.

"Arwen. Her father owns Eirwen Energy. I was hoping she might have an update on the Sanctuary's power systems."

"You mean Arwen Snow? I've seen that name somewhere...in the news, I think. Let me check..." Leo pulled the keyboard toward him, and the big screen lit up with a search window. Leo typed in her name, and a flood of pictures filled the screen.

"Oh, no," Lily whispered.

Her father, Fannar Snow, had died after a short illness, and Arwen was missing. How had she not known? First Diana, then Eden, and now Arwen...was someone kidnapping Mirror Academy students? And why?

"We need to find her," Lily said.

"I'll get Badger on it," Leo promised. "With his help, we'll find her, I promise."

"And the other girls, too."

Leo's eyes widened. "There are other girls missing?"

Lily nodded. "Three of them. All Mirror Academy students."

Leo wrapped her in his arms. "I won't let them get you, I promise."

Lily swatted him. "I'm not worried about me. I have claws and can kick your furry arse, remember? But the other girls...Rosalind and Sienna and Auren...what if they're next?"