



# Jack of All Trades

## (Valleywood: Season Three)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Jack Pengrove lives a secret life in a magical city. He was born to a powerful family of witches, but he, unlike everyone else in his family, never acquired powers.

Leaving them and their horrible treatment of him for his lack of powers, he moved to Valleywood, hoping that being surrounded by magical beings would help his familial gifts finally come to him. Already there for years, however, he has little hope left.

Doing jobs through a temp agency that covers for the prostitution ring it truly was, Jace makes enough money to get by, but still dreams of more.

After the huge blizzard that buries Valleywood, Jack gets a straight job, fixing a roof for a man who collects classic cars.

Maltin Graves is a half-witch. With his powers being finite, the man who has lived nearly two hundred years knows that every time he uses his powers, his life shortens.

Graves's warehouse houses these cars and also the man, in a beautiful loft above the cars, where he can always watch over them. He's a writer of screenplays for the major studios in town, and that leaves him to live almost as a hermit. Rarely going out, he has everything he needs in that warehouse.

The two clash instantly, and Jack finds his new employer not only rude but also aloof. So why, then, is he so drawn to the guy?

Could it be they are fated mates, and if so, what kind of shifter could they possibly be? The terrible dreams that begin for Jack could hold a clue, and one that makes him fear himself more than he's ever feared anything.

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# Page 1

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## Chapter One

Walking and waiting. Walking and waiting. He walked everywhere he went, unable to save enough money for a decent car of his own. His last one died all of two months after he'd purchased the thing before the engine seized, and he was stranded five miles from his apartment.

The waiting part? Jack Pengrove wasn't what he was supposed to be, and he waited for the moment someone would discover that.

You see, Jack was born into one of the most powerful witch families in the world. They were heads of state, ambassadors, CEOs of corporations, and all had gotten that far with the help of their powers. When Jack didn't come into his powers by thirteen, the cutoff for powers in his family to blossom, his family had all but given up on him. Until he was eighteen, well, he was their dirty secret, kept home from boarding schools, as his siblings attended, kept out of parties, and in the care of nannies when they traveled.

Tired of being treated like the freak of the family, he'd run off soon after his eighteenth birthday, looking for things he figured he might never find.

His powers, for one and another, were simple acceptance. He had only found the latter when he found Valleywood. Even so, it was only those in the dark recesses of the well-cloaked city for all things supernatural that accepted him. He was an outsider, after all, no matter his family name or reputation for breeding powerful witches. He was a powerless witch.

A fucking poser, a freak, an odd man out, a liar, and a closet mundane mortal.

He didn't advertise the fact, in fact, he tried his best to hide it. Funnily enough, no one had ever asked him to use his powers. For that, he was thankful, but that was about all he had to be grateful for.

The storm had dumped tons of snow throughout the city and surrounding areas. It had come in waves until it finally broke, and he sloshed through the remnants of it, his simple, cheap sneakers soaked through with the dirt-blackened snow he walked through.

He caught his reflection in the window of an abandoned storefront, stopping to check his appearance. The only thing he had gotten from his family was his good looks. Not that he looked anything like them, no. They were dark-headed and dark-eyed, while his hair was on the blond side of brown, and his eyes were a crazy hazel that turned from green to gray depending on his mood. Keeping up his muscled frame wasn't hard with the line of work he had had to take. Handyman/hooker. He got workouts from both, and what they didn't provide, a cheap set of weights in the studio apartment he shared with two other men did.

On the corner of Twenty-Ninth and Peacoat Avenue. Right on the corner. The windows were blacked out with paint. The door was covered with decades-old flyers, and the annoying buzzer that sounded when the door was opened could be heard for a block or more.

There was, of course, a reason for that. Usually, Colin Avery, the owner of Handy-Men or what was secretly known as Handsy-Men, was in the back playing grab-ass with the secretary, Lois Hanoverian.

Lois was a shifter, and Jack had often walked in to hear her whinnying in the back while they were doing...something. He didn't want to know.

She was dressed when Jack walked into the place, the tattered couches and chairs of the waiting room empty of humans and supes alike, as usual. “Jack, how are you?”

“Better since you called with a job,” he said with an edge. He wasn’t Lois’s favorite person, and he suspected she was suspicious of him, but he was paranoid. Everyone that didn’t seem to like him made him think they were catching onto him being a fake witch.

With her pinched nose up in the air like she had something to be high-and-mighty about, she got onto the computer and brought up the current jobs. “Yes, here it is. Maltin Grave. He needs a roof to be patched in the industrial district.”

“Roofing, cool. I figured I’d get a few of those after that storm.”

“Three others have gone out for them, three with much better experience,” she said snidely. She handed him a card with the address and information, and he knew he was dismissed.

He snatched the card from her and trudged along the street after leaving the office, the buzzer still ringing as he crossed against the light.

Waiting for the bus, he watched a couple walk hand in hand across the street. The woman had her hair done in big bouncy curls, and her male friend covered his hair with a black hoodie. They laughed as their hands swung together, making Jack turn away from the scene.

He’d never have that. The biggest obstacle was if his family knew about him. No, not about being gay. They didn’t care about that so much as the children that he’d have. To have a Pengrove that had no powers giving their precious last name to a new generation of embarrassments, well, they’d use all their powers on him to take him out of the world altogether.

Not that he had any plans to or an opportunity to have kids. He was a hooker. No one of quality would have him for more than a regular screw on Wednesday or an all-nighter when they came to town for business.

It paid the bills, though. He had almost enough saved for a car, even if it would have to be a junker.

It seemed like hours before the bus arrived, mostly because it was so cold. He hated the cold. Jack's dreams were of lying on a beach in the tropics. When he stepped on the bus, he immediately smelled cheap perfume and stale beer and had the misfortune of sitting behind the lady wearing both.

In her hand was a can covered in a paper bag, and she slurped loudly as the bus started rolling. Jack wished he could have a beer or a shot of tequila, anything but working on some roof in the cold. He wanted the money, sure, but if things went like usual, he'd work his ass off on the roof, then work getting his ass fucked for fifteen minutes after by some slimy dude that couldn't pick up a quicky at the club.

Maltin Graves. What a name. Jack pictured a bloated man in a dirty wife-beater, coffee or blended scotch stains down the front, food stuck in his mangy beard.

No, Jack's mood wasn't the best that day. He'd called his parents to check in, as was the expectation. No, they didn't much want anything to do with him, but if he didn't call once a month, they acted like he was the one rejecting them.

Hypocrites.

The bus stop was half a mile from the address Lois had given Jack. Once the bus came to a stop, Jack rose to start up the aisle but was stopped by the woman with the beer.

She reached out for him, snatching his arm in her bony grip. “You’re about to find your mate, canine.”

Blinking down on her as her pointy tongue ran over her thin, wrinkled lips, he barked a laugh. “I’m not a shifter.”

She cackled as he wrenched his arm from her and continued up the aisle, hearing her witchy laughter until he got off the bus and the doors closed behind him. As he looked back, she stood, pointing her gnarled finger at him.

“Creepy old witch.”

The cold hit Jack hard, and he pulled his hoodie over his head as he trudged through more salt-melting snow. Hanging a left on Bulworth Street, Jack passed several warehouses before he came to the address he’d been given.

Like any other warehouse, it didn’t stand out amongst the others. Jack could have sworn it was supposed to be where the guy, Maltin Graves, lived.

No big deal, he thought. A business might even pay more. He went up the hill and veered off into the parking lot, seeing only one car parked outside. A big, black SUV. It shined without a speck of dust, no watermarks or mud, unlike all the other cars he’d passed on the way.

There were two huge bay doors, but he went to the small side door labeled Odins in faded orange stencil letters. That was where he knocked, right on the O in Odins.

The door opened, and he tried to see the man standing back from the doorway, hidden in the wall’s shadow. “Maltin Graves?”

“That’s me,” he said in a low, gravelly voice.

“I’m Jack, from Hand-e-Men.”

“Of course,” he said in that rumbling tone. “Come in, please.”

The brightness of the snow outside made it impossible to see before his eyes adjusted after he stepped into the building. That meant the man and the space were nothing but blackness for the first full minute.

Except for the hole in the roof where the light shone in and water dripped loudly, hitting metal.

“As you can see, the roof took a beating from that horrible blizzard. I was only lucky none of the debris hit any of my cars.”

By then, his eyes adjusted enough to see what Maltin Graves meant. Around the vast space were at least forty, probably more like fifty, cars, all classics, all in mint condition, in every color from sea-foam green to bright, cobalt blue. In awe, he stared until Maltin Graves cleared his throat to regain his attention.

“Sorry. They’re...they’re beautiful. Are they all yours?”

“Yes, they are. They’re not to be touched,” he said in a clipped way that told Jack he’d be fired or possibly killed for even considering it.

Even though he seemed to be a real asshole, Jack got a better look at the guy after his eyes had adjusted. Well, he was pretty. Soft features and dark eyes that almost took on a red glow when he peered up at the hole in the roof.

Soft wisps of dark hair kissed his cheeks almost purposely in the tousled style. It was so dark that its shine was close to blinding Jack all over again.

“Can you fix it?”

Jack came out of his reverie to look the man in the eye again. “I...sure, yeah, I can fix it.”

“Good.”

He walked to the end of the warehouse, where there was a loft upper story that usually housed the offices. Jack was at a loss until Graves called, “Are you coming?”

“Oh, right.”

He jogged to catch up to Graves, but it was hard because his head was on a swivel, trying to take in all the classic cars. There was a cherry red '57 Chevy Bel Air, a silver '67 Mustang Shelby GT Fastback, a '63 Austin Healey Sebring MX, and those were just the few he could catch as he caught up to Graves.

It was like he died and went to car collector heaven. “Your cars are amazing.”

“Yes,” he grunted.

As much as the guy was a prick, Jack could forgive him anything if he could just stare at those cars all day. They were a perfect collection, but Graves was fussy about them, casting concerned glances back every couple of steps.

Graves led him up the metal stairs to the loft and through a set of heavy metal doors a few feet from the landing. As he pushed them, Graves again warned, “Please, don’t touch anything.”

Behind his back, Jack made a face, feeling infantile doing it, but he was in a foul mood for such a persnickety client. All he could hope was that the guy didn’t want

sex after the roof was built. Money or not, he didn't want to please him past fixing the roof. And that, he thought, was for the cars. They were too beautiful to be threatened by the roof falling in on them.

When he stepped into the loft apartment, he couldn't help but stare. He'd been to nice homes before, even into the homes of a few famous men in the city. This place, however, had them all beat.

As much as the rows of cars had been a surprise hidden in the old warehouse, Maltin Graves's home was even more of a surprise. It was a modern, sleek, industrially designed home that felt both warm and rich at once.

It was a big, open space. Long couches made of steel pipe and wood frames held brown leather cushions, long beige and black rugs under them, and shining wood end and coffee tables. Off to the right sat a long dining table made of shining barn wood and steel girders.

The kitchen was tucked under the loft within a loft bedroom that sat above it all. To reach it, a metal twisting staircase was on the side of the kitchen wall.

The walls were concrete on the sides, and the entire back was whitewashed old brick. The huge and paned windows in the back and the side facing away from the street let in light to allow his many plants to grow.

"This place is so beautiful."

"Yes," he said curtly again as he strode to a desk at the end of the living area. It was little more than a tall table on steel legs. He wrote out a check and handed it to him. "Here is the money to obtain the materials you'll need. The home goods store knows you're coming, and they'll report to me if you get anything that won't be needed. They'll credit me if any money is left."

Jack stared at him as he took the check. "I'm not a thief."

"No offense, but I've heard that in the past."

"Not from me. I don't steal."

Graves' eyes moved up his face until they reached Jack's eyes, and there was a flash of red that made Jack move back a step. "As I said. No offense."

Jack was caught in that gaze, pulled in like some sci-fi movie with a tractor beam pulling him off the planet and into a spaceship.

Into the gaze, he was taken, a lick of flames showing around the frame of his vision, like Maltin Graves was setting the world afire.

It was gone as quickly as it came, and Jack shook his head to clear it.

"Do you have a truck?"

It took him a moment to regain himself from the strange vision, but once he did, he croaked, "No. I don't."

"There's one on the northern side of the building you can use. I expect it to be returned in the same condition it was taken." Graves grabbed a set of keys from the desk, holding them out to Jack.

Jack laid his flat hand out, and the keys were dropped into his palm. And, with that, he was dismissed without another word.

Keeping his composure wasn't easy. Over the four years since leaving his family, his temper had snapped at the worst times, making it hard to control it. The older he got,

the less patience he had, which wasn't great for his current profession.

He left before he could say anything that would get him fired, not only from his present job but future ones. Colin had warned him he was on his last chance, and he didn't know where else he'd work.

Sure, there were always studio jobs, but between background checks and security bonds, he was afraid he'd be discovered. It's not like anyone would cast him out of town if they found out he wasn't a witch. But the stench of it...the embarrassment of it. It was too much for him. Besides, those jobs always went to folks who knew the right people.

No, he had to content himself with fixing roofs and sucking dick.

The truck obviously wasn't one of the prized vehicles kept in the warehouse. It was a simple pickup with a long bed and a crew cab. He got in and started the engine, letting it warm up a minute or two so the heat would come on before he started the trip. His fingers were freezing, so he rubbed his hands together while he waited for the cold air to stop and the warm air to come through the vent.

A rap on the side window made him jump and yell. His head spun to see Graves standing on the other side of the door, his scowl tainting his overly pretty face.

After rolling down the window, Jack asked, "Did you forget something?"

"No. Why are you just sitting here, wasting all my gasoline?"

The warm air had just started coming through the vents, but having the window down killed that warmth. Not to mention, the man's cold, dark eyes glaring at him froze him to the bone. "Sorry, I was just warming it up."

“Fuel-injected cars do not need to be warmed.”

He was not up for arguing that he, in fact, did need to be warmed; he simply apologized. “Sorry, sir. I’ll leave right now.”

“Make sure you do,” he said, then, in a flourish, left without another word.

After the window was back up and he saw Graves rushing back into his warehouse, Jack mumbled, “Make sure you go fuck yourself. Prick.”

He backed the truck out of the drive, and as he got to the street, he looked up to see Graves glaring at him from up in his high loft. Lofty heights, that was him, looking down on the whole world.

Jack settled his mind right then. He’d fix the roof, but there was no way in hell he’d let the guy fuck him. If that was part of the bargain, he’d quit and work street corners.

## Page 2

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### Chapter Two

The wind calmed an hour after he got on the roof and started the job. Thankfully, Jack saw little of Graves. The problem was, he'd have to converse with the asshole. The job was bigger than he first thought. Sure, the hole wasn't huge, but the snow caused hidden and bigger structural issues that he'd have to fix, or else the entire thing would cave in on his precious cars.

After the sun fell, he climbed down the ladder carefully, wondering if Graves wanted Jack to tell him he was leaving or not, but he figured he'd better give him a heads up on the extra work that was needed.

Once he was in the warehouse, he walked steadily but slowly so he could get a better look at the cars and trucks. There was an old '55 GMC pickup painted sun yellow. The chrome was shining like it had seven spotlights on it. He wanted to touch it, but knew Graves would know, probably sensing fingerprints.

Speaking of sensing things, he wondered if Graves was a supe. He looked to be only around thirty, so he either came from money or his career had taken off early to give him the means for all the classic cars. One alone was over a hundred grand, but all of them, there had to be millions of dollars on rubber in that warehouse.

Up the stairs and to the double doors where he knocked, though the metal hurt his knuckles. When Graves opened, his scowl was evident again. "Yes?"

"It's too dark to work, so I'll be back tomorrow, but...I hate to tell you, more needs done than just the hole. Most of the roof needs to be fixed."

He glared like he hated Jack, but that glowing red was there again. That kind of glare reminded him of his family when they were ready to throw a hex at someone. Suddenly, thinking Graves was a witch made Jack uneasy.

“If I find that you tore it up to keep working, I’ll...” He seemed to think better of the threat. “Just do what you need to,” he said, before slamming the door with a heavy thud.

“Well, okay then,” he said between gritted teeth. “Thanks so much, and I’ll be back bright and early,” he said sarcastically to the metal door.

Home was a studio apartment with two sets of bunk beds for the occupants. His bunk was the top one next to the only window in the place, and he spent an hour staring out of it once he was back. His roommates were gone, off on dates or respective jobs. It was rare that he was alone in the studio, but for some reason, that evening, he hated it.

The place was too quiet. It allowed random thoughts to move through his head. Jobs, men, hopes and dreams that he had no prospects of reaching. No actual goals had ever come to him, mostly because he didn’t have faith they’d ever be reached.

He was all looks. Sure, he was handsome. He had those blond good looks that he’d seen in movie stars and models. He kept up his appearance by working out daily, and walking everywhere didn’t hurt, well, except his feet.

Depressed, Jack stared out of the window that needed a good cleaning to see the city.

Growing into a love/hate feeling for the city was possibly the worst of it. Yes, he loved the city because he could disappear and become invisible.

The skyline was nothing but a shadow with the lights on in the thousand windows

making it seem like the sky had fallen, but the stars refused not to shine. Behind each of those lights lay people of every kind, and most likely, people who had real powers.

If he was powerful, like his family, he'd have millions of dollars and he'd tell men like Maltin Graves exactly where he could shove his shitty...beautiful face.

Pouting like a kid, Jack stared off at the skyline until his eyelids were so heavy they fell and led him into a sleep that was filled with nightmarish images.

That was the thing. Jack rarely dreamed. At least, he didn't remember them if he had them. This was one he'd never in his life forget.

Through a fog, he walked deep in some forest with trees that towered over the world. It was night and the cool wind blew through the fog, stirring it like someone would walk through any second. The swirls of the fog were ominous, but he didn't feel fear. Not exactly.

At least, not his own fear.

A growl sounded in the night, and he looked around for the source. All he saw, however, was that damn fog and those towering trees. There were no animals in that forest, no flap of wings, no scurrying of rodents. Only the fog and that was silent.

The crunching of leaves was under his feet. The growling was so close, like he could almost feel the hot breath of whatever made it on his neck. A house came into view, a small cottage in a clearing with a wooden picket fence that had long ago lost its whitewash, and the gate hung open and off its hinges.

That was where Jack was headed. He was sure of it. A dim light showed in one window that became apparent the closer Jack got to the cottage. Someone was home. That made his heart pound, and the growling grew louder, drowning out the thumping

of his heart. So close...

The house was there in front of him, and he moved faster to the rounded wooden door with the tiny window, for the occupant to look out of and see who could be visiting.

To the door he went, but once there, instead of knocking, he raised what he thought was a hand, but it wasn't. And instead of knocking, he scratched. With his claws.

One long swipe of those claws on the wood dug deep grooves in the wood and from inside of the cottage, a scream came, a desperate sound of sorrow and pain. It was that scream he heard as he woke, covered in sweat, a scream of his own caught in his throat.

He looked out of the window to see the same scene he'd fallen to sleep to and the night skyline and the twinkling stars of the city buildings.

Chest heaving with his panting breaths, he slid to the floor and padded to the bathroom, closing the door quietly.

In the mirror, he was shocked to see how pale he was, eyes reddened in fear. Jack looked at his hands, stared at them, wondering what the hell the dream was trying to tell him.

Not that he'd ever had a premonition before, but those in his family had. They spent time over their breakfast each morning, analyzing their dreams, picking apart every part of them for hidden meaning.

Sitting on the lid of the toilet, Jack continued to stare at his hands, the dream still thick in his memory. A gentle snore came from the other room, and Jack recalled the growl. It was at that moment he realized it was him. He'd made the growling sound in the dream.

Jack was sure his family would spend hours going over the details of that dream. Wishing he could call them, ask them to tell him what it could mean, how to help him. That, however, would not happen. It would give them false hope that his powers were coming in at long last.

If only he could believe that, but that wasn't the way it felt. There was something dark in him, and he'd suspected that for years. Dark, menacing, but powerless, that's how he'd felt for most of his life.

When he got back in bed, his phone vibrated, and he checked to see he had a message from one of his regulars.

Looking forward to seeing you tonight.

A client, sex, transactional sex. That was what his life had become. Jack thought crazily that at least his family had given him good looks to barter on even if he hadn't received their powers.

Lying awake the rest of the night, Jack worried about the dream until he couldn't think about it any longer. His head hurt. His chest hurt from the way his heart had tried to pound right out of his chest. After a shower, he dressed in an old T-shirt and his loose jeans, knowing he'd be doing splits and contorting all over with the roofing job.

When he got his shoes, however, he noticed the hole in the left's sneaker sole. Frowning, he cursed under his breath and made a note to pick up a new pair. He went through shoes a lot, walking all over the city.

After he was dressed, he left to head to the bus stop. He needed coffee, but refused to wake his roommates in making a pot of the cheap coffee they kept in the apartment's kitchenette.

The Rocky Mountain Java Company made the best coffee in the city, so once he got off the bus near the studios, he walked to the business and saw people at tables, on laptops, and quietly sipping their morning brew.

Stepping up to the counter, Jack waited for only a moment before a blue-haired server turned and said, “Welcome to Colorado Java Company.”

Her lashes were bespeckled with glitter, and Jack wondered how she kept it from falling in her eyes but didn’t think on it long. His need for coffee was too great after the terrible sleep he’d had and the job ahead of him. “I need a double shot, fat-free, caramel latte with cold foam, please.”

“Very good,” she said, writing his order on the pad. “Size?”

“The biggest you have.”

“That kind of morning?”

Her eyes, well, they sparkled too, like they already had glitter in them she didn’t notice. Smiling despite his morning so far, he said, “Yes. And it’ll be that kind of day too. The guy I’m working for is...not pleasant.”

“Oh? Shame. I love my boss. He’s the best. Maybe get a job here?”

Not that he wouldn’t like it, but it wouldn’t pay as much and would take that much longer to get a car, so he could quit going through shoes like they were tissue paper. “I’ll think about it after this job is over.”

As she turned to start his order, pulling out the large cup from below the counter, she said, “If you do, just ask for me, Nina Nile.”

“Are you the...manager?”

She nodded happily. “Just promoted last week. And you, excuse my forwardness, would bring in the guys and the girls.”

He felt his face heat like they were pouring the hot coffee directly on it. “Uh, thank you.”

“Shy too. Sweet.”

After getting his coffee, he paid and left a tip in the jar before heading back outside, glad it was much warmer than the previous day.

He was still smiling as he crossed the street to get back to the bus stop. Pondering how nice it would be to work there, making coffee instead of giving blow jobs and working on top of rickety roofs.

Maybe he'd consider it in the future. After he finished the roof and...made a little more money.

The coffee was perfect, and Jack sipped until he neared his stop, then he gulped. The city flew by the window as he watched the people all scrambling to get to work, school, or shopping.

The dream was in the recesses of his mind. He couldn't shake it, that image of his...well, his paws and the claws that were long and sharp as razors, cutting through the wood of that door...

He made it to the warehouse, walking up the short hill to see Maltin Graves standing outside, his normal scowl clear long before Jack got to him. “Mr. Graves, good morning.”

“Yes, fine. I need to...I need to go to the studio this morning. The warehouse will be open, but my apartment will be locked. Do not go into the warehouse for anything except to use the facilities and don't touch any of my vehicles.”

Resisting the intense urge to roll his eyes was probably harder than the rest of the job would be. “No, sir, I won't.”

“Good. Here is the key to the warehouse. I've notified all the businesses in the area against copying the key.”

Hold it in, Jack, hold it in. Don't punch him. Do not punch him.

“I wouldn't, sir. I'll go get started.”

“The ladder is already set in back for you. I won't be long. Just hand delivering my scripts because the messengers are incompetent.”

With that, he left, and Jack started around the building, finally getting how the guy had so much money to spend on all those classics.

The studios. He wrote scripts. Perfect for a recluse, someone who had a real distaste for other people. Well, it made sense.

Not that he couldn't have inherited money too, but even so, buying all those cars, he'd have to have some more coming in to keep up his lifestyle. Another thing Jack would never have, skills like writing.

On the roof, he worked until noon, climbing up and down that long, long ladder three times alone. That was dangerous, but he'd rather fall and break his neck than ask the guy to spot him if he was still there. He walked to a convenience store and bought a bag of chips and energy drink—the effects of the coffee had worn off hours ago—and

then went back to work until five, when he climbed down to find Maltin Graves waiting at the bottom.

“Are you almost finished?” Graves asked before both his feet were on solid ground.

“No, sir. I figure another week at least. I’m going as fast as I can. Maybe...I don’t know. If I had some help?”

“I’m not hiring more people to come here and get an idea of what I have inside. You’ll just have to go faster.”

Maltin Graves might be the most handsome man he’d ever seen in his life, but he wouldn’t spit on the fucker if he was on fire. Now there was an idea, setting him on fire...

“I’m going as fast as I can. If you’re not satisfied, you can fire me and get someone else.”

The way his brows rose almost to his hairline was comical, but Jack wasn’t laughing. He was too busy fuming.

The piercing glare that came when his brows righted was intense, and a bit frightening. Sure, there were laws against murder using powers, but that didn’t mean it didn’t happen all the time.

Dark eyes, eyes that could draw a person in to get lost in them. He knew in that very second that if he didn’t hate the man so much, he could get lost in those eyes. But his hatred for the man burned inside him, bubbling up like a vat of acid consuming flesh and bone.

“Just get here bright and early in the morning.”

“No problem,” he spat, watching the man turn on his heel and head back to the door of the warehouse. “No problem, you prick.”

He didn’t say it loud enough for Graves to hear him, but he wanted to shout it. He wanted it to ring out and stick with the man, never to let go of him.

Instead, he left, seething with intense anger all the way home to change for his date with his other client, one that didn’t throw scowls at him. One that didn’t think he was so above Jack that he couldn’t be bothered to speak to him with anything more than disdain.

Jack supposed he should be used to it. Most of his life, he’d been fielding that attitude. At least Maltin Graves wasn’t a member of his family. Their hatred and scorn hurt much more. In fact, he didn’t know why Maltin’s bothered him at all. He was some rich fucker, living in the industrial wasteland of Valleywood, writing scripts.

Still, it ate at Jack. Ate at his gut to the point it ached like he’d swallowed razor blades.

He dressed in a black button-down shirt and his best jeans, checking himself in the mirror as his roommate, Garvey, came in from the hall. “Hey! I wanted to ask you about your temp job.”

Garvey was an omega wolf, packless, and wandering. He’d only recently come to Valleywood to try his hand at acting. So far, he’d landed an amazing part as a dishwasher to the stars at Mama Vee’s Italian restaurant, where he made just above starvation pay.

“Garvey, you know what I do. Are you ready for that? Most of the clients are men. You’re not gay, or do I have to remind you of that?”

“Gay for pay, my brother. Gay for pay.”

After Jack deposited the number and address into Garvey’s phone, Garvey went into the bathroom, and Jack was left to shake his head, laughing. So much for thinking he could get a legit job somewhere.

If Garvey couldn’t live on what it paid, he wouldn’t be able to, either.

He met Joshua Kerns at the cheapest hotel in town, the L’Hotel Valeur. It was a scuzzy place, and Joshua could afford much better, but when he fucked, he liked it cheap in every way. Including the surroundings.

The place creeped Jack out something fierce, though. There were over-the-top frightening clown paintings all over the walls. The entire time he was at the L’Hotel Valeur, he kept his eyes on the stained and out-of-date carpeting.

Joshua texted him the room number, not that he needed to. It was always room twelve. Always that dirty room with the dresser positioned perfectly to reflect the bed and what was happening there.

The way Jack got through it was to see it in the most positive of lights. It was sex, after all. He didn’t hate sex, not by any stretch. In fact, he’d been thinking about sex a lot more the last couple days. The surprise was that he was almost looking forward to being with Joshua. That was a first.

In the hall, he knocked on the door to room twelve and waited. He heard the footsteps approach, and the door was flung open. Joshua stood grinning from ear to ear. “There he is.”

He said that every time, like he was speaking to someone. Putting on his best smile, Jack stepped into the room, avoiding the clown pictures like the plague. “Joshua, how

are you?”

“Better now. I’m telling you, those producers on the show are making me insane.”

It always started the same. Joshua brought him into the room, told him about his week, like he’d kept every minute pent up until he spoke to Jack. The thing was, Jack found it strange. Joshua had a wife and three kids. Jack often wondered if he ever told his wife about his day, or his grown kids.

Joshua had a full head of white hair, puffy white hair that sat three inches above his heavily lined forehead. He wasn’t horrible to look at, perhaps, but Jack still felt it was wrong each time they were together. Not just wrong, as in Joshua was married, and it was a financial exchange. Jack felt, with all his clients, that he was meant for something else. That he was meant for someone else.

Talking himself out of those thoughts was easy on the surface. Down deep, however, was this gnawing need to find that person who was his, all his, and that he belonged to.

“The scripts alone need work, but the producers are always on the side of the writers unless the writers want more pay, you know. It’s all a terrible circle.”

For once, something Joshua said intrigued Jack and he asked, “The writers...do you know all of them?”

“Huh? Oh, sure, most, anyway. It’s important for big directors to know the best writers.”

He had already started to undress, and he was down to his baggie boxers, black socks, and those funny suspenders that kept his socks in place. His leather shoes were placed neatly under his side of the bed, pants folded along the crease and placed perfectly

over the back of the desk chair. For liking things dirty, he couldn't go so far as to let his expensive clothing touch the floor for longer than it took to get them off.

Jack broached, "Do you know...I mean, he said he writes scripts, but...Maltin Graves?"

Hearing the name made Joshua lose his smile. "Graves? You know him?"

"I'm working for him," he said, then realized Joshua didn't think Jack did anything besides hooking. "Fixing his roof, I mean."

"Right," he sighed in relief. "Forgot you do...labor too."

"Well, do you know him?"

A quick jerk of his head that Jack took for a nod came before he went to the bed and sat on it. "Strange duck, that one. He only works at home and insists on bringing the scripts in himself, but he won't stay for changes in the script if we need to change something. We're forever having to call him. Some days, I'd like to turn him into a lamppost and break the lightbulb."

Jack laughed at that. "You're not alone."

He joined Joshua on the bed, glad he'd left his pants on because the bedspread was always sticky and disgusting. "He's old, that one. Older than most witches get. I've heard rumors he's something like...oh, over two hundred years old."

Jack gaped at him. "Two hundred? Are you sure?"

"Oh, rumors fly in this city, you know. He doesn't look to be over, I don't know, thirty-five, but he has been around a lot longer than that. He wrote the script for a

movie that debuted in the nineties. That would have made him a small child.”

Leaning over and resting his elbows on his thighs, Jack let that sink in for a moment.

“Two hundred.”

“And, well, he’s a recluse, mostly. That makes sense from his age being, well, elevated like that. I’ve heard it myself, him calling himself a half-breed.”

“Half-breed? Like what?”

“Witch and shifter. I don’t know his lineage, though. I don’t believe anyone does.”

It made sense. Back in the distant past, it was frowned upon to be anything but a full-blooded shifter or witch, or anything except the gods and demigods. “I’ll be damned.”

“Can we get on with it? I’m tired of talk of that man.”

“Sure,” Jack said as he started to unbutton his shirt. “Let’s get on with it.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:28 am*

### Chapter Three

Arriving home just before midnight, Jack didn't bother to undress, he just climbed into his bunk and fell almost instantly asleep.

That, he regretted.

Another dream as disturbing as the first. He was running down a dirt road, the sound of his claws on the hard-packed earth distracting. Fast breathing, the vapor of which clouded his vision of the road ahead, the night falling darker and darker as the way led to the same bleak forest from the previous dream.

Then, up ahead, Jack saw a figure, and he knew instinctively the man ahead of him was running from Jack. Why, Jack couldn't guess, except he felt fear from the man, in sick, thick waves.

Jack felt that he wanted to feed. The dream-Jack wanted to tear into the man, scratching through his chest, ribs, and breastbone, and get to the man's rapidly beating heart until he could see the heart beating in his chest, pumping blood. Jack would set his mouth over it, closing his immense jaws until the heart popped like a hard candy filled with delicious juice...

Waking up in a cold sweat again, barely holding in the scream, Jack sat straight up, hugging himself until his breathing slowed enough for him to be able to swallow. The thing was, when he swallowed, he tasted blood.

He climbed down from the bunk and hurried to the bathroom, closing and locking the

door behind him. In the mirror, he saw the blood on his lips, the blood he'd tasted. He was ghostly white, his eyes wide in terror, so that blood stood out macabrely.

Jack ran the water until it was as cold as he could get it, then scrubbed over his face, slurping water into his mouth to clean the blood. When he looked back in the mirror, he saw that he'd bitten his lip.

Turning away from the mirror, Jack leaned back on the sink, the glare of his pale face too much for what was going through his mind. He'd wanted to bite that heart so badly that he'd bitten his own lip.

The skyline of the city helped to calm his racing heart. That was remarkable, really, as he hadn't any special affinity for the city except it had been an escape from his family. Still, it was home. Maybe that was all he'd needed—a place that felt like home.

He showered and got ready for the day before his roommates woke, and crowded into the bathroom. Hair dripping over his shoulders, Jack stared into the mirror, glad he had some pink back in his cheeks.

The problem was, Jack barely recognized himself. It was the same face he'd seen in the mirror thousands of times, of course. Square jawline, depressed cheeks, bright eyes, and full lips. But when he looked in the mirror, he expected to see another face completely. Why, Jack didn't know. For the first time in his life, his own face felt foreign to him.

He practically ran from that mirror, the terror from the nightmare coming back to him. Ignoring his need for coffee, he got on the bus to head straight to work, though he'd be two hours early.

That was fine, he thought. Anything to get the job over and done with would suit him

just fine. Now that he thought about it, the strange feelings had begun when he'd started that job, around that hateful man.

On the roof, Jack placed a sheet of metal over the hole, screwing it into the reinforced beams. A warehouse didn't have shingles, but he added a few to the top of the metal. After he moved to the next section, he reinforced more, and stepped carefully over the new beam, only to feel another soft spot in the metal. Carefully, he sat and realized another two feet would need fixing.

To tell Graves that the entire roof would need replacing, well, that wasn't something Jack wanted to tell him. A handyman wouldn't be able to take on a job of that size.

At least he wouldn't be the one working on it. He didn't do full roofs, and couldn't, even if he did. He'd need an entire crew. A smile came to his lips as he thought about it, how pissed the recluse would be, having a whole crew of men there working right above his precious cars.

Descending the ladder, he got to the bottom and grabbed the bottle of water he'd brought, slugging it down while he watched the clouds overhead, dark and brooding, ready to cover the world from the sky.

The darkness it brought was eerie and reminded him too much of his dreams. He could feel himself walking through that forest, shadows everywhere, moving, ready to jump out at him, but he wasn't afraid of the shadows. He was more frightened of himself.

"Already finished?" Graves asked, making Jack jump in surprise.

He set the bottle down on the ground and said, "No. I just needed some water. I do need to speak with you about the roof, though. It may be worse than I first thought."

“Of course, it is,” he sneered. “You’ll take longer, needing more money, no doubt.”

He was wearing a long leather coat, black and shining despite the low light. That didn’t seem out of place for Maltin Graves, and his beauty, his amazing eyes that sliced into him like a thousand daggers.

“No, the opposite, in fact. I can’t do an entire roof on my own, no matter the money or the time.”

His brows drew together, yet no crease came between them. His skin was so perfectly smooth, it was creepy. “Oh? You’re admitting defeat? I didn’t see that in you.”

Jack didn’t know whether to take that as a compliment or not, but it felt like one and totally didn’t fit their tenuous relationship. “I’d love to finish the job, and I will, the job I signed up for, I’m just warning you, it will only work temporarily.”

The man’s voice was softened by a lot as he asked, “That bad?”

“I’m afraid it is. I’ll take some pictures if you like.”

“I’ll follow you up this time. I’m no great fan of heights, but I should see for myself.”

Another surprise. “Okay, sure, but I’ll follow you and hold the ladder while you climb.”

Taking a tentative step to the ladder, Jack watched as Maltin’s entire demeanor changed. “Thank...thank you.”

He started to climb, and Jack held the ladder, though it was bouncing anyway, once Maltin got to the halfway point. He knew that bounce well, and it scared the hell out of him.

Once Maltin was on the roof, he held the top for Jack as he started up the thing, and when he reached halfway, he looked up to catch Maltin staring down at him, a smile playing on his lips. Jack hadn't realized the man had the muscles it took to smile. With each rung of the ladder he took, he felt his heartbeat speeding up.

With some of his hatred abating, Jack could look at Maltin Graves in a new light, and all those times he'd seen him, hating him, well, he'd softened as much as Maltin's voice and demeanor had.

When he neared the top of the ladder, Maltin reached his hand to Jack and Jack took it, ready to be helped the rest of the way. But the second that Maltin touched him, there was a jolt of electricity, like someone gathering static electricity by shuffling their feet over a carpet, only a thousand times that.

It was so jolting that he was thrown backward, which wasn't good, as there was nothing under him but air.

Panic hit him immediately as he began to fall, and his mind glitched, the adrenaline and fear overcoming everything. It was so powerful that he blacked out, and as the world turned dark, he was grateful he wouldn't feel his body being broken by landing on the ground.

In the blackness, however, wasn't pain or fear. He stood in the forest from his recent dreams, checking over his body for injuries, and finding none. His hands were hands, fingernails not claws, and he felt over his face to find it was his normal face.

He was so glad he was just his ordinary, human self that he started running, ducking under branches, and dodging flowering bushes.

The trail wound around trees and stones and came out into a beautiful clearing, the sun rising on the horizon. Finally, the dreamworld he'd been thrown into was

brightening.

In the distance, he saw a man sitting, his face pointed to the sunrise. He slowed his pace as he neared the man, wondering who it could be and why he was sitting in the field of green grasses and yellow wildflowers.

As Jack approached, the man turned, and just when his face was about to be revealed, he woke from the dream with a fast, loud intake of air, and looked up to see a cloudy sky. When he turned his head, Maltin Graves was beside him, holding his hand as his face was creased with worry. “Are you alright?”

“I’m...alive?”

“Yes, you’re alive. I...helped. Magic.”

Blinking a few times, Jack tried to sit up, but Maltin wouldn’t allow it.

“Don’t move yet. I’ve called an ambulance.”

“I’m not hurt. Call them...back. I can’t afford the hospital.”

“Jack...my magic isn’t...strong. You still hit, and you were unconscious.”

Jack did sit up and his hand automatically moved to the back of his head, feeling for wounds and finding none. He didn’t even have a headache. “I passed out on the way down, I...I think.”

Maltin got them both to their feet and held him around the waist as he led them into the warehouse via the back entrance. “Still, let them check you out. And you’re not paying, I am.”

Shaking his head, he tried to argue. “I really feel okay.”

“You’ve had a fright, Jack. Please, let them look at you, for my sake.”

Unwilling to fight him on it, Jack let himself be led to the stairs and Maltin walked with him up to the loft, where he was taken inside and sat on the long leather sofa. “Stay here, and I’ll fetch you some water.”

“Th-thanks.”

Staring at his hands, Jack cocked his head, wondering what had happened. The jolt of electricity or static or whatever it had been had come out of nowhere. “Mr. Graves...did you...did you feel that?”

Maltin was in the kitchen area, looking out over the rest of the apartment and pouring him a glass of water from a clear jug from the fridge. “I, uh, did, yes.”

“What was it?”

When Graves didn’t answer, Jack tried to push, and all he got for that was handed the water and told to drink.

Maltin sat at the large wood block that served as a coffee table as he watched Jack drink. Once Jack took the glass from his lips, Maltin took it, and a buzzer sounded. “That must be the EMTs.”

Jack didn’t want to be checked over; he wanted answers. Still, Maltin was probably right. If he landed on his head or back, he could be hurt, and the shock might keep him from feeling it.

The EMTs rushed in once Maltin led them to the loft, and after poking and asking a

million questions, including if he'd used his own power to break his fall, they left. He sat unable to shake that question, to which he'd had to answer a simple no, hoping he didn't have to elaborate.

Thankfully, he didn't, and Maltin showed them out once they came back with good news: besides his elevated blood pressure, he was fine.

"Please, Jack, take the rest of the day off with pay. Go home and rest."

Not waiting for Maltin to change his mind, Jack got up and left quickly, barely acknowledging Maltin on the way out the door.

Home was not an option. He had an old laptop that didn't work, and he needed answers. After catching the crosstown bus, he went to the city's biggest library and got on the computer there, looking for anything that could explain the strange things happening to him.

There had to be answers. Dreams, what happened when he and Maltin touched for the first time? Something had to stop his heart from beating out of his damn chest. His head swam with all the questions, and he hoped beyond hope that he'd find something to ease his mind.

### Chapter Four

Being drawn so heavily to Jack had been a problem from the start. Maltin Graves stared at the door that had slammed shut upon Jack's leaving, and his eyes stayed there for more than an hour as thoughts crowded his mind.

He'd opened his mouth to call out to Jack, to beg him to stay and recover more, but the words fell away from him, and he'd closed his mouth again.

At the bathroom sink, he stared at his image, looking for and finding the tiny lines that had formed around his eyes.

To anyone else, they'd be nearly invisible.

Every time Maltin Graves used his magic, he was closer to death. It was a menacing truth of his very long life.

You see, Maltin Graves was a half-breed, and while the world had changed during his time on it, where that term didn't gather derision, it did mean he had a finite level of magic. His family, for instance, those on the witch side, could cast spells to lengthen their lives. He had an aunt that was close to nine hundred years old. For him, however, those spells couldn't be cast. They took too much magic, and the trying of them would likely kill him.

The line of magic he was from was so powerful that his people were revered throughout the magic realms. His father, however, wasn't a witch. His mother had fallen in love with a shifter on a trip to Denmark one icy winter.

Since his father's animal form was never seen, Maltin didn't know what creature he would be once he shifted. Most find out at a young age. His mother told him that his father died without shifting once, and she'd learned that some won't until they meet their mates. His poor mother spent the rest of her years pining for that lost love. He'd died so young, not yet forty.

The magic he'd used to slow Jack's fall from the roof had taken a lot out of him. A lot of energy and a lot of magic. Out of practice, he hadn't used magic for more than twenty years. He sat on the bed in his room, staring down at his hands, especially the one Jack had touched. That energy that was cast between them wasn't normal magic. It was dark, but it was alive.

Feeling pulled to Jack from the first, he'd passed it off, thinking it had just been too long since he'd been in close company with such an attractive man. Sure, he had been around gorgeous men at the studios when he was forced to go in them to take his scripts or do rewrites in person, which he hated.

No one made him feel the things that Jack had made him feel. Longing, need, bordering on desperation. Thinking back on his mother's words, they sat in his gut and ate away like acid.

"We were in love, but if he'd met his fated mate before he'd died, he would have had to leave me for her."

Wondering, not for the first time, if his mother had been secretly happy that his father had died first before he could meet his mate...Maltin wondered if he'd just met his own.

That touch. That all-consuming touch so strong as to throw Jack into the air was nothing short of powerful magic. Maltin lay on his bed, letting his lids slide closed and thinking about Jack, that beautiful face, that amazing body, and those hazel eyes

that were gray at times and olive-green at others, and he dared to let himself hope that he'd met his mate at long last.

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The Carmichael Library was near downtown Valleywood, right down the road from The Valleywood Mall. It was a vast, grey brick building with two winged lions guarding the front on either side of the marble steps.

The inside boasted hundreds of stacks of books, including novels and reference books, but they didn't stop with those. Sections of the library were dedicated to every form of magic, magical beings, and other worlds.

The books on magic alone were half the library, and he didn't know where to start. He got on one of the computers and started adding words to the search, but the possibilities were so great that Jack knew he'd never find what he was looking for.

Then the librarian came creaking over to him, her hunchback not stopping her from rushing around, telling one group of kids to hush their loud talking, and gathering books left behind on tables.

She had the whitest hair he'd ever seen. It was so white that it fairly glowed. She came over to him, gnarled finger pointing at him, making him remember that strange woman from a few days previous who'd told him he'd find his mate...

"You have a heck of a stack, there, son. Don't forget to return them all to the cart. My back is aching to beat the band today."

She turned to leave, but Jack stopped her with a hand on her arm. Keeping his voice low like the librarian, he stopped her with, "Excuse me, Missus..."

“ Ms . Sunny Jim. Ms. Tempest. What can I do you for?”

With wrinkles and creases covering her face, she could have been a roadmap of the world. Still, her icy blue eyes were kind as they locked with his. “I’m not sure of what I’m looking for.”

“Oh?” She pushed around some of the titles on the table surrounding him and commented, “Magic, obviously.”

“But I’m not sure...what kind. I guess. I mean, what does it mean when you touch someone, and you get this weird...I don’t know, jolt? It threw me backward; it was so strong. I’ve never felt anything like it. I’ve never even heard of anything like it.”

As Ms. Tempest looked around, she whispered, “Come with me, son.”

He got up and followed her, walking much quicker than he anticipated. She scurried along like a mouse after a block of cheese.

Between two long stacks they went, his eyes trying to take in volumes around him to guess where they were headed, but once they went through a door into an entirely different section, he saw immediately they were in the section that had all books about shifters.

His disappointment was hard to mask as he said, “I, uh, I’m not a shifter. I’m...I come from a family of witches.”

She turned to him with a smile on her thin, heavily lined lips. “Oh? Is that so? I never heard of a witch having a fated mate.”

The shock of her statement made him speechless at first. She turned back to the aisle ahead of her, moving as swiftly until they came to the very end of that row, where she

stopped and pulled out a thick, leather-bound tome that must have weighed twenty pounds. But the tiny old woman hefted it like it was nothing.

She took it to a table in the back of the room and set it down with a dull thud. “There. Read over the chapter about hellhounds.”

Unable to voice his shock, he simply stared at her.

“I’m going to head over to another area and get you another book while you learn a little about yourself.”

Jack sat at the table and stared at the book's cover. The gold embossed lettering was faded but legible.

A Guide to Uncommon Shapeshifters, Author Clarence Reginald

“I can’t be. I just can’t be! You don’t get a shifter from a witch.”

Noticing that his hand was shaking as he lifted it to open the book, he shook it hard and made a tight fist before he opened it again and opened the book to the table of contents.

When he saw the section on hellhounds, he swallowed, suddenly more terrified than he’d been in his life.

Hellhounds were evil creatures, he’d always thought. He didn’t feel evil, not much anyway. He was no saint, surely, but not an evil being. Basically, a damn demon?

Skimming over the first page of the section, he started to calm down. Early on, it disclosed that hellhounds, unlike their prey, were servants needed for the cycle of life. They were simply taking those from one plane of existence to another.

He sat back and took his eyes off the page, scoffing, “Sure. Dragging people to hell is just part of the circle of life. Great.”

Ms. Tempest was back, and she pushed the shifter book away from him, opening the book she’d brought. “Now, I am guessing your family had no idea about you. There are six families that have been known to produce hellhounds, but there are others that have claimed it, though no one was witness to it. There are thirty names here. Don’t bother telling me who you are before you look at these.”

The page of the book she’d brought had lists of all the hellhound families known to the author, with the disclaimer that not all hellhounds were aware of their roots. “That would be me,” he said mostly to himself.

“Adoptions have always been, son. Even before there was paperwork and courts. A parentless child would be given to a family for raising, unknowing of where they came from and what their powers might be.”

“But...I’m not adopted. I know I’m not. In fact, that would be the best-case scenario for me, because it would explain a lot.”

She sat in the other chair and gazed at him with the utmost sympathy. “Child, you look at the names, and if you don’t find your family here, maybe someone has some explaining to do. I’ve only ever heard of one before, a woman that found her fated mate by accident, the same way you did, with a jolt like that. That jolt...it’s killed a lot of folks like you. It killed that poor girl and her fated mate lived out the rest of his life in misery and never fully became.”

“Became? Became what?”

“Why, a hellhound, dear. Without your mate, you’re...well,” she said then patted his hand like he was a child. “Read for yourself. I wouldn’t trust the word of a crazy old

librarian over the experts.”

She left him then and the books sat in front of him for a few minutes as he tried to wrap his mind around what he was learning. There was a thread left of pure disbelief. After all, she said it herself, she was a crazy old librarian. For all he knew, she didn’t know more than what she read in the cheap novels she was surrounded by.

That thread was unraveling, though. All of it struck home, and that, along with the dreams he was having...

Not to mention fated mates.

He knew about mates, of course. It was hard not to hear about them growing up in a magical family. Of course, his family had looked down their pointed noses at the thought of it, animals that were expected to wait until their true mates were revealed. Witches chose their own, but their hypocrisy knew no bounds. They only chose other witches to marry, to keep their lineage magically strong.

Fated mates...those were a whole other can of worms. To wait for that one special person, and once you found them, your entire life made sense. It was rumored that was the reason humans believed in soulmates.

Thinking of Malin Graves as the one being he was meant to be with didn’t sit well with him. Sure, the man was gorgeous, but that was where his interest in him stopped.

He pulled the book with the family names over and started to scan it, looking desperately for the Pengrove name. He passed right over the Ps and didn’t see it, and his heart sank.

He decided to check out the books, his head beginning to ache so badly that the words blurred on the pages. At the front desk, Ms. Tempest sat with a novel open,

though she wasn't reading it. "Checking it out?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. Take your time and read up on things. I'll give you an extended checkout because I believe you'll need it to take it all in. I'm sorry that I had to be the one to tell you."

Nodding, Jack wished the same.

Taking the books back to his apartment, he set them on the table by the kitchenette and grabbed a beer from the fridge. Falling back on the couch, his mind suddenly blank for its own benefit, he figured. He had just sipped the cold beer when Garvey came in the door.

"Hey, Jackie boy. How's it going?"

"It sucks. That's how. Why are you home? I thought you worked all day."

"Took the day off to go and register with Colin."

Jack's head spun to him as Garvey plopped on the couch on the other end. "Colin? My boss?"

"Yeah. I told ya."

He had, but Jack hadn't taken him seriously. "You know...not all the clients are women, and the men you'll be fucking aren't good-looking, right?"

"Who cares? I get ugly ass now. At least I'll get more out of it than the damn crabs."

Breathing a laugh, he took another sip and said, “Gross.”

“Exactly. He wasn’t gonna give me a shot until he had me take off my shirt. That seemed to do it.”

Garvey wasn’t good-looking per se, but his body was kicking. He inspired Jack to work out harder when they’d first met. “Well, it’s better money than bussing tables, for sure.”

“Exactly. Might as well, you know? Make some good cash.”

He stared at the books and asked Garvey, “What do you know...about fated mates?”

“Fated mates? What everyone knows, I guess. A person you’re meant to be with, breed with, whatever. If I ever find mine, well...I guess I’ll become a dad. Why? You don’t have to worry about that, being a witch.”

“Yeah, sure. It’s just...my client, he...he’s a shifter, and I just wanted to know about them.”

“Oh, right. Well, no worries, if you get down and dirty with him, and he’s not the one, he won’t knock you up. If that’s what you’re worried about.”

“If I’m the one that can get knocked up.”

“You think you’d be the alpha? Come on,” he said, laughing.

“I could be if...you know, I was a shifter.”

Garvey shook his head and took the beer from Jack’s hand. “Sure, buddy.”

“How do you know? If you’re the one that, you know, gets knocked up?”

After he shrugged his shoulder and handed him back the beer, Garvey said, “Easy. You’ve got the parts inside you. I don’t.”

“How do you know? Do you check?”

“Sure. I got checked during my first school physical. I’m no alpha, but I don’t have to be to get someone preggers.”

Realizing how little he knew about shifters, he decided it might be a good idea to start reading up on them—just in case. Then something else came to him, and he waited until Garvey went into the bathroom to shower.

Opening the book that listed the names of the families producing hellhounds, he used his finger to guide him down the list until he came to the Gs. He’d passed right over them before when he’d looked for his own name.

The end of the Gs, it was there. Graves.

“No fucking way.”

He left in a rush and felt like time was chasing him as he waited impatiently for the bus. It felt worse the many times the bus stopped on the way to his stop. He drummed his hands on his thighs until the man across from him cleared his throat and scowled at him. After shoving his hands in his pockets, he watched the city go by agonizingly slowly before he came to his stop, where he jumped up and exited the bus like the devil was chasing him.

When he saw the warehouse, his heart started to pound in his chest. He felt the man. From a hundred yards away, he felt Maltin like they were near enough to touch.

Warmth started in his chest and quickly consumed him. Jack hungered for Maltin like he'd been starving all his life, and Maltin was the only food that would satisfy him.

He slowly walked up the slight rise, despite how impatient he was to get there. With each step, he got warmer, like the sun was falling from the sky right over him, and the nearer it got, the more he burned.

Then, like magic, Maltin stood outside the warehouse as if he'd felt Jack coming, and Jack's heart leaped into his throat. He stopped, staring at the man, and suddenly, the doubts ended. He knew beyond a doubt that Maltin was meant to be his.

Maltin began to close the distance between them, and Jack followed suit, taking one step, then another. The closer he got, the more he felt the man.

When they stood beside the road a foot apart, tears began to spring to his eyes, and the world blurred until they ran down his cheeks.

Maltin went to him quickly, grabbing his upper arms, and that touch didn't throw him, but Maltin's hands burned into his flesh. "I haven't stopped thinking about you."

"I'm...I'm confused and...I don't know what's happening to me."

"I don't know either, but maybe we're supposed to find out together."

Dark, deep eyes stared into his, and Jack's breath caught in his throat. He wanted to kiss Maltin, but he also knew that if he started, he'd be unable to stop. They'd be naked and writhing in the middle of the parking lot with cars driving by, witnessing their coupling.

Coupling. He'd never called it that before, even in his own mind. "We should go into your house."

“Yes,” Maltin agreed, letting his hands slide down Jack’s arms until he took both of Jack’s hands in his. “Come with me, Jack. Don’t be afraid.”

Frankly, he was terrified of his new reality. When he was led to the loft and Maltin helped him to sit on the sofa, he finally found his voice again and asked weakly, “Did you know?”

“Know? Know what, Jack?”

“That you were...are...we are...hellhounds?”

Maltin stopped moving like he’d been frozen solid, and his eyes glazed over as he stared at Jack. “Excuse me?”

“You don’t know?”

It was Maltin’s turn to sit as he paled and started to shake.

Jack knew then that Maltin had no idea.

“I didn’t know what...we are. I mean, it’s not for sure or anything, but with the force of...well, me flying off that ladder, the librarian said?”

“The librarian? You told someone?”

He looked like that bit of news frightened him more than learning what he was.

“Just her, and...I didn’t tell her. She told me. I researched what might have happened, and I had a stack of books on the table. She wanted to help, so I told her what happened to me, and...she gave me books to read.”

“Jack, if anyone knew-I mean anyone, we could be...we would be outcasts!”

That didn't seem likely. There were rumors of actual gods living in Valleywood, and they didn't have the best reputations, though it was all just gossip. “Why?”

“Jack, do you realize what hellhounds are?”

He was still pale, and his chest was moving so fast, Jack worried he'd hyperventilate. “Kind of. I mean, I thought they were like evil beings, but the books say they're needed.”

“Of course they are! They're needed to drag people into the underworld! No one wants to go into the underworld, Jack, unless they come from there and call it home to begin with! It's hell, Jack!”

He was shaking, and for some reason, his distress over the matter made Jack become the caregiver. In the corner of the room, across from the kitchen, was a small table Maltin used as a bar. He poured them both what he assumed to be whiskey by the amber color of it and brought them to the couch, where he handed one to Maltin. “Drink this.”

“Not even the best cognac can calm me over this, Jack.”

He held the glass in both hands and stared at the liquid, but then he did drink, slugging it back quickly.

Jack sat beside him and drank his own glass. It warmed him, but it wasn't like he was chilled. Being near Maltin made him sweat with the heat they were gathering between them.

“I don't know anything about it, Maltin. I barely read a few sentences. I was freaking

out, you know? Your name...it's in the list of families known to produce hellhounds."

He seemed to be speaking more to himself than to Jack. His voice was low and far away as he said, "My father never knew what he was. He never shifted. He and my mother were never meant to be together, but they fell in love regardless."

"Don't most shifters know, like, pretty early on? My friend, Garvey, he knew."

"Yes, of course. Others, however, don't shift unless they find their fated mates."

"It said that about hellhounds. So, your father, he was one, he just never knew? Can that be? If your names are in a book, wouldn't those families know?"

"What book?" Maltin demanded, and Jack saw the Maltin he knew coming back. Angry, hateful of the rest of the world.

Jack took the glass from him and handed Maltin his, gently pushing it to his lips. "Calm down. It's a book from the library. It lists names of shifter families and the shifters they've produced."

"So, others know?"

"The book was pretty dusty, so I doubt anyone's checked it out in years, if not a century. Besides, it's not your fault, or I guess mine. I don't know how I am, though. I come from a witch family."

"You have powers? Why didn't you save yourself when you were falling? You made me do it, and I have finite powers, Jack!"

He was nearly hysterical, and Jack knew he'd get worse if Jack weren't careful. And,

if he had powers, he could kill Jack pretty easily as Jack couldn't defend himself from magic.

After pouring himself another drink, he watched Maltin get up and start to pace, his casual clothing the most expensive money could buy, white linen shirt, matching pants, how they rippled when he moved, like the waves of a lake during a soft breeze.

The cloth draped perfectly over his body, the rounded cheeks of his ass flexing and relaxing with each quick step, the shirt rising a bit to show the flesh of his stomach each time he ran fingers through his thick dark hair. The man was even more beautiful than Jack had first observed. If they were fated mates, he could have done much, much worse.

"I can't believe this. If we're found out, we'll be cast out of Valleywood and any other city bearing magical people. My family, they'll never speak to me again."

Speaking of families, Jack wondered about his own. They already barely had anything to do with him because he wasn't a witch like them. To find out he was a hellhound...

That raised the question again for him, and he spoke it aloud. "How did I become a shifter from witch parents?"

Maltin stopped and turned his head slowly to Jack. "Yes, indeed, how?" He raced to his small desk near the bar and sat in the chair, flipping open his laptop, fingers flying over the keys. "We're going to find out. We'll find out everything, then... then decide what to do."

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:28 am*

### Chapter Five

As Jack peered over his shoulder, the guy's proximity made Maltin sweat despite how cool his loft was. Online, he found three private detective agencies, but one only worked in Valleywood, another didn't ever go near the city, and finally, the third was countrywide.

"Great. This is where we begin."

"A private detective? I thought you didn't want anyone to know."

"He's not from Valleywood, but close enough to drive here in an hour. We're leaving in ten minutes."

Jack's jaw dropped but Maltin ignored him. He had to. Whenever he looked at Jack, he had extreme impulses to fuck him blind.

After dressing in a casual tan suit, he grabbed his wallet and herded Jack to the warehouse, opening the door of his pink convertible '62 Ford Thunderbird for him.

"Get in, please."

"You don't believe in being incognito much, huh?"

"I don't drive ugly cars, even to blend in with others. Are you getting in?"

Jack chuckled dryly. "Can I drive?"

“No,” he said flatly, suddenly annoyed with his possible fated mate.

Fated mate. Although he’d known he could be a shifter, he never considered mating. He’d had lovers in the past, but the one time he thought about being with someone forever, they’d cheated and left him high and dry.

That was when he decided that other people weren’t for him. They were all out to hurt him, at least in his mind. To think of fate placing a mate with him, with no say so from Maltin, with no choice, made him as angry as it aroused him just to be near Jack.

He started the car with a roar of the engine, and Jack was smiling as he petted the black leather dashboard like it was a kitten. “God, this is beautiful. I’d have never gone for pink, but with the black, it’s gorgeous.”

“Please refrain from sexually assaulting my interior,” he said, though he hadn’t meant to sound so clipped.

Jack’s voice turned menacing. “Listen, I get your cars are so fucking precious to you but lay off me. I’m dealing with a lot of shit right now.”

“And I’m not?”

“Yeah, you are! Aren’t we kind of in this thing together? Maybe that pisses you off that you have to share something with me, a lowly fucking whore, but that’s the roll of the dice.”

Maltin heard the words and turned off the engine before turning his head slowly to Jack. “You’re what?”

“Oh, don’t pretend you don’t know.”

“I thought you were a handyman!”

Jack stared in disbelief. “You are kidding, right?”

“Kidding about this? I assure you I wouldn’t joke about something like that. I didn’t hire you to...to...”

“Fuck you?”

“Well, yes!”

Jack slumped in his seat and groaned, “Fuck, my mouth. Yes, I’m a handyman, but the company where I work does a play on words. Hand-E-Men. Hands-E-Men, like men who work with their hands but don’t use any tools except what they were born with, so to speak. We do both or either.”

Maltin was so shocked that he didn’t know what to think. “Well, if I’d have known...”

“What? You wouldn’t have hired me? I am fixing your roof. Both or either, you know? Usually, I do some work for a guy, and then, when I’m done with that job, I give him one, or whatever. I pretty much figured, then hoped, that you didn’t want the second part of that contract.”

Of everything Jack had said, only the last part jumped out at him. “You hoped I wouldn’t? What’s wrong with me ?”

Jack finally looked over at him. “You’re a...well, you’re a prick.”

As much as he’d liked to deny that, he couldn’t. “I guess I do come off that way. Besides that, I’m...I mean, would you...?”

“Yeah, okay. You’re hot when you’re not talking.” Jack laughed and shook his head a little. “Can we leave now?”

“Yes. I suppose we should go.”

He pushed the remote on the big door in front of the warehouse, and up it went, squealing and creaking until it was open. Maltin started forward, hitting the remote again once they were through.

Jack mentioned, “I can work on that too if you’d like.”

“Let’s see if we’re mated first. I’d hate to...I mean, you know.”

“You aren’t going to pay me to fuck, if that’s what you’re concerned about if we’re mated. If not, and you want to fuck, then pay me.”

Maltin cringed at that. “I don’t pay for sex, Jack.”

They mainly drove in silence, but Jack did ask if he could play the radio. Maltin wasn’t sure what kind of music he’d want to play, so he turned it on himself and found a nice classical station.

“Really? You can drive to this music?”

“Of course! Let the music flow through you. This music is classical for a reason, Jack. It’s big and thrums through a body, making every cell and breath alive.”

“Cheesy.”

Maltin’s temper was in check, but barely. “Your family, they’re upper crust. Are you telling me you weren’t raised with culture?”

“I was raised in a room whenever people would come over,” he said in tones that told of his anger and resentment.

“Why, Jack? What was it that made you so resentful of your family?”

Jack stared at the floor of the car, unmoving for a long time. Maltin wanted to press him but refrained.

Finally, Jack huffed and asked, “I guess, you being my mate, you will find out eventually, right?”

“Find out what, Jack?”

“I have no powers. None. I am basically human, or I was before...I found out all this.”

Maltin understood then why Jack hadn’t tried to save himself. Knowing that eased him that he’d saved Jack from that desperate fall. “I see.”

“I knew it. You hate me now!”

Maltin only laughed. “Why? Do you think you’re the first offspring of magical people who were born without powers? Not at all. And I don’t hate you. I’m somewhat of a pariah in my family, too. Their powers are infinite. They can use them all day, every day, without consequence. Me? If I use them too much, I will perish.”

“Perish? Are you serious?”

“Very. My magic keeps me alive. My family has very long lives. Even the fully magical members die eventually, but they have spells to prolong them further. It’s rumored we come from a demigod, but that is only a rumor. The only reason I’ve

lived so long is not using my powers.”

Jack looked confused, and Maltin couldn't blame him. “You can't use your powers, so you don't die, and your family uses theirs to live longer. How does that make sense?”

“Does all magic make sense to you? Does it make sense your family are witches, and you're a shifter?”

Jack slumped farther in the seat. “No,” he said as he pouted.

“Magic doesn't always make sense, and magical families make less sense. That's why it's called the supernatural.”

“Still, it's weird. And how do you know? Are there many people in your family that aren't full witches? Maybe they're lying.”

“They're not. I aged overnight once when I used my powers, Jack. I went from a sweet mid-puberty twelve-year-old to a raging twenty-year-old. At least I looked it. I still felt twelve, of course. I stopped going to the same school that year. It was tough on me.”

“That's crazy.”

“It is.”

Maltin hated confessing his secrets to Jack or anyone, but Jack had confessed a huge secret of his own, and he was right. As mates, they'd share a lot, including secrets. “Jack, please, don't think I judge you. I'd never, as I have no place to judge anyone.”

“You won't tell anyone, right?”

“If you don’t tell anyone we are or might be, or whatever, hellhounds.”

“Why would I? Sounds like we’ll be torched and pitchforked out of town. I like Valleywood. I mean, I hate what I have to do for money, but it’s better than being hidden away like a dirty secret. Wait, I guess I will be.”

“I’d never hide you away, Jack. Just because I don’t want to reveal to the world that you and I are hellhounds, that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t be proud to walk into any room with you.”

Jack was staring over at him, but Maltin pretended to keep his eyes on the road. It was becoming too real too quickly, and they barely liked each other. They’d fought more than been friendly.

When they arrived at the private investigator’s office, Maltin was pleasantly surprised when it wasn’t like he’d expected. He’d thought for sure he would walk into an office straight out of an old noir movie, where the man behind the cluttered desk would be wearing a stained shirt, balding, with a cigar hanging from his mouth as he drank cheap whiskey from a stained white coffee cup.

That couldn’t be further from the truth. The front of the office was sleek and modern, with a standing desk and a shining black tablet where the receptionist typed in their names. White walls were decorated with wood and metal sculptures, and the chairs in the waiting area were armless and imported from Spain.

The receptionist wore a classic black dress and had perfectly done French tip nails, and her hair was back in a braided bun. Maltin was impressed but a little disappointed. He’d have liked to pretend to be in that noir movie, where the detective would have called women skirts, bottle blondes, cookies, or broads . So, that wasn’t exactly PC, but old movies were anything but PC. He’d smoke a butt , call himself a dick, and talk about how he just did a dime in Joliet.

So much for expectations.

When they were called into his office, Dennis Peterson was a regular-looking man with a full head of dark hair and no stains on his freshly pressed white dress shirt. He was relaxing behind his glass and onyx desk with an air of calmness. “Gentlemen,” he said as he stood and proffered his hand to each of them.

After we sat in comfortable wooden scoop chairs, he asked us, “What can I do for you, gentlemen?”

Jack clammed up like he’d lost the ability to speak, but Maltin didn’t mind. “We’ve recently discovered that Jack here is very different from his parents. We have no idea why.”

“Uh, okay...can you be more specific?”

Using magic was the only option if the man was far enough from Valleywood that he didn’t know about magical people. It was worth the few months it would take for him to use just that tiny bit.

Maltin whispered, “Non dicas animae quod confessuri sumus .”

Jack’s head spun to him. “Did you just,” he lowered his voice to finish, “magic?”

“Tiny bit. Only a few months’ worth.”

Dennis smiled and said, “No need for spells, Mr. Graves. I’m quite aware of the magical folk from Valleywood.”

Relieved, Matlin sighed, “Thank goodness. And this...even from those magical folk, will be confidential?”

“Of course. I understand how important it is to be discrete.”

More relief. “Good,” Maltin said. Then he laid out the story from top to bottom. Once he was finished, he glanced over to Jack, seeing how pale he was. “Jack, he’ll be discrete.”

“I understand that, and I believe it, but I’ve kept this secret since I moved to Valleywood. Excuse me for being a little iffy about telling two people in one day.”

Dennis said, “I assure you, I’ve heard much worse, Jack. And you’re sure you weren’t adopted?”

“I’m very sure. I’ve heard my birth story; I’ve seen pictures of my mother in the hospital with me. Back then, she was proud to have me for a son, so there were a ton of pictures.”

“Strange. I’m not an expert on witches, mind you, but enough to know that it isn’t usual for a shifter to be produced by two witches. Like your...dare I say, a possible mate, a shifter would have had to have been in your lineage.”

“If there were one, they would have hidden it, so it’s possible.”

“Yes, that would have been a stain on the family, one of prestige, anyway. Full blood has always been important to families like that.”

Jack looked over at Maltin and then reached for his hand. As Maltin let Jack take it, he felt a bussing of electricity in their touch. There was little point in denying there was something between them more than surface attraction.

“Okay, give me the details of what you all need me to do, and I’ll quote a price. If it’s acceptable, I’ll start on it today, and I should have something for you in a couple of

days.”

“That fast?” Jack squeaked.

“Yes. I have friends that help me get into programs that I wouldn’t normally have access to. Adoption records, for instance. Remember, gentlemen, discretion.”

Maltin felt himself smiling, and Jack nodded, coming to grips that he may have been adopted, no matter all the pictures. “Thank you, sir. We’ll be waiting for your call.”

The ride back was even quieter, but Maltin understood. Thinking of being adopted weighed heavily on Jack. “I’m sorry about all this.”

“Not your fault. At least it would explain why my family could give a flying fuck about me.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

Jack groaned, “It’s true.”

Maltin wanted to take him in his arms and hold him, but their heat together was getting worse, and that would result in them fucking, he was sure. As much as that would satisfy him in some ways, it was too soon, too...biological. That wasn’t romantic or special; for Jack, he wanted it to be special.

“So, your name is really Jackson. I think it fits you better.”

“I never thought so. It’s pretentious, and I’m not.”

Sulking like a child made Jack terribly cute. “I don’t think so. I think you’re more refined than you give yourself credit for. You’re articulate, handsome, groomed well.

You act like some bum living out of a cardboard box or something.”

“Bum? People that have no homes are not bums,” he scolded Maltin. “God, you really are old-fashioned in your views. No wonder all your cars are old.”

“Well, I’m old, Jack. I may look thirty, but I’m much older than that.”

“That’s no excuse to be bigoted.”

Taking offense to that, he gripped the leather steering wheel cover tightly as he gritted, “I’m no bigot. I was a gay man long before it became cool to be so.”

“Cool? How detached are you?”

“Detached? Do you realize what it was like to be gay in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?”

“You’re really that old?”

He turned to see that Jack was laughing. “What is so funny?”

“Talk about an age gap. We’re worse than Aaron and Sam.”

“Who are they?”

Jack laughed more. “Never mind.”

After Jack’s laughter finally died, Maltin realized that he was calling the two of them a couple. “Jack, would that bother you terribly?”

“What?”

“Our age difference?”

“You don’t look it, so no. Would it bother you?”

If he was truthful with himself, he’d been attracted to Jack right off, but his trust issues and the love of being alone kept him from allowing his mind to work that out to anything but a transaction for his work. “No, Jack, but...we’re not getting along well so far.”

“I’ve seen a lot of couples. We’re not supposed to be all sweet and sappy all the time. How boring is that? We have...spice! Yeah, we’re spicy. Besides, don’t shifters like to bite and scratch and all that?”

“I have no idea. I’ve never been intimate with a shifter.”

“I have been with plenty, but they weren’t shifted while we were doing it,” Jack said nonchalantly.

Feeling suddenly jealous and possessive, he tried to move past the comment and found his anger kept surging.

Jack must have noticed. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he said a little too quickly, snapping the words like he was a shark after prey.

“Are you...jealous?”

More anger made his foot a little heavy on the accelerator. “Jealous? Don’t be absurd.”

Jack leaned over as far as the seatbelt would allow and commented, “Uh, you are driving a hundred and twenty miles an hour right now.”

He forced himself to be calm after backing his foot off the peddle. “We don’t even know each other, and we’re supposed to be mates, and what? Have children? I don’t even like children.”

“Hey, I am not exactly dying to become a dad. As far as being mated? It’s gonna fuck with my job a little.”

Again, he had to bring up the fact he was a whore. How the hell would Maltin Graves deal with the fact his mate is a whore? “Can we, maybe, stop talking about that?”

“What?” Clenching his jaw, he didn’t say a word, but already, Jack read him well. “Really? Are you embarrassed of me?”

Maltin had never rolled his eyes in his life until that moment. “No! Who would I be embarrassed in front of? I don’t have friends, and I barely have colleagues.”

“Then what?”

Maltin pulled off on their exit and slowed to a stop before turning right and starting for home. “How would you like knowing I was with a lot of men?”

“Being you’re...I don’t know, a thousand years old, I’d be pretty stupid to think you weren’t with a lot of men.”

“I’m nowhere near a thousand years old! Jesus, Jack!”

The city came into view a few minutes later, and he let out a pent-up breath, his mind easing the moment he knew he was nearly home. “Jack...I’m just...this is a lot. For

you as well, I'm sure."

"Yes, you're right. Maybe we just don't talk about men we've been with for a while. Even though I'm a little curious about how sex has changed."

Maltin heard that and suddenly burst out laughing. Jack laughed with him, and they were much calmer for the rest of the trip to the warehouse.

When they got into the loft, his phone rang, and it was the private investigator. "Already?"

Jack was bouncing nervously. "Answer it!"

Maltin fully intended to, but it was like pulling a tooth for him. Finally, on the sixth ring, he pressed the green spot and then the speaker so they could both hear as they sat on stools at the kitchen bar.

He placed the phone between them and said, "Hello, Mr. Peterson."

"Call me Dennis, please. Well, gentlemen, I have the first answer for you. Jack was recorded as having been born at the hospital in Valleywood. Your father was there on business, and he brought your mother along. You came two weeks early."

"I've heard the story. So...they are my parents?"

"It seems so, but I'm looking into something else."

Maltin looked at Jack, whose brow creased in worry, and asked Dennis, "Is it something he should worry about?"

"I'm not sure if it's anything at all. Like I said, I'd like to look into it before I say too

much. I don't want to put worry on you that is unfounded."

Jack's head moved side to side slowly. "I will worry anyway. Can you tell me something?"

"There were three other people there that had children the same day you were born, Jack. Two were shifters, one man and one woman, and the other was a human woman."

Maltin pushed, "And?"

"And one of the shifter families lost their child. He died soon after he was born."

Maltin watched Jack struggling to understand that. It was obvious he did, but what he struggled with was to think of something, anything else that could explain it. Then, he did. "That can't be. The hospital wouldn't do that."

"I'd like to think the same, Jack. I want to go and meet these shifters and see if there is any way you could be their child. Humans have made that mistake a lot. There are always stories like this in the news."

"I can see accidentally exchanging the live children, but one being dead and the other alive? That isn't the same," Maltin thought aloud.

Then he wished he didn't. Jack's shoulders slumped, and his head lowered. "Fuck."

"I'd like your permission to travel to them. They live in northern Canada."

Maltin hurried to say, "Whatever you need to do to set Jack's mind at ease or give him the truth. Go, charge it to the expenses."

“I will call the second I learn anything. I do need something, however. Will you send a picture of Jack? I doubt that it would be any proof, but I have pictures of his Pengrove family. If I can’t find exact proof, that might help some.”

“Of course. I’ll send one as soon as the call is over.”

Jack’s face was pale and drawn, but he knew the picture was necessary. He didn’t smile and, in fact, looked nearly murderous. Maltin took the picture and sent it anyway, then set the phone on the counter. “Jack...please, don’t be upset. We don’t know anything yet.”

“Sure, we do. We know I am a hellhound, and a guy that practically hates me is my fated fucking mate. I’m just jumping for joy.”

Maltin rose from the stool and took his hand, pulling him gently until he slid from the stool and followed him to the couch. As they sat, Maltin was closer to him than he’d intended, but he didn’t think Jack needed to be distant.

“I do not hate you. I act the way I do to push people away from me. Over the years, I’ve discovered that friendships and closer relationships end in my heart being broken. People, whether human, supe, or whatever, break your heart. But with you, I felt immediately that you were different. Maybe it’s as simple as being mated, but I don’t think so.”

“You were...you were nice to me before I flew off the ladder.”

His voice was almost childlike. He was unsure. The trauma of finding things out about himself he’d never guessed was wearing on him. “I think you need to rest. Go up to my bed and rest. I was going to clean the Thunderbird.”

Thinking he’d get an argument, he was surprised when Jack nodded and rose,

heading for the stairs. Maltin watched him head up to the loft bedroom, and once he was out of sight, he went immediately to his desk and opened his computer.

On VWQuest Search Engine, the search engine for all things supernatural, he started looking for the book Jack had mentioned, with the families known to produce hellhounds. It wasn't long before he found it and pulled up a PDF of the section he was looking for.

Sure enough, Graves was on the list. He looked at the other names and recognized a few, but he knew no one personally. After texting their investigator, he received a text with the name of the shifter family that Dennis was going to see.

Garmer.

It was another name beginning with G, and as Maltin was looking for his own, he saw the name. It was there.

Maltin's heart sank for Jack. There was little doubt that he was a hellhound and little doubt he'd been born to others.

Maltin stood and quietly ascended the stairs. Jack was sleeping peacefully, his face slack from all the day's worry. His heart went out to the beautiful young man that fate had somehow given him.

How would Maltin tell him? Could he?

He had to. The question was, how?

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:28 am*

### Chapter Six

Jack woke just before dark and walked down the stairs slowly while Maltin sipped a drink, still trying to figure out how to tell him. And he knew it had to come from him.

Jack walked over to the couch and fell back on it, turning his head to Maltin. “Sorry, I slept so long.”

“You must have needed it. I fully plan to fall into bed for about fifteen hours soon.”

“I should go home.”

“No,” Maltin said. “Stay here. I don’t want you to be alone.”

Jack chuckled dryly as he turned from Maltin. “I live with other people. I’m practically never alone when I’m home.”

“You have roommates, I see. Well, even in your room, you’d be alone.”

“I don’t have my own room, and before you feel sorry for me, I make enough to live on my own, but then I’d have no money left to save for a car.”

“I noticed you never drive here. Still, Jack, please stay. Maybe I don’t want to be alone.”

Jack chuckled again, but then he turned and he wasn’t smiling. “You like being alone I thought. I’m kind of trampling all over that.”

“I liked being alone because so many had...let’s just say disappointed me.”

“Oh. Heartbroken, I take it.”

“Several times over, yes. One hurt the most, and he wasn’t my lover. He was a dear friend, and, well, he stole from me.”

“I see. That’s why you’re so possessive of your cars.”

“I suppose so. They’ve never hurt me, let me down, or broke my heart.”

Jack rubbed his hands over his jeans, staring off before him. “They’re inanimate objects. Of course, they can’t hurt you. I get it, Maltin. I’m not judging. I understand a little too well.”

Maltin guessed he did understand. After hearing a small bit about his family, Maltin was surprised that Jack wanted to be around anyone at all. “It’s jading, being around people.”

“It is. My family was so ashamed of me. I was their dirty secret. It hurt a lot, and I don’t know if I can ever get over it.”

That was his in. If he were ever to tell Jack the truth, Jack had himself laid the perfect opening. Still, he couldn’t bring himself to do it. He was hurt enough by the family that raised him. What if his real family was worse?

No. As much as it may cost Jack's trust, he couldn’t say a thing until they were absolutely certain.

“I think I’m...going to go home. Being close to you, I want to, you know.”

Maltin knew. Ever since they'd first touched, if not before that, he wanted inside of Jack more than he wanted air. He was electric, and the room heated when they were together. "I'll drive you. You don't need to take the bus."

"No, it's fine."

Then Maltin thought about it and how he had to try to trust at least once more, especially if he was meant to be with Jack. "Okay, then how about this? Take the truck."

"Not the Thunderbird?" He teased.

"I have definite feelings for you, dearest Jack, but even those aren't strong enough to give you one of my cars. Take the fucking truck."

"Sure," he said, then he surprised Maltin by leaning over and giving him a peck on the lips.

Even that small kiss almost drowned him in arousal, and Jack pulled away slowly, his eyes glowing almost white; they were so gray. "Damn."

"Get out before we both go further than we're ready."

He laughed as he got to his feet and winked at him. "Just wait until we do. You'll enjoy it."

"I know that. That's the one thing I'm very sure of."

Finally, he felt like he could breathe once Jack left the loft. He fell over on the couch, laughing to himself. "What the hell am I doing?"

The next day, Jack was there bright and early, but he barely told Maltin hello before he went out to work. Every noise from the roof and Maltin felt his flesh warming, sensations rushing through him until he couldn't concentrate on the script he was writing.

His body wouldn't allow his mind to think. He was hard and had been since Jack came to the door. Sitting in front of his computer, all he wanted was to watch porn and jerk his cock, but then it dawned on him.

Jack was in season.

How that happened without them even kissing more than a peck and never having shifted at all, he didn't know. Plus, kids? Really? How many hellhounds were needed in the world?

He got up and went to the refrigerator to fill a glass with ice water, downing it quickly enough to get a headache. "Fuck," he said, and even the word made him hot.

Stomping across the floor to the huge windows that lined the north side of the apartment, he heard the hammering and closed his eyes, picturing Jack on the roof, a little sweaty, muscles ripping, face intense from concentration on the task...

"Jesus, Maltin! Stop!"

It came to him that there were things to do to overcome the ferocious arousal that came with a mate being in season. He nearly flew to his computer to start looking up treatments.

As he looked it up, he realized he never learned a thing about being a shifter. Why? He'd never had any indication of being one. Most shifted early in their lives. He thought that gene was recessive, and he only had the powers of his witch half.

The more he read, the more his head hurt. There were so many rules, but then again, none for hellhounds. He searched and searched the web but there was not a thing about his specific shifter identity.

The longer he sat, however, and heard the tapping of the hammer, making him realize his mate was so close, the more his head hurt, and his dick matched that pain, throbbing in tune with the hammering.

“Will the suppressants even work on us? Am I the alpha, is he? Why doesn’t anyone know?”

The frustration was too much. He was ready to lose his mind. Wondering if Jack was feeling the same, he left the loft and walked through his rows of cars, trying to take his mind from his dick to polish the tiny bit of dust that was landing on them while Jack stirred it.

Jack stirred the dust; he stirred Maltin’s pheromones if that was what hellhounds had. Unable to write or think, he rubbed the soft cotton towel over the yellow hood of the ’71 Mustang and then the black hood of the ’45 Chevy Coupe. All while most of his thoughts were centered completely on the man sitting on his roof.

“I can’t do this,” he growled, then his head moved until he looked at the underside of the roof, the little sliver of sky he could see disappearing because Jack was looking through it.

“Come down here! I...I need to speak with you.”

He didn’t say a word, but Maltin listened to the steps on the roof, then the clanking of the ladder as Jack descended. When he walked in the door, Maltin wanted to fly to him, grab him and fuck him against each and every car, but he restrained.

His jaw felt like it could barely move as he ground his teeth together, but watching Jack walking toward him, seeing him moving, seeing the bulge in his pants...

Maltin turned around to face away from him, unable to look at him for another second.

“Jack, something needs to be done.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m ready to back up to doorknobs.”

Maltin heard that, and he pictured it in his head, and besides arousing him more, he started to laugh. “Jesus.”

“Don’t even say that. I’ll picture him naked, and I’ll go to hell. Wait, are we going to hell anyway?”

Maltin laughed more than he was aroused, and he could finally face Jack. As he did, he saw Jack smiling, and he was so much more beautiful smiling. “Can we, I don’t know, see someone?”

“I’ve thought about it. I spoke to Garvey, and he told me they have pills and shots and stuff for this. I just don’t know if I want them.”

Maltin felt the same. “Plus, we’d have to admit what we are.”

“Yeah,” he said, taking another step closer. “I don’t want to do that.”

“Me either.”

Maltin took a step, and Jack did, and they continued until the heat from Jack was pulsing off him and making Maltin sweat. “Maltin...I want you. I want you more

than I've ever wanted anyone in my life. I don't think I can stand it."

Nodding slowly, Maltin grunted, "No. I can't. I need you."

"Do you just need me because of...what we are?"

Maltin laughed low and wickedly. "No. I wanted you before that."

They were close, their body heat combining to make it nearly unbearable. Jack's lips parted as his eyes dilated, panting loudly, and it consumed Maltin in a haze of the most extreme arousal.

Maltin grabbed his head and pulled him closer, not that he needed to pull much. He set his lips on Jack's but didn't kiss him. Instead, he let their rushed breaths combine as he stared into Jack's suddenly darkened eyes.

Jack's entire body vibrated, his head dipping to the side, giving over his will to Maltin. Maltin felt his alpha senses coming through the haze, and he felt as if he had grown ten inches in height in those few seconds. His fierce need calming as he knew he was about to take his mate.

The calm only lasted while they experienced their first real kiss.

Jack, more subdued than Maltin imagined he could be, tentatively let his lips part as they touched Maltin's, allowing, silently, Maltin to take over the kiss. Maltin's hands held Jack's face, moving it as he needed so he could deepen that chaste start, pushing his tongue between Jack's cherub lips, brushing his tongue, sucking on it once before he backed off and kissed both of his lips before pulling back and watching his eyes flutter open.

"Maltin," he sighed, the sound of tears in that breathy word.

Maltin Graves knew right that second he'd never like the sound of his name more than when it was spoken from that luscious mouth.

Then came the surge of adrenaline, his heat consuming him once again, and he moved Jack backward until he fell back on the hood of his '69 Corvette Stingray.

His red face nearly perfectly matched the cherry red of the car, and all that crimson was perfect for the fire he felt in his veins. Pushing Jack down fully, he started to rip at Jack's jeans. He never knew his strength, but he could have lifted any car in the warehouse at that moment.

The button flew off, and he heard the ting of it as it hit another one of the cars. Any other day that would have enraged him, but he didn't care a bit. Yanking Jack's pants from him, Jack was moving like he was on fire, trying to kick off his sneakers.

Maltin helped, throwing them behind him after snatching them from his feet, and then the pants were off, and he moved over him, kissing him so roughly, he was biting at his lips, Jack's hair in his fists, Jack's hips moving to grind against Maltin.

It was harried, frenzied, and Maltin had never wanted anyone more, not in all his long years on the earth. He'd never guessed he had a mate and never thought how hot it would be to be with him, their bodies writhing against one another, lips and teeth clashing.

Jack's legs wrapped around him as he tried to free his cock, but he couldn't manage to keep his hand there as Jack lifted his hips, his growls desperate and animal.

Maltin moved, breaking the hold Jack had on him, and like a flash, he spun Jack around on his stomach, freeing his cock and spitting on his hand, rubbing it over his cock before he moved to Jack's hole, pushing in like he was trying to hammer into Jack like Jack had hammered into the roof.

Yes, that sound, that pounding, was echoing in his head, and he knew that was a motion he wanted to replicate. Grabbing both of Jack's luscious, globed ass cheeks, he squeezed and was surprised to see his nails digging into his flesh. His nails were usually short and manicured, but he noticed the harder he grabbed Jack's ass, the longer and thicker they got...like claws...

Jack's screams were vibrating the metal of the car hood, high-pitched and pained, and instead of making him want to stop, he pushed those claws deeper. His cock pierced his mate, and that set Jack to scream more, his own claws raking down the red paint, bringing up curling ribbons of it along with the metal underneath.

He smiled, seeing it, seeing his mate's blood pooling around his fingers and the blood-red paint under Jack's blood. His eyes moved slowly over the rest of Jack, angry once they settled on Jack's T-shirt even as he pounded inside his ass, deep, roughly, no mercy in his thrusts.

Reaching for it, Maltin grabbed the shirt and started to tear it, ripping through it in long streaks with his claws.

Once it was in ribbons, Maltin's eyes kept moving up, expecting to stop on the beautiful face of his mate after Jack had turned his head to lay his cheek on the cold metal of the car. Instead, however, he moved over Jack's face quickly and then set on the back of his neck.

Suddenly, Maltin's mouth filled with saliva as he stared at Jack's neck, and suddenly, he wanted to bite. It was a need in him that was stronger than even the need to fuck was, and he bent over his mate, grabbing a fistful of hair to keep him still while his mouth opened, and his teeth settled over his flesh. As he bit into Jack, his eyes rolled back, and he felt his body purring like some lion, and his hips began to move once again, gaining speed the deeper his fangs (fangs?) went into Jack's neck.

Jack's fists began to pound so hard on the hood that he dented the thing, and he shouted out while his body stiffened under Maltin.

The entire warehouse was filled with the incredible scent of Jack's cum. Maltin sniffed hard, sucking it into his lungs, feeling more wicked by the second. "You came?" he growled, sounding completely different than he'd ever heard himself.

Jack was slack, his body boneless as Maltin started in on him again, banging him into the car, watching the Corvette move half an inch, then another half, then a full inch. The closer it got to the '70 powder blue Mini Cooper, the more his blood boiled in lust.

The power he felt in those moments made up for how powerless he'd felt all his life. He bit into Jack's neck again, tasting blood, the scent of the man's pheromones surrounding him, mingling with the scent of sex.

Mating. Taking his mate, fucking him, it was right, it was good, and Maltin surged with the energy he had. As the Corvette's bumper slammed into the Mini Cooper, Maltin came, and he felt the electricity that had shot Jack out from the ladder was nothing compared to the crackling, exciting feeling of that moment.

The warehouse lit with it, and he screamed out, letting the echo of that scream sound in the warehouse, booming, ear-splitting...

And he knew he was just getting started.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:28 am*

### Chapter Seven

As Maltin picked him up, Jack turned ravenous all over again. The man wasn't that much bigger than he was, but he picked Jack up off that car like he weighed nothing at all and carried him up the metal stairs and through the door to the loft.

Jack's eyes never left him. It was incredible how much he felt for the man. In a short time, he couldn't imagine his life without Maltin. It was crazy, but the way he felt, besides being completely aroused, was warm in a whole other way.

It resided in his chest, a burning, comforting feeling steeped in excitement for his future. As terrified as he'd been that he was a devil dog or whatever the fuck he was, he felt a new hope blooming there.

Maltin stopped in the middle of the loft, his stare into Jack's eyes letting Jack know he wasn't alone in his feelings. "Jack, are you okay?"

"I'm great. Amazing, actually."

"Me too. I'm not done with you."

Jack's deep laugh didn't even sound like him, but he also knew he wasn't the same man any longer.

He was taken to the bedroom and thrown onto a linen duvet on the incredibly comfortable bed. The only time he took his eyes off Maltin was when the accent pillows bounced and were disheveled from his landing.

The bedroom was much like the rest of the loft, with a head and footboard made of galvanized pipe. The headboard curved into a high peak, and the bedding was a combination of raw linen and cotton, with two strips of silk running down and black “rivets” accenting them.

He felt like he was home and not in that big, cold home where he was raised. Instead, he lay naked on fine linens while the most beautiful man he’d ever seen stared heatedly down at him.

“Turn over and give me your ass.”

If he got any hotter, that beautiful duvet would be in ashes. Feeling sluggish, like he was drugged, Jack turned to his stomach, letting his face lie against the duvet, thinking briefly how much nicer that felt to the cold metal of the car hood.

When he heard Maltin’s grunting voice, he was shocked at what was being said.

“Where are the marks I left on you?”

For a second, he didn’t understand, then he remembered how deeply Maltin’s nails had cut into his ass and the bites on the back of his neck. With his left hand, he felt over his neck, but the skin had fused back together in the short time it had taken Maltin to carry him up the stairs. He tried to look at his ass but couldn’t quite twist enough. “Are they gone too?”

“They’re gone! I marked you, and you healed them!”

It was one of the first times he’d used power, and he hadn’t even known he’d done it.

“They’re gone?”

“Yes,” Maltin growled, and Jack looked at him, and was suddenly frightened. The

man looked furious.

“I didn’t mean to!”

“The next time I mark your body, you will not heal them. Do you understand?”

That was a promise he couldn’t make, being he hadn’t known he’d done it, but to appease his...alpha? Was Maltin truly his alpha? Anyway, he nodded and turned back around, slamming his eyes shut.

In went the claws to his ass, but he didn’t cry out in pain. The opposite. He loved feeling Maltin in him before they were even fucking again. It felt like fire was entering the cheeks of his ass, and it lit the rest of his body. Again, he worried they’d scorch the duvet.

When Maltin was inside him again, he felt like he was whole. All his life, he’d felt a hole inside him that he thought magic could fill, and maybe that was still true. It was Maltin that was his magic. Inside Jack, Maltin filled him with that magic, and Jack no longer felt alone.

Again, Maltin didn’t hold back, and his new strength had the king-size bed pushed into the outer wall in no time. Jack heard the creaking from the metal rafters high above their heads as if Maltin’s thrusts were jarring the entire warehouse. Jack worried the roof would cave in on them.

Aware of these things, Jack found he didn’t care. The fucking he received was so amazing, he only wanted more. And deep inside him, he knew his body could handle it. All he felt was pleasure, and the pain he felt was part of that.

Long claws that had torn his shirt to ribbons were raking through the skin of his back, and still, he felt pleasure. The cock inside him seemed to grow, and all it was, was

pleasure. In fact, it was so big, he felt like it could tear him in two, but all was good. He only wanted more.

His own claws, as frightening as they were curious, slashed the duvet and then went deeper, and the mattress was getting torn, too. The inside foam was coming into his fists in huge chunks, and the sunlight streamed through the window, showing the dust as if tiny fairies were dancing.

So aware of everything, even as his body was being used, his focus on his ass and the burning of the claw marks.

Accent pillows went flying, the metal headboard dented the wall, and Jack felt Maltin's cock growing inside him with every brutal thrust. He didn't understand it, and it was as painful as it was glorious. Still, then, when he started to orgasm, he heard a roar from Maltin that sounded nothing like Maltin at all, but he soon forgot about that as he felt the cock inside him grow so round and wide, he came immediately, and then moved his mouth to the torn duvet, huffing to keep from crying out.

Maltin pushed him fully to the bed and lay over him, then wrapped him in his arms and pulled Jack to his side. He was still inside Jack, and it felt like he couldn't pull out of him.

"Mal...Maltin, what the fuck is going on?"

"I had...I had a dog once," he started, making Jack want to punch him.

"A dog? What the fuck does that have to do with anything?"

"When a bitch in heat came into the yard, Jack...they mated and...he got stuck inside of the bitch. Jack...I'm stuck," he said, his voice returning to normal except for the

fear. His fear caused Jack's to ramp up until his heart pounded a million miles an hour.

"Maltin, are you telling me you...are stuck up my ass?"

Maltin wrapped his arms around Jack's chest and held him lovingly. Jack didn't know he had that kind of emotion in him. "I think I am, and I've heard of this with certain shifters."

"I haven't! I've been with a thousand shifters in this town, and they never...gotten stuck!"

"Jack, first of all, don't ever remind me of your former profession. Ever. Secondly, don't freak out because the more you move, the more it will hurt. It's called knotting, and it's perfectly...perfectly normal."

Jack's mind spun around a few times but he stayed as still as he could. That was getting hard, too, being Maltin was cooing to him, kissing his neck, trying to calm him.

"It's okay, baby, just be mellow, stay still. You're gonna be fine. I'm going to make sure of it. Nothing will ever hurt you again."

Those words, how he'd longed for those words his entire life. All those nights alone, the nanny was putting him to bed, and there was no kiss from his mother or bedtime story from his father. Maltin was holding him, and Jack believed him. It was like the words seeped into his pores and traveled to his heart.

"You're mine, Jack. I'm so happy you're mine."

Tears were falling from his eyes, burning his cheeks, but he couldn't stop them. It felt

like they'd been stored inside him for years, waiting for Maltin to release them.

"Maltin?"

"Yes, Jack?"

He didn't know what to say. He only knew his emotions were churning, his heart full for the first time in his life. "Don't...hurt me."

"Never. I'll never hurt you. I won't let anyone hurt you. I swear it."

When his cock shrunk back to normal and as Maltin pulled out of Jack, Jack turned in Maltin's arms and was asleep instantly.

He was still in Maltin's arms when he woke from a dreamless sleep. Maltin was sleeping, his head sunk in the pillow, and a little smile was on his lips. Jack tried to move, but Maltin's hold on him was tighter than he'd thought.

When he could get free, he padded to the bathroom that lay down the stairs, and once he relieved himself, he looked in the bathroom mirror, seeing that he didn't have a scratch on him. "Damn. He's gonna be cranky about that," he said with a huge smile. Jack also noticed the shirt still hung around his neck by the collar, though the shirt itself was in ribbons. After discarding that, he washed up, wishing he had a toothbrush.

He looked through the cabinet above, then under the sink, but found none. Then, luckily, in the linen closet outside the bathroom, he found one and used it, parking it next to Maltin's in the metal holder on the wall.

That was the first time he was able to stroll casually through the house, and though he felt like some creep being nosy, he thought it helped him get to know his mate.

There was art stacked in a staggered array near the big windows in the living room. Jack walked over to it and flipped through it, seeing pictures of the countryside, abstract splashes of paint, and a lake scene where a man sat on the shore, staring at the sunset, all alone.

Jack knelt on the floor before it, his heart hurting for his mate. In all the paintings, he learned more about Maltin than he had, and this one painting said so much.

He liked being alone, but why? He enjoyed the beauty of nature, of colors, of serenity. Jack knew why. He hadn't found anyone who could share that with him so he could enjoy it alone.

A man like Maltin didn't need anyone to share that beauty with. He was comfortable alone, appreciating things most people took for granted. Maybe decades of being alone gave him that appreciation, but regardless of how he got there, he owned it.

Jack didn't want Maltin to need him. Maltin should want him. And, for all he'd felt so far, he did.

Jack was his mate. It was so obvious after everything in the last couple of days, and yet Maltin wasn't pushing him away to be alone. Was it possible that Jack was the one he was supposed to share things with?

He hoped so.

In the kitchen, Jack made himself coffee once he found the French press. As he waited for the coffee to brew, he looked in the fridge, laughing as he saw the perfect single servings of things in small glass containers labeled with the plastic ribbons of a label maker.

The cabinets were all neat, each can, or bottle lined perfectly, with their labels out.

Then, Jack worried about Maltin liking things so organized. Jack didn't consider himself a slob at all, but he wasn't as compulsive as Maltin. How would he ever get used to Maltin's ways? How would Maltin get used to Jack's?

Then, he laughed it off. It wasn't like they were getting married in a week. They had time to get to know each other.

The one thing he did know, however, was that he needed to quit his job. As jealous as Maltin seemed to be, Jack doubted he'd want Jack still hooking. And Jack knew Colin, knew he'd never send Jack out on jobs that were purely handyman work.

Jack took his mug of coffee upstairs and saw Maltin still out cold. As much as he hated to do it, he found some clothes that would fit him in Maltin's dresser and got them on, a simple pair of expensive jeans and a shirt that Maltin likely used to clean his precious cars.

The cars. Jack's memory came out of the fog of their lust, and he remembered the cars. "God, he's going to lose it."

After rushing down to the warehouse, he found his shoes in the center row of the cars, then stared in shock at the Corvette, which was nearly totally wrecked. "God! I'm so sorry," he told the car, then laughed at himself for speaking to a car. "Maltin's going to shit. Good thing I won't be here for the explosion."

He got his shoes and ran back up the stairs, leaving Maltin a note before finishing dressing and leaving the warehouse to head to the bus stop.

He went first to his apartment, wishing for his own clothes before he wrecked more of Maltin's things. After showering, he put on his best jeans and white shirt before he came out of the bathroom to find two of his roommates drinking coffee at their small kitchen table.

Garvey was one of them, and then there was Pete, who was a small, bookish man with green contacts that were always askew. “Hey guys.”

At first, he was ignored as they perused their phones, then Pete glanced up at him and did a double take. “Wow, you look...different.”

Garvey looked next and said, “Yeah, you do! What the hell?”

He’d looked in the mirror several times but didn’t notice anything. “What do you mean?”

“Well, happier, for sure. Must have had a good client,” Pete said, setting his phone on the table.

“Not a client,” he said, then sat with them. They spoke in whispers to keep their other roommates from waking. “Wait...he is. Or he was. I don’t know.”

“Your mate,” Garvey whispered, and it was so breathy it was nearly inaudible.

“Mate? He has a mate?” Pete asked, his eyes widening enough to see the green of the contacts off by his tear duct.

Garvey ignored Pete momentarily, as his voice rose in his excitement. “You are, aren’t you? That’s why you were asking me all that stuff! And this client, he’s your mate!”

One of the roommates groaned from the bed, and they lowered their voices again. “Garvey, please, don’t tell anyone else.”

“Why? What’s wrong with being a shifter?”

Pete was hanging on every word, and Jack suddenly regretted coming home. “Absolutely nothing.”

“They are the highest form of supe, friend,” Garvey said haughtily.

Pete scoffed, “Not higher than gods.”

“Those rumors again?” Jack asked, irritated. “You guys and your conspiracy theories.”

“I’m telling you, there are gods in this town,” Pete pronounced. “I’d bet you if I wasn’t broke.”

“Can we get back to Jack thinking he’s too good to be a shifter?”

“Right, a witch/shifter,” Pete mused. “That’s a great combination, except if you’re ashamed of one or the other.”

“I’m not ashamed of anything. And...I’m just not sure of anything yet, so I don’t want a big fuss.”

“Oh, you’re a shifter,” Garvey said, grabbing his crotch and adjusting. “I’ve had wood since you started talking to us.”

“Excuse me?”

Pete giggled. He was human, but he worked with supes all the time at his job as a temp personal assistant. “You’re in heat,” he said.

Jack’s jaw dropped for a good thirty seconds. When he managed to close his mouth, he swallowed, cleared his throat, and squeaked, “Oh. You...can tell?”

“I’m human, and I’ve even started feeling it, Jack. You need some suppressants if you’re gonna be walking around in public.”

“Listen,” Garvey said very low, glancing at the bunk bed where the others lay. “Harold has some. You take them daily when you’re out in public. I’d grab a couple for you, but...man you smell so fucking good. Have you always smelled this good?”

Jack got up and moved away from the table. “Get me the suppressants.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 11:28 am*

### Chapter Eight

Maltin rolled over and felt the bed cold under his hand. That woke him in a second, and he sat up and looked around for Jack. When he didn't see him, Maltin got out of bed and stood at the rail to look down at the rest of the apartment. "Jack! Jack, get back up here!"

He'd woke with his cock throbbing and wanted to sink it into his mate again, but the silence reverberated in his voice, and Jack didn't call back.

He ran down the stairs, searching the apartment, finding the extra toothbrush in the holder on the wall near the mirror, and seeing the French press in the sink. "What the fuck?"

In the warehouse, he saw Jack's shoes were gone, then his eyes fell on the Corvette, and his heart dropped to his feet. "Oh, gods. What did I do?"

Both cars were a mess, but that was secondary at the moment. Thinking about that briefly, he felt the changes that Jack had brought to him. If anyone had told him a week ago that he'd be so uncaring about his cars, he'd have slapped them for lying.

"Jack!"

When he returned to the apartment to shower and change, needing to look for Jack, he saw the note on the coffee table.

Maltin,

I'm sorry I left while you were sleeping. I had a few errands to run, including heading to Hands-E-Men. I'll be back later.

Jack

"Hands-E-Men?" Maltin's mind went to the darkest place at that moment. He thought Jack was there to do another job with another client...

He hurried to dress and leave the warehouse, driving the Thunderbird down the street so fast that he nearly hit two pedestrians.

As he drove to the freeway onramp, pictures went through his mind of Jack, bent over for another man, writhing in ecstasy as he was fucked for money.

His toolbelt the only thing on his body, the metal of the hammer and wrenches clattering as he was banged from behind him. Maltin's vision turned red from his anger, and he was ready to use every bit of the rest of his magic, death be damned, to kill anyone who came near his mate.

He couldn't think, couldn't feel anything except rage. His hands gripped the wheel, and he was ready to wreck another car, right into any man thinking they could have his mate, even for an hour.

At a stop light he barely noticed, he got on his phone to punch in the address to Jack's work. Once the mechanical voice droned on the directions, he turned right, then drove a quarter mile before turning left. He saw the building, the office on the corner, windows painted black.

Like they were hiding something.

"They're hiding my fucking mate," he seethed.

Like magic, Jack came out of the building. Just as Maltin started to roll down his window to call out to him, Jack got into a car; into the passenger seat.

Assuming it was a client, Maltin had to prevent himself from ramming the Thunderbird into the other car, a dented and rusted Kia Picanto that used to be white but was so dirty it looked gray.

Maltin couldn't see the driver, but he could imagine him. An ugly man, dressed in stained clothing, having saved for a month to afford a romp in his crusty-sheeted bed with a beautiful man like Maltin's mate, Jack.

Jack would pretend, of course, to enjoy it, but would he think of Maltin at all? Would Jack picture Maltin when he was getting fucked?

Suddenly, his heart was broken, and his anger faded into despair. He followed the car, ready to grab Jack and ask him why, tell him that he was no better than any of the other men he'd been with. Then Maltin would go home to be alone again and wonder why he thought that could change.

They drove toward the part of town where most of the studios lay. He could have driven there without looking, he knew the route so well. It was one of the few places in the city he traveled to.

When they parked across the street from the Colorado Jave Company, Maltin parked a few spaces down from them, watching Jack exit the car to run across the street and into the coffee shop.

When he came out a few minutes later with a piece of paper in his hand, Maltin guessed he was gathering contacts for more clients. His heart was breaking, his tears flowing, but his anger returned as Jack waved the paper at the man in the Kia.

Opening his door, Maltin resolved to tell Jack farewell and end the pain before it could possibly worsen. His fated mate! Sure, they were supposed to fall in love and raise a family together, but that was the stuff of stories. He didn't believe it could really happen for him.

Once Jack ran across the street, he was about to get into the Kia when Maltin called to him. "Jack!"

Jack turned, his head cocking to the side as a smile grew. "Maltin?"

Maltin ignored the smile as he got back into the car, and Jack came to the passenger side, getting into the Thunderbird. "Hey," he said happily. "What are you doing here? You like this coffee?"

"Coffee, Jack? You expect me to believe you're here for coffee? Coffee that you already had at my home?"

His voice cracked with emotion, but Jack only gazed at him, totally confused. "What? No, I wasn't getting coffee."

"I know that, Jack. I know you think I'm an imbecile, but I assure you, I am not."

Jack sighed, "God. I should have said more in the note."

"What? You should have told me you were meeting some client?"

"Client? That's Garvey, my friend and roommate, up in that car," he said, waving the paper in that direction.

When Maltin snatched the paper and read over it, his anger began to recede as his own confusion overtook it. "What is this, an application for work?"

“Yeah, Maltin. I needed a job after quitting Hand-E-Men.”

Maltin let the paper fall to his lap as he gazed at Jack. “You...you quit?”

“Yes! I knew you wouldn’t want me to work there anymore, and besides, I’ve been looking for an excuse to quit. If you let me borrow your truck now and then, maybe I won’t need to make as much to get a car so fast. The bus only goes so far, then I walk to half the places I’m working when I’m doing handyman stuff or...the other stuff. So, the girl in there the other day offered me a job, and I am taking it. I just have to fill out the application and give it back to her,” he explained as he took the paper from Maltin.

Maltin felt as low as he’d ever felt in his life. Hanging his head, he couldn’t even look Jack in the eye.

“Did you think I was going to see a client?”

“Of course. I...I’m terribly sorry, Jack.”

“Hey, look at me.”

Maltin didn’t relish the thought of it, but he couldn’t shrink away from his own foolishness. Turning to Jack, he felt his heart thud just looking at him. “I’m sorry, Jack. I thought the worst.”

Jack nodded and turned to the paper in his lap. “You know, this morning, and before I say this, I felt really bad, I...looked around your place. I got to know you a little, and...Maltin, I get it. You’ve been around a little longer than I have and likely been hurt a few times. I already have trouble trusting, so I can’t imagine what you feel.”

The fact that Jack understood didn’t take away his guilt, it just made it grow. “Jack,

you're really wonderful. I can't tell you how ashamed I feel."

"Don't. I'd probably think the same thing. I'm scared, I'm in awe, I'm happy, and so much more. I don't know what the hell to feel at any given second. I'm sorry you thought I was back to my old tricks. Forgive the pun."

"Forgiven," he said with a laugh. "And, for the record, I'm thrilled you quit."

"I figured you would be. Garvey's taking my old clients. Colin's happy, Garvey's happy, and I'm..."

"Happy?"

Jack reached over and took Maltin's hand, bringing it to his mouth. After kissing it, he whispered, "Happier than I thought I could be."

Maltin's tears ran, but he swiped at them with his left hand. "Stop all this! I can't stand emotions."

"Right. That's why you followed me."

His head spun to Jack, and he saw the laughter. "Jack!"

"Listen, I'm on suppressants right now, but if you can get past that, want to go to your place and...have some fun?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I'd love that."

When they got back to Maltin's warehouse, however, there was a car parked in front, and Maltin got out, ready to accost whoever it was, telling them to leave. But then the man got out of his champagne-colored Buick Encore, and they both saw it was the

investigator, a briefcase in his hand.

Jack moved to Maltin and grabbed his hand. “He looks...”

Jack didn’t have to finish his thought. They could both see the way Dennis Peterson’s brows were creased hard together, his mouth a thin slash on his face. “Maltin,” Jack whispered.

“It’ll be okay, Jack. I promise I’ll make sure it’s okay.”

They greeted the man, and then Maltin invited him upstairs. He asked if they’d like tea, but Peterson nodded over to the bar. “Might want to get your mate a drink.”

Jack’s eyes grew into saucers, so Maltin poured him a drink and one for himself.

They sat together on the couch while Peterson sat across from them in the scoop chair. “Gentlemen, I’m just going to get this out. Jack...you are the victim of people’s fear of your...your parents.”

“What are you talking about?” Jack said in a tiny voice, and Maltin wrapped an arm around him.

“Yes, what are you saying?”

“I looked up your parents, Jack, and I’m sure it didn’t escape you that you don’t exactly look like either of your parents.”

Jack stiffened and said, “Yeah, I’m blond, they’re not. So?”

Maltin closed his eyes to brace himself, but he thought he knew what Peterson was about to say, and he was right.

“Jack, I found one of the nurses who was in the hospital that day. She’s nearing ninety and in poor health. She no longer cares about any wrath from the hospital or the Pengroves.” He cleared his throat and opened the briefcase, taking a folder from it. “She gave me a statement, and, if you don’t mind, I’ll tell you an abbreviated version, then I’ll give you the full report.”

“Just tell him, please,” Maltin urged aggressively.

“Of course. Well, Jack, when their child was born dead, the baby was rushed from the room, seemingly to administer lifesaving treatment to it, although the doctors knew it was no use. Your father was already threatening them, as at the last checkup his wife had, the doctor told them the baby was healthy and right on track. They were in fear for their lives, and also in fear of being sued. Another child was born healthy and alive in the next delivery room. They switched the children, telling your real parents, who’d had two miscarriages already, that their one living child had passed away.”

Jack wrenched from him and started to pace around; his voice thick with sadness. “I’m...I’m not theirs? I was stolen from my family?”

“I’m afraid so, Jack. I’m very sorry, and the nurse, Ruth Madrid, is ready to testify against the hospital for you.”

“All these years, I felt like a freak, no powers, my family treating me like a pariah, and I wasn’t theirs?”

Maltin got up to Grab Jack in his arms. “We’ll find your real family, Jack, I swear it.”

“Uh, if you’ll indulge me a bit longer, I have found them.”

Jack broke from Maltin’s arms again and moved closer to Peterson. “What? Did you...tell them about me?”

“I haven’t spoken to them, Jack. I didn’t think I had the right or the okay from you, my client.”

Maltin sat back on the couch and motioned for Jack to join him. When he did, Maltin took his hand and was determined to keep him close. “What should we do?”

Peterson looked to Maltin and said, “That’s up to Jack and you, as his mate. In my opinion, be gentle if you contact them. They had no idea their child was alive all this time. It will be a shock for both families.”

“Not for the Pengroves,” Jack spat. “They’ll be overjoyed.”

“Baby, I’m sure that’s not true.”

“Oh, really? They hate me, kept me hidden from the time they knew I had no powers like them.”

“Jack, I realize this is difficult for you, but faced with the fact that their real child died, I would tread carefully. They are witches, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Then...this could be an even greater shock to them, and they could throw a lot of blame. It’s not uncommon for the messenger to reap people's wrath.”

Jack wouldn’t be hurt. Maltin would assure that. “Thank you,” he said to Dennis Peterson. “Can you leave the report and the statement and such for us? We’ll need some time to mull this over in our minds before we act.”

“Of course, of course. I’ll leave these and send a digital copy and anything else you might need, along with my expense report and the remaining bill. I’m not taking a

dime for the travel, though. This was a shock to me too, and I hate delivering news that is this life-changing in ways that aren't going to be celebrated."

After Maltin showed him out, he returned to the living room and stood on the other side of the wood block coffee table, his mind racing for ways to help Jack through this. He had no real clue. "Jack, what do you want to do?"

"Tell my family. Or, rather, my fake family, exactly where they can stick it."

Maltin agreed. "Good start, but what about your real family? I'll follow your lead on that. I swear I'll be with you through it all as your mate and as your friend too."

Jack got up and went to him so quickly that Maltin didn't know what was happening, but Jack flew into his arms, holding him so tightly that Maltin could barely breathe. "I hate them! I hate them so much!"

Maltin knew he meant the family that raised him. "Shh, baby, it's okay. It's going to be okay."

Scooping Jack into his arms, he carried him up the stairs to the bedroom and, after laying him on the bed, crawled on next to him to hold him as he sobbed himself to sleep.

Once he was sure Jack wouldn't wake if he moved, he got up and left to head to the warehouse, avoiding looking at the Corvette and Mini Cooper. Taking out his phone, he called his family, who were all in the South of France for the winter.

"Malty? How nice to finally hear from you, dear."

His mother was terribly old-fashioned and still didn't understand that he was gay, for one, and limited in his magic, though it was her fault he was. "Mother, how is Uncle

Rodney?”

Her brother Rodney was younger than Maltin by a week, and they’d grown up like brothers. “He’s wonderful, dear. How are you? Since I rarely hear from you, I wouldn’t know, of course.”

Closing his eyes, he tried to make his voice light. “I’m fine, Mother. I’ve been busy. In fact, I’m very busy...being that, well, I’ve found my mate.”

“Mate! What are you talking about, Maltin?”

He knew her reaction wouldn’t be warm and fuzzy. She’d been put through hell by her in-laws for the fact his father hadn’t looked for his mate. “Mother, you know I’m half shifter. It’s not like I was exactly looking for him.”

“Him? Your fated mate is a man?”

Outside, he slid down the metal wall of the warehouse and sat in the dirt. “Yes, Mother. I’m gay, remember?”

“How can I forget?” she snipped. “Well, you’re mated. Will I have grandchildren or...what is it that I will have? Chicks? Guppies?”

Here we go , he thought. “Hounds,” he said and flinched a little at the semi-lie.

“Hounds? Hounds? ”

“Mother, please, it wasn’t my choice. Not the gay part, not the shifter part, either. I’d think you’d be happy for me.”

“Are you happy for you?”

Again, he could only smile. When he could feel his mother ready to scream again he said, “We’re getting to know each other, but so far, I’m very happy, Mother. And it’s not about his being my fated mate. It’s him. He’s wonderful.”

“I’ll just bet,” she snarked. “Regardless, what do you need from me besides stabbing an athame through my heart?”

So dramatic, that was his mother. “Well, I need power. Possibly a lot of it. Do you know the Pengroves?”

“Pengroves...why, yes, they’re an old family, going back to Ireland in the...let me think. The first century?”

“I wouldn’t know, I’m afraid.”

Her voice suddenly turned joyous. “Is he a member of the Pengrove family? Oh, Malty!”

He was back to being Malty. “It’s very complicated, Mother.”

“Wait a moment. He couldn’t possibly be a member of the Pengrove family. They have no shifters.”

“I know that. Please keep this conversation between us for now. Jack was raised by them, but he didn’t know, and they still don’t, that he was not born to them. The hospital was afraid of the family, so they switched a dead child for a live one. The live one grew to be Jack.”

“Oh, dear,” she said with real sadness in her voice. “That’s terrible. I’m so sorry, dear. Not that I can blame them. Those Pengroves are like your grandparents. Total snobs to the point they’d kill if someone so much as sniffed around one of their

eligible children in hopes of a date.”

Maltin sighed, but finally, he had his mother by the diamonds. “Mother, they’ll likely not want this information to get out.”

“Don’t end your sentence with a preposition, dear. You were taught better than that. And stop slouching and get off the ground. What have you become in that strange city?”

He’d long ago stopped wondering how his mother knew what he was doing, even thousands of miles away. He stood and brushed off the dirt from his pants. “Sorry, Mother.”

“Well, if they so much as tried to hurt my child, I’d bring all the wrath of the Hilderbrand family down on their heads. What do you need, son? Would you like Uncle Rodney to fly to you tonight? He can be there by morning.”

“Yes, Mother. I’d like that. I hate asking for help, but I will likely use all my power defending Jack, and...I am not prepared to leave him.”

“Oh, son. That’s sweet. You have real feelings for him, don’t you?”

“Mother, I know how you feel about fated mates, but Father loved you more than anything in the world. What I feel for Jack would have come regardless, I promise you.”

“Then...then I’m sure I’ll adore him. Take care, and Rodney will be there soon. Use him well, dear. And be careful he doesn’t take off to any casino. You know how he gambles.”

She hung up after that, and he was left to chuckle as he went back inside the

warehouse.

### Chapter Nine

Jack woke and started to call for him as Maltin was making tea. Maltin smiled as he grabbed the long wooden tray he'd rarely used and carried it up the stairs. Jack rubbed his eyes like a kid and Maltin called him on it. "Sleepy baby."

"Where were you?"

"Just getting us some tea, sweetheart."

He sat up, and the moment Maltin set down the tray, Jack snatched up one of the cookies from the plate between the teacups. "I thought you might be hungry. Have you eaten at all today?"

"No," he said after he swallowed. "I'm not hungry."

Maltin watched him eat the first cookie and take a second before he took one of the cups. "Okay, but I'll fix some food for us when you are."

Jack nodded pitifully, and it tore at Maltin's heart.

When Jack had finished the tea, he lay back on the pillows and pouted a little. Maltin set the tray on the floor and crawled back on the bed, spooning behind Jack. "You may be using suppressants, but...I still smell you."

"Pervert."

“Hey,” he said, laughing. “I can’t help it, you know? And, besides, I think I have this huge crush on you.”

“I’m your mate. You’re supposed to.”

“I think I would anyway. You must remember, darling, I am the product of a shifter who ignored his drive to find his fated mate because he found love first. What if...what if I am not your fated mate, and I’ve just become totally obsessed with you anyway?”

Jack clumsily turned around to face him. His eyes rose to look into Maltin’s, blinking slowly. “I would like that. I like you. I did mean it. I always thought you were gorgeous.”

“Ditto. I thought you were so beautiful that I tried very hard to push you away because I knew I could fall for you, and you could break my heart into a thousand pieces.”

“Really?”

He was so insecure after all the news of his roots and true parentage that Maltin wanted to fight the world to make him feel safe again. His eyes welled with tears, his bottom lip hung a little fuller than usual, and he pled with those wet eyes most sweetly. If he hadn’t fallen in love with Jack already, he surely did in that moment. “Really, Jack. I think you’re the most remarkable man I’ve ever known. You’re much stronger than I guessed to take that kind of news and not completely fall apart.”

“Strong? I’m acting like a child.”

“No. You’re acting like a person who just had their whole world turned upside down, and instead of lashing out, you’re lying here, in a bed with a man that cares for you,

confident enough in yourself and me to be vulnerable. Me? I hid away in a warehouse, surrounded by cold cars and beautiful things, instead of trying to be vulnerable again with anyone. I admire and respect you, Jack.”

Jack’s swift movement caught him by surprise as Jack pressed his tea and cookie-flavored lips to Maltin’s. “You’re so good to me,” he said against Maltin’s lips. “I’m so sorry about your cars.”

Barking a laugh, Maltin whispered, “Tut, tut. None of that. It was me doing it. I’m just glad I didn’t break you.”

“You just said how tough I am. Why don’t we...you know...see if we can break the bed?”

Maltin laughed throatily as he let his eyes move over the bed. “Well, it would be pretty difficult, but we can try it,” he started, then whispered, “Next time. This time, I just want to be with you, touching, kissing, feeling you.”

Jack blinked at him again, and it was so sweet it warmed his heart even more. “You...want that?”

Taken aback, he asked, “Why wouldn’t I?”

“I don’t know...I just...we went at it like that.”

“Oh. Well, I think that was the heat you are in, at least part of it. With or without the shifter stuff, my passion for you made me a bit...crazy. I’ve calmed enough to see past my overwhelming urges to want you, softly,” he said as he kissed Jack tenderly.

“I like that,” Jack whispered, then added, “Sometimes. But, you know, I didn’t mind the rough either.”

“Good, because I have a lot more cars to crash.”

Jack giggled, and it was like angels singing. “I came here the first time, and you wouldn’t let me even touch them.”

“I was a bit anal about them. About everything, but now I have something much more precious. A mate.”

Jack kissed him seductively, then lay flat on the bed, his eyes heavily lidded, lips parted to allow his long, heated breaths to escape.

Maltin kissed him again, sucking in that breath, licking the underside of Jack’s top lip playfully. “You’re so beautiful, Jack. So, so beautiful.”

For the next few minutes, Maltin slowly got Jack undressed, lifting his shirt a little at a time, licking a little, kissing his hard, perfect stomach, then moving up to suckle each nipple. When Jack was free of the shirt, Maltin lay gently over him, tasting his mouth, sucking marks on his neck, and listening to Jack’s sweet sounds.

Once he started on Jack’s pants, he pleased him in a long, slow blow job as his hands pulled the waistband over his hips, sucking each ball, loving the smell and taste of his mate.

Free of the pants at last, Jack spread his legs while he smiled shyly. Maltin hadn’t ever pictured him as shy, but he had his moments come to find out. “I want to be inside you, Jack. I want to mate with you, but not because we’re supposed to. I hope that you know that.”

“I want to be with you, be your mate, be yours,” he breathed and wrapped his arms tightly around Maltin’s neck, kissing his face until Maltin started to slide inside of him. Then he let his head drop back to the pillow, and Maltin smiled wickedly at

Jack, pushing deeper.

“Yeah, Jack. My mate. Mine. I want you all to myself, and I don’t care how that sounds,” he breathed into Jack’s ear while he rested his cock fully inside of Jack. “I don’t care if I come off as a jealous, possessive asshole. I want you all to myself for at least a little while.”

“Yes,” Jack grunted, panting wildly. “I’m yours. I want to be yours, Maltin.”

Maltin started to move, slowly at first, taking full advantage, kissing him, scraping his teeth across Jack’s jaw stubble, whispering in his ear until his thrusts sped.

Jack was clenching around his cock, milking him, loving him back, and Maltin sped up more, holding Jack’s head to keep it elevated, making it easier to kiss those succulent, cherub lips.

Jack was clinging to him, his eyes wet and round as he looked over Maltin’s face, begging with sounds instead of words, kissing back, fucking back, and Maltin knew at that moment he was completely in love with this man. There was no doubt, and he wanted to scream it out or whisper it, but he didn’t want the first time he said it to be in the middle of lovemaking.

His mate. His. The words rang in his head, the feelings surging through him stronger than the climax that was rushing on him.

“Will you...do the knotting thing again?”

Knowing that he was breeding Jack when he knotted, he stopped his thrusts and said, “Jack, do you realize...?”

“That we’re gonna make...more little hellhounds? Yeah, Maltin. I do.”

Maltin's life did an entire circle in his mind as he thought about how much he wanted it, too. He'd been alone so long and thought he liked it that way, but having Jack in his life made all the difference.

When he came in the next few minutes, Jack held onto him, unmoving, and Maltin knotted, breathing harshly on the pillow beside Jack's head. "Jack...Jack, I want you...forever, I want you."

"Me too. It's fate."

Maltin nodded and stayed still so he wouldn't hurt his mate. Jack's breath on his cheek as he turned his head was everything, just like Jack himself.

They lay together even after Maltin could pull out of Jack, and he held his mate in his arms silently and sweetly. Jack was the one to get up first, padding across the floor to the stairs, and Maltin couldn't take his eyes off that sweet ass. "Damn, you're so pretty naked."

"So, I'm ugly with clothes?" Jack yelled from the bottom of the stairs.

"Definitely horrid!"

When Jack returned a few minutes later, he crawled onto the bed, then on top of Maltin. "I guess I'll just have to stay naked all the time."

"Like I'd argue with that!"

"Go ahead and tell me now."

Maltin's breathing stopped. His mind halted along with it. When he did speak, it was after swallowing a thousand times. "Um, what?"

Jack's smile made his entire face glow. "Tell me you love me now."

"How...?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's a fated mate thing, but I heard your thoughts. You didn't want to tell me during sex. I'll start if you like."

Maltin shook his head and stammered, "No...no, it should be me first, at least I think so. I mean, I wanted to say it, but yes, we were being intimate."

"Are you going to say it?"

Jack's hands rested on Maltin's chest, and Maltin took his left hand, kissing the palm as he calmed himself. "I love you, Jack. I...I love you with every single part of me."

Nodding slowly, Jack's voice absolutely purred. "I love you, Maltin."

"We're insane."

"Why? Because we met and fell in love? It's an old story, you know? A million, trillion love stories, songs, poems, all talking about this. And we've found it. If you question it, I'll lose my cool."

"I'm not questioning my feelings, Jack. I guess I just didn't really think that anyone could love me."

Without blinking, Jack said, "Yeah, you're so ugly! You're poor and wretched and not hot at all. Old! Like you're really old, right? And you have this tiny dick."

"Excuse me! Play all you want about my age, my looks, and my money, but not the dick."

Jack laughed loudly, and Maltin enjoyed that sound. He'd been so down after finding out his parentage. "Let's, uh, get something to drink. You dehydrate me."

Jack hopped off the bed and held his hand down to Maltin. "Need a hand, old man?"

"You are asking for a spanking."

"Do not threaten me with a good time."

Hand in hand, naked, they walked down the stairs and drank two glasses each, quickly, then Jack stared over at the papers on the coffee table. "I guess we should get this planned. I need to tell the Pengroves to fuck off."

"Jack..."

"No. I'm serious. They treated me like shit for not being powerful, and it turns out I am," he said, then stopped and looked back at Maltin. "I think. What do we do exactly? And when do we shift?"

Maltin stared back, searching his mind and finding nothing. "I don't know! I've never met one, never given them a thought. I guess maybe we should start with that. How will you rub your identity in their faces if you don't know what we do?"

"Exactly. And I know just the place to research."

"Okay, where?"

"The library."

### Chapter Ten

The library. He hadn't been there in years. He used the internet to research for his scripts, so there was no need.

Jack walked up the stairs to the entrance with him. "This place is huge."

"I remember. I used to love coming here, but that was before the internet. I feel rather badly now, for not coming back for a visit sooner."

"Well, we'll be here a while so you can reconnect."

Inside, they walked together to the desk, and Ms. Tempest smiled at them both as they neared. She spoke first to Jack but didn't take her eyes off Maltin. "Is this the mate?"

"Yes," Jack confirmed rather shyly. "I mean, we think so, but we don't know anything about," he started, then moved closer and lowered his voice further. "what exactly we do."

"Oh, well, I'm very happy for you both, and that goes for discovering what you are and finding your mate. Not all shifters do, you know."

She led them back to an area he'd been in before that day, but again, it had been a very long time. Jack was practically bouncing with excitement, but Maltin knew that his happiness was more about sticking it to his family than actually being a shifter.

“Alright,” Ms. Tempest said, waving a hand over one of the stacks in the shifter section. “This is some of it. Now, you two are like other shifters in a lot of ways. One difference is that you won’t shift until you’ve found your fated mate.”

“Well, we’ve done that,” Jack pointed out. “That’s where we are now, and...well, now what?”

Her orange-painted lips curved into a patient smile for Jack. Like Maltin, Jack had wrapped her around his finger quickly. It was hard not to take to him. “Jack, there is no timeline. You see, most hellhounds are given tasks from the underworld gods. Some people shouldn’t be on the earth any longer. They’ve made deals, did spells, spit in the face of death to live millennia longer than they should have,” she said, and then her eyes finally fully fell on Maltin. “You, darling, come from witches that have done that very thing, yes?”

“How...how do you know?”

“I know a great deal, Maltin Graves.”

Maltin’s head spun to Jack, but he held up his hands. “I didn’t tell her your name.”

“I’ve read a lot, obviously, and I know the names of all the hellhound families.”

“Then you know my family, on my mother’s side, are witches.”

“Don’t worry about your family. No one would ever expect a son to go after his own family. They may get away with their witchery for centuries yet. Hellhounds are rare, you see. And once they are given their...marching orders, they will shift and do the bidding of those spirits of the lower realms.”

Jack’s worry came back. “We kill people?”

“Jack, the lives you’ll be taking are meant to go south if you understand my meaning. They’re likely terrible people. Those that aren’t will likely be caught and sent to the nicer place. People who extend their lives for selfish reasons aren’t necessarily evil. They just fear death or aren’t finished with their tasks here yet, or so they think.”

Jack was pale again, so Maltin whispered, “We’re not evil, Jack.”

“No, honey,” Ms. Tempest agreed. “Not at all. You are the wrath of time and the realms of the gods. We all have our places, dear.”

Maltin stared at her, and she gave him a wink. Something deep in him felt her power, but she was so old and serene that he couldn’t place what he felt.

“What books can we read?”

She shuffled along until she came to the end of a stack and pointed to the second shelf at the top. “Dear boys, indulge an old woman. Get that book up there, the thick red one.”

Maltin did the honors and got the book from the high shelf, handing it to the old woman.

She placed it in Jack’s waiting hands. “I’ll check it out for you if you like.”

Jack asked her, “Why didn’t you give me this book when I first came?”

“You weren’t ready, dear.” She looked at Maltin and said, “But I think you are now. The both of you.” Turning back to Jack, she finished, “After you take care of your personal problems.”

“Problems?”

Maltin knew what she meant. “Jack, she means, you know, our families.”

After giving him a wink, she left to head back to the desk, calling back to them, “I’ll check that out for you. Take it for as long as you need, dears.”

Maltin took the book and then took Jack’s hand. “We’ll only read this together. Understand?”

“Yes. I don’t think I could without you. I have a feeling I’ll need you. Does that make me completely pathetic?”

“Yes,” he teased.

Jack laughed a little too loudly, and two people walking by the stack shushed them.

Back at the warehouse, a stretch limo sat. “What the hell?” Jack asked.

Maltin’s laugh came more from relief than anything. “It’s someone very special and someone that knows how special he is.”

“Huh?”

Before he could explain, the driver got out and moved around to the back door, opening it. Maltin saw Jack waiting breathlessly. With a flourish that only his uncle could accomplish, wearing only the most expensive clothes money could buy, a man emerged from the limo's backseat, his arms stretched out to either side of him. “Malty! How are you, my beautiful nephew?”

Maltin went to Rodney Hilderbrand and received the hug. He was lifted off the ground as Rodney sang a chorus of guffaws. “Oh, it’s so good to see you!”

“You too, Rodney. You, too.” Maltin said once he was back on the ground.

“This must be your...mate?”

Before Jack could introduce himself, Rodney lifted him off the ground in another hug and more laughter rang out.

Maltin rushed over to them and begged his uncle, “Don’t...overly do it, Rodney. He’s a bit skittish from all this.”

Jack was pale and drawn but smiling, especially after Rodney pinched his cheek and said, “He’s a peach! If I weren’t the stud of a million beautiful ladies, I would definitely take him from you.”

“We’re fated mates, Rodney. I doubt that.”

“You must have forgotten your lineage, dear boy. Your mother so wooed your father that he no longer cared about his own fated mate.”

“One, I’m not a boy, and you’re a week younger than I am. Two, if he’d met his first, I wouldn’t be here, at least not as Trudy Hilderbrand’s son.”

“Pish, posh, my boy. Pish posh.”

Maltin finally introduced them properly. “Jack, this Broadway Show on two legs is my uncle. Rodney, this is my mate, Jack.”

“He’s a real peach. Too handsome for you, old boy.”

Jack laughed and reached out his hand to Rodney. “Nice to meet you.”

“Polite, too. Surprisingly, after being raised by those fobs, the Pengroves. They’re so stuck up; they can’t stand out in the rain for fear of drowning.”

Jack’s eyes lit on him. “What? You told him?”

“He’s my family, Jack. He’s also more powerful than any other witch I’ve ever seen or heard of.”

As Jack’s brows raised, he asked, “Really?”

“Yes. He’s accompanying us when we confront your family with the truth.” He turned to Rodney and warned, “And we’re only telling them. You’re here in case they try to hurt Jack. They’re going to learn their child died almost twenty-three years ago.”

“As shocking as that might be to most, I doubt they’ll care. They are the most uncaring people I’ve had the misfortune to know. But, enough of this. Today, we celebrate our reunion.”

Rodney was every bit a Hilderbrand. Handsome, dark-haired, his eyes blue as the sky and skin so perfect, he looked more like a doll than a real man. He was tall, like Maltin, but thinner and kept himself that way for nothing more than his love of fine fashion.

Rodney turned to the warehouse. “Why am I here?”

“This is my home, Rodney.”

Rodney turned to him quickly, grabbing his shoulders and shaking once. “Why didn’t you tell me you were destitute?”

“Because I’m not. I store my cars here, and I have a loft upstairs.”

“Heaven’s no! A loft? Where do your servants sleep? How can you live like this?”

Once Rodney went to the door and threw it open to inspect the place himself, Maltin whispered to Jack, “And he says your family is snobbish.”

“Good thing it’s not raining, I guess,” Jack whispered back with a laugh.

They entered the warehouse to see Rodney change into white silk overalls and a shining purple shirt. What was more shocking, however, was that the Corvette and Mini Cooper were completely restored.

Maltin rushed over to them, running a hand over the hood of the Corvette. “Rodney! You fixed it!”

“How you left it that way is shocking. You know better. How did it happen?”

Maltin felt his blush as a blast furnace on his face, and Rodney got it immediately.

“Oh, I see, you old dog.”

“He called you a dog,” Jack said, giggling.

“Jack, he doesn’t know.”

Jack’s smile faded as Rodney looked from one to the other. “Your mother said you were hounds. Is that not a dog? Canines, descendants of wolves?”

After Jack pointed to the loft, he said, “I’ll go fix us some...drinks while you two talk.”

As soon as he was up the stairs, Maltin faced his uncle. Swallowing the sudden lump his throat had developed. “Uh, Rodney, uh, we are hounds, but not the sweet, puppy kind.”

“Lord and Lady, what the hell, Maltie?”

Looking everywhere but in his uncle’s eyes, Maltin whispered, “Hellhounds.”

Craning his neck, Rodney asked, “Excuse me? What was that?”

“Hellhounds, Rodney, okay?”

Taking a step backward, Rodney simply stared at him.

“Say something!”

“Well, at least you weren’t a mouse or some rodent, I suppose. A hellhound? I thought those were myths.”

“No, not myths. In fact, we’ve got a book in the car that will tell us something about ourselves.”

Rodney nodded once and then waved to the stairs. “I think I’ll need that drink your...your mate offered.”

“Don’t start, Rodney,” he said as they walked to the stairs. “Mother is bad enough.”

“She’s had a shock, Maltie. She loves you very much and was hoping, I think, that you’d find a nice witch.”

“Female witch, at that.”

“Yes, she’s old-fashioned. She doesn’t understand all this. She did nothing wrong in her life except marry a man who was ultimately meant for someone else and was harassed about that for years. You can’t blame her for being suspicious of shifters.”

In the loft, Rodney looked around while Maltin went to Jack to help him with the drinks. “How did he change so fast?”

“He’s a witch, honey. You’ll...you’ll see more of that while he’s here. He loves clothes.”

“Well, this is very nice for a...for such a tiny place. Again, where are your servants?”

Maltin handed him the glass of scotch and said, “No servants, Rodney. Until very recently, I treasured being alone.”

“You’d be alone! Servants serve and then leave. Do you mean to tell me you actually clean your own house? Your mother would faint dead away and need smelling salts.”

“Then don’t tell her.”

“I don’t plan to. The last time I gave her bad news, she turned me into a saltshaker and kept throwing bits of me over her shoulder!”

Maltin glanced at Jack and then asked his uncle, “Is that how you dress for cocktails?”

Rodney’s eyes grew as big as saucers, and he shoved the glass at Maltin. “Dear me!”

After spinning around, Rodney was suddenly wearing a rather casual black tuxedo, no tie or vest, the top two buttons on the gleaming white shirt open. “There. Better?”

“Much,” Maltin laughed.

Then Rodney waved a hand over him, then Jack, and they, too, were wearing casual tuxedos. Jack’s was gray, Maltin’s was black, like his uncle’s. “We’re dressing for dinner, too, unless I have to cook for myself. I haven’t cooked in two hundred years, though, so I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“No, we’ll order in tonight. I don’t think I have it in me either,” Maltin said, taking Jack in his arms. “Why don’t you go grab the book from the car? I’d hate for something to happen to it, and we’ll read it later.”

Jack nodded and left the loft, and Maltin hurried to explain to Rodney, “He’s very vulnerable right now, Rod. Please, be careful around him.”

For once, Rodney agreed to keep his mouth shut, at least with Jack. “He seems lovely, Maltin. Really. I’m happy for you.”

“We don’t really know each other well yet, but I care for him so deeply, I’m not sure of myself around him. He’s terribly special.”

“And the reason you wanted someone with enough oomph to take on his former family. I understand, Maltin. I won’t scar the boy.”

“Thank you. Now, how is mother?”

Rodney immediately was back to his usual self. “A flirt. She’s got scads of boyfriends in Europe. Of course, half are after her money, but you know her, once she’s done with them, they’ll be lucky to keep their own possessions.”

Maltin knew his mother well. “Not one will ever realize she’s had the love of her life. No one can come close, I’m afraid.”

“Truer words were never spoken, Maltin. And you, my dear nephew, are the product of it. That’s why she worries about you so much. You’re all she has left of your father.”

He nodded, feeling tears welling in his eyes. “Father was a wonderful man.”

“So, please, tell me about hellhounds.”

They sat on the couch with their drinks, and after taking a sip, Maltin sighed, “We don’t know a lot, yet. We’re tasked with taking supes with evil intentions to hell. Or whatever the underworld is. The librarian told us a bit but gave us a book to explain it more fully. We don’t know much, like I said.”

“Dragging folks to hell, that’s a helluva purpose in life, Maltin. You’ve yet to actually shift?”

“Not yet. I thought, possibly, after we...came together. Jack’s had nightmares, but me? Nothing yet. The only time I feel differently is when we’re being intimate.”

“Is that what wrecked the cars?”

“How did you know that?”

He chuckled, but there was little humor there. “I know you. You have loved those cars for over a hundred years. Every time one comes along that catches your eye, you add it to your collection. Most don’t know you bought most of those cars brand new off the lot.”

“Not all. I discovered a few later, and I’ve even restored one. That, however, is rare. The entire time I did it, I was tempted to use my powers when I couldn’t find an original part.”

“I can relate. I do the same with clothes.”

“Being old, like we are, we find something that makes us happy continually and hold onto it tightly.”

“Now you have Jack. I’ll admit, I’m jealous.”

“You’ll find someone if you stop whoring yourself all over the place and settle down.”

“Not a chance,” he smiled and gave with a cheeky wink.

Jack returned to the loft with the book and joined the two on the couch. After he set the book on the coffee table, the three of them stared at it like it would jump up and attack.

Finally, Rodney said, “Shouldn’t you two...open it?”

“Why don’t you?”

Rodney told Maltin, “I’m not the shifter!”

Jack turned to him with soft eyes that pleaded, and Maltin knew it was him who had to make the first move. “Fine, but you two need to read it with me.”

“Again, I’m not a shifter, but being your uncle?”

“And a week younger than me,” Maltin reminded him.

“I will stay and protect you.”

“From a book. How chivalrous of you, Uncle Rodney.”

“I do what I must.”

The book opened, and right away, the three stared at an illustration of a hellhound. While he and Jack simply stared, Rodney could be counted on. “Rather odious creatures, your people.”

“Rodney!”

“Sorry. Read on.”

### Chapter Eleven

Jack stared at the illustration. It was hideous, and then again...it wasn't. Sure, the beast was snarling and bloodthirsty looking, but any animal or human could be.

Ms. Tempest dispelled many myths with her words. Still, Rodney's reaction told the story of what others would see him and Maltin as.

"It looks like a dragon!"

"We don't breathe fire, Rodney." Maltin stopped and turned to Jack. "Do we?"

"No, not that I saw in my dreams. I just...ate someone."

"Ate them? Is that how you...take them to hell?"

Maltin shook his head and told his uncle, "No. I mean, I don't know."

"I didn't get that far in my dream," Jack told them in a voice so low he barely heard himself.

The three of them stared at the book some more.

The hellhound itself was hideous. There was no getting around that. Two long, curving horns like a bighorn sheep above the ears. Long fangs and flaring nostrils in the snout. The thing's shape was like a dog, but scaly instead of furred, and a long tail that came to an arrow at the end.

And the entire thing was red, including its glowing eyes...

Finally, Jack turned the page, and they all let out a breath when they saw another depiction. This one was no less frightening, but it looked more like a regular dog, only bigger. It had fur, no horns, and was black, not red.

“Which one is it?”

“I don’t know,” Maltin told his uncle. “I’m seeing all this for the first time like you are.”

“You don’t have, I don’t know, instincts?”

“Obviously, that’s why we had to get a book. Will you be quiet, Rodney?”

“Geesh, invite a guy to the party only to tell him he’s not dressed for it.”

Jack and Maltin stared at him after that, and he yelled, “Okay, you think of a better analogy!”

Jack turned the page again, and they all began to read. Maltin finished first, but he read twice as fast as Rodney or Jack.

Jack learned quickly that the librarian was right. They weren’t evil beings, no matter their appearance. They didn’t hurt good people. They didn’t terrorize villages or go after good, kind people.

They only got called up when those who shouldn’t still be in the world were running around alive. The evilest, who got past those grim reapers that took most souls away from their earthly bodies. Those were the people hellhounds went after and took to the underworld.

The calls were like dog whistles, and only hellhounds could hear them. Some force most knew as gods would call out, and the closest hellhound would go after the prey and kill their bodies and retrieve their souls.

As they read, Jack calmed down, knowing that one day, he'd be called, that Maltin would. Maltin's fingers threaded through his and he could feel his mate's relief combining with his own.

"I don't know about you two, but they seem okay to me. They are...scary things."

"Rodney, you do get that they...go after folks like you and Mother, right?"

"We're not evil!"

"No. You're not."

"We'll go when we go. I don't believe we'll go to hell. Your mother has too good of taste to be sent there. And mine? I'm impeccable."

"Taste isn't the issue, Rodney," Maltin laughed.

Jack flipped through the book, and sure enough, he found the chapter he was looking for. "Pups."

"Dear god, we are having pups," Maltin whispered.

"Pups? Like puppies? You cannot be serious!"

Jack laughed. "Let me read before we go out and buy chew toys."

There were graphs and more illustrations, and Jack subconsciously set his hand over

his stomach when he saw what his insides must look like. “I have a uterus?”

“I’ve been checked. My mother took me to the doctor when I was very young, and then, well, once X-rays were invented, she made me go. I have none of this. And, well, I knotted.”

“I’m pregnant?”

“Well, I’ll be damned. She’s going to be a grandmother, after all. She’ll have parties, and the children will be so spoiled. This will give her a reason to go on. Another piece of her late husband, her son. Trudy will be thrilled.”

Jack heard that and felt a scream rise in him. He wouldn’t have anyone to tell that would be thrilled. “Jack, please, don’t. You have a real family, remember?”

“How did you know what I was thinking?”

“I saw it on your face, my darling. Never worry about the Pengroves. I’ll plan for our travel soon. For now, we’ll find out more about your real kin.”

“What if they hate me too?”

“Perish the thought,” Rodney told him. “I will put such a spell on them if they so much as look at you wrong. Jack, regardless of your past and your family ties, real and adopted, you do have a family now, and it’s a fabulous family with a lot of money and influence! Oh, the grand wedding we’ll have!”

“W-wedding?”

Maltin growled, “Slow down, Rodney.”

“Oh, it’s inevitable, Malty! The white lilies and real Irish lace, Asian silks, pearls from the seven seas! I must plan!”

“Not yet! Can I at least ask him first?”

Jack leaned on him and whispered, “Not yet. Let’s...I don’t know, find out more. Please?”

“Anything you want, Jack.”

He sighed audibly and squeezed his hand. “I guess I should make an appointment with my doc. See if I have...a uterus. Where will the baby come out?”

“Babies,” Rodney said, pointing to the part of the page that states it. “Being very rare for two hellhound fated mates to find one another, nature compensates for this by giving the parents multiple births.”

“That could just mean...”

“No, dear,” Rodney said. “Look here. A litter. Literally a litter.”

Jack’s hand on his stomach pressed in a little. “Gosh...”

“Baby don’t worry right now. It says that it takes a few tries even to get pregnant. We’ll go to the doctor, and then we’ll go to your families. The former and the biological.”

“It’s a lot,” he said, and I noticed his voice was shaking.

Rodney slammed the book shut and placed it out of their reach on the coffee table, then went to the bar, poured them all a drink, and then thought better of it. “Perhaps,

only for Maltin and myself?”

Jack nodded, unwilling to risk his...babies. Puppies, Litter. He felt queasy and didn't know if it was fear, nerves, or morning sickness. “This is a lot.”

“Go up and lie on the bed for a while, baby. Rodney and I will order some food, and I'll make the necessary appointment with my doctor.”

“I have a doctor.”

Rodney laughed and said, “Pish, posh, young man! I can't imagine the roach-infested clinic you must use. Go to Maltin's doctor. He was always a snob about his health.”

“Fuck off, Uncle Rodney,” Maltin told him as he helped Jack off the couch. “Go, sweetheart. I'll fetch you when the food is here.”

Jack went up to the bedroom and lay on the bed, but his mind was spinning. He thought crazily that he could feel things in his stomach, like tiny creatures moving around in there. Crazy, he thought. Even if he was pregnant, it was much too early to feel anything.

Still, he lay with his hand on his belly, and he suddenly felt warm, thinking that little ones would grow there and they'd be his.

His. Unlike his family, who hated him for not having their powers, the children he bore would be his, and he'd watch them grow and never, ever place expectations on them. They would grow to be whatever they wanted and if they weren't hellhounds, then fine! They could be human or shifter turtles, for all he cared. Whatever they were, he'd love them so much it would make up for all the parents in the world who judged and disowned their own kids for not being what they wanted.

“I’ll love you, no matter what. If you’re in there, know that first. I’ll love you no matter what.”

## Page 12

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### Chapter Twelve

Without realizing it, he had fallen asleep. Maltin was on the bed, kissing him awake as his eyes fluttered open. “Maltin. How long have I been sleeping?”

“A couple hours, my darling. Food is here. It took us this long to agree on what to order, so we ordered everything.”

“I’m starving.”

He got up, stretched, and started to get off the bed, but Maltin stopped him. “You were smiling in your sleep. Are you...better?”

Remembering his vow before he’d napped, he smiled at Maltin. Maltin’s brows were drawn harshly, and his worry evident. “Yes. Much. I’m happy, Maltin. Maybe the happiest I’ve ever been.”

“Thank goodness. I...thought maybe, finding out about the...about having children, that it might have been too much.”

“Promise me, Maltin, you won’t ever put expectations on our kids. I don’t ever want them to feel like we’re disappointed in them.”

“Well, dear, you have to know, I’ll expect them to do well in school and be good and productive people.”

“Yes, yes, besides that! Like, we’d never expect them to be rich and fancy, or have

powers they might not have, or...you know.”

“I know. You’re wonderful for worrying about that, but it’s unnecessary. I just want them to be happy and healthy like I want for you.”

“Then feed me!”

As they walked down the stairs together, Maltin confessed, “I did make that appointment. Tomorrow, we’ll go, and if the doctor says it’s okay, I thought we might as well travel to see the Pengroves.”

A knot formed in his stomach. and he felt like vomiting. “See them. God, Maltin, they’ll be so happy to learn I’m not theirs. That’s going to hurt, no matter what I might think.”

At the bottom of the stairs, he was suddenly in Maltin’s arms, and he felt Maltin’s love emanating from him. “Jack, you have me, you have Rodney and my mother and the rest of my insane family now. No matter what!”

“I like that. I like that a lot, Maltin.”

“Good. Let’s feed you.”

The spread was huge. Chinese takeout, pizza, and burritos. Rodney was pouring the drinks, including some virgin ones for Jack.

They had a good time that evening, keeping the talk of shifters and family out of it. Jack relaxed more than he thought he could.

When it was time to retire that night, Maltin handed his uncle a pillow and blanket and pointed to the couch. “It’s comfortable,” he said.

“You must be out of your mind, Malty! I don’t lay my pretty head where others sit their behinds!”

Jack watched in awe as Rodney started twirling his pointer finger around in a circle as his hand stretched before him. “Expandere! ”

As Maltin and Jack watched out of the big windows, the wall grew outward, the two windows bricking over to blind them to the rest. Yes, the windows disappeared, but the sound of brick scraping against brick was loud, causing Jack to cover his ears with his hands.

Then, when the scraping stopped, a door appeared out of nowhere in the center of where the windows had been. “There. A nice suite for me while I’m here, complete with private privy.”

Maltin laughed while shaking his head. “The couch is good for most, Rodney.”

“I’m far from most, Malty.”

Jack stepped toward the door, then asked Rodney, “May I see?”

“Of course, dear boy! Take a gander at my immeasurable prowess when it comes to magic. Well, when it comes to anything, really.”

“Dear gods and goddesses,” Maltin groaned.

Jack opened the door, and he blinked at what he saw. If he hadn’t been around witchcraft most of his life, he’d have never believed his eyes.

It was glorious. The room had expanded inside much bigger than it could have outside, but that was magic—the impossible becoming possible.

A bed was in the center of the far wall, which was currently lined with stained glass windows.

The floors were shining walnut, and traditional antique furnishings were like antique silver, a king-sized bed with tufted champagne silk material framed in ornate swirling frosted silver and gold-brushed oak. The headboard was nearly six feet tall, the footboard half the size, leaving a nice back for the tufted bench at the bottom of the bed.

The huge dressers and nightstands matched perfectly, painted gold in place of the tufts of the bed and every piece of furniture had beautiful claw feet.

The bedding matched the champagne color of the tufting, and thick pillows cascaded to the center of the bed.

The ceiling was adorned with murals of clouds and cherubs, and the wardrobe was open, showing lines of fine clothing. Jack was impressed, to say the least. "You're more powerful than even I imagined."

"Why, thank you, kind sir."

"Don't blow smoke up his ass, Jack. He does that plenty on his own."

As Jack giggled, Rodney pinched Maltin's cheek. "Such a jealous boy."

"Ass," Maltin accused, laughing.

"Go to bed and make a litter of pups for your mother to enjoy in her golden years."

"Her golden years were a hundred years ago, or more, but you'd never know it looking at her. Goodnight, Rodney, and rest well. You'll need all your strength in

case Jack's former family is in a fighting mood."

"Pish, posh," he drawled.

Jack lay in the bed with Maltin, being held from behind as they spooned. "Jack," Maltin whispered. "Are you going to be okay, doing all this?"

"No, but I have to." His heart hurt, knowing how relieved the Pengroves would be that he wasn't theirs. "I never wanted to hate them."

"It's hard to hate family, Jack. But you're loved now. I can tell Rodney's already taken with you. My mother will pretend to be cross, but she'll come around quickly. And, when she's acting cross, know it's her own fears that she kept my father from a fated mate, and his destiny to become a shifter. It's not you or me."

"That would be hard to live with, I suppose."

"Sleep, my darling. Tomorrow will be a long, strange day for us both."

He woke to see an Asian woman carrying a tray of breakfast foods and a silver pot of coffee. Jack sat up and scooted back against the pillows and piping of the headboard. "Maltin! Maltin, wake up!"

Maltin woke with a start, but once he saw the woman, he sighed, "Dammit, Rodney."

"He asked me to bring this to you. The chef prepared fresh croissants and fruit for you, as well as poached eggs and Turkish coffee."

"Rodney," Maltin called out, and up the stairs came his uncle, silk peach-colored robe around him and white ascot around his neck. "Yes, Maltin?"

“You scared Jack half out of his wits!”

“So sorry, dear boy. I wasn’t a bit tired last evening as I’d thought, so I went out and found this lovely lady.”

The woman sat the tray on Maltin’s lap and blew a kiss to Rodney before descending the stairs.

“Really? Bringing strangers here? And what chef?”

“My personal chef! Do you expect I eat cornflakes?” he asked with a scowl.  
“Please!”

Jack couldn’t help but laugh at their friendly banter, trying to disguise it as conflict. The thing he’d longed for all his life was heavy between them, familial love, and more than that. They knew one another. Faults, fears, fun, and memories lay between them, and Jack was terribly envious of them. One day, he hoped to have the same with...anyone.

“I’ll send him back to your mother by ten, no worries, Maltin. What would she do without her morning soft-boiled eggs and toast corners?”

Jack took a strawberry from the big bowl of fruit, and once he bit into it, the sweetness enveloped his entire mouth. “Wow!”

“Only the best, Jack. Only the best! We imported these from Japan this morning, fresh off the vine, and the cantaloupe is from Rocky Ford, Colorado. Never accept second best,” he said, then playfully frowned. “Well, too late for that, but I’m not gay, so you’re stuck with second best, I’m afraid.”

Maltin laughed and held up his fuck-you finger to his uncle. “Go away and let us

eat.”

“Of course! I have new clothes for the both of you for our trip to see Jack’s former parents and a limo will be here soon to whisk us away to the doctor and then on our longer journey, so eat up, shower, and get changed.”

Jack ate all the strawberries as Maltin picked at a croissant. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m a worrier, Jack. I must confess this now before I surprise you.”

“Oh, right, because I hadn’t noticed it from the first minute I was here.”

“Excuse me?”

Jack laughed as he took one of the croissants. “You worried over me touching your precious cars. I got it. If I had those, I’d worry too.”

“Well, yes, they were...I’m afraid that was my only love for a long time. Now, that has changed.”

Jack’s chest warmed at his meaning. “I’m glad, but you can still love the cars. I won’t be jealous.”

“So big of you, my love.”

Jack heard the words, and he warmed more. My love...how he’d longed to be loved at all, and after all the waiting, he was. He knew at that moment that he could face his hateful family with the strength of a million men.

Ashes of hatred had suffocated him, choking any loving feelings from him, but he had spat out those ashes at last, finding a clear, sweet love.

After eating the best croissant he'd ever imagined, so buttery and light, he was ready for the day. "Meet you in the shower?"

"I'll be there presently."

Jack didn't have to wait long, as Maltin was getting into the tub with him minutes later, closing the curtain that hung from the oval hanging rod behind him.

He was taken into Maltin's arms, and soon he felt Maltin's chin resting on his shoulder. "We've had little time to be alone. I hope you are okay with that."

"I'm fine, Maltin. I'm only scared, I guess."

Maltin moved his head, resting his forehead against Jack's as he chided, "No need for it. You'll have us there with you."

"I know. I'm more scared of the doctor right now. My fear of my family will come after, I guess."

"My love, I know it's all so new and frightening, but we're two people now. We'll take all of it on together, face it, fight it, whatever we need to do."

Jack wrapped the naked, wet man in his arms and cried a little on his shoulder. He'd never been able to let down his guard like that, but with Maltin, he knew he could. He felt deep in him that Maltin would never judge him or hate him. They were two people and one heart, after all.

Dressing in the suits Rodney had given them, Jack felt like an imposter. His was grey, matching his eyes perfectly, and the silk T-shirt he wore under the jacket was so soft that he felt like sleeping.

That's how he felt. Soft, warm, and loved, and he could sleep with how good it felt like he could finally lay down his stress and walk freely.

Maltin's was red, and he looked wicked in it. A tie of pure crimson was around his neck, and his shoes were muted black like the button-down shirt under his jacket. He and Rodney were like twin opposites, as he wore a black suit with a red shirt.

Together, they were like a high-class boy band. They rode in the limo, Rodney facing them as they said hand in hand, an easy tune playing through the speakers. Rodney sipped cognac, but Maltin teased him about how early it was in the day.

"It's nighttime where I'm from, or nearly. France misses me, so I'm waving to it in the best way I know."

"Misses you?"

"Yes. I am the apple on that tree."

Rodney stayed in the waiting room while he and Maltin entered the doctor's office. After being given a long questionnaire to fill out, Jack nervously wrote his shifter identity; the nurse took his vitals and then took his form. "Oh, hellhound. That's rare. The doctor will be in soon."

She hadn't flinched at learning what Jack was. "Did you see that?"

"Jack, do you think we're special? I'm sure the doctor has seen almost all forms of supernatural creatures come through here."

"Still. I...I about puked writing it."

Maltin took his hand, kissing him over the knuckles. "Stop being so scared of us,

baby. We'll be fine."

The doctor came in, and he and Maltin both swallowed at the same time. Talk about a doctor being sexy—the man was beautiful.

Sunkissed skin that glowed bronze, reddish-blond hair that looked like he was on fire, and as hot as he was, he could have been. Smiling to show perfect white teeth framed in cherry red lips, he nodded to the two of them and said, "I'm Dr. Cleveland Morris, Jack, and..." he looked at the paperwork, but Maltin wasn't listed.

"Maltin Graves, Dr. Morris."

"Maltin, good to meet you, Jack." Looking back at the paper, he asked, "Hellhounds?"

"Yes," Maltin answered with his head held high. "We both are."

"Mated hellhounds?"

"Yes, he's my mate."

Jack was glad Maltin was there. He couldn't form words for anything.

"Very nice. Congratulations. I'm a horse shifter, which is why I'm one of the city's leading veterinarian/human doctors."

Knowing he was a shifter made Jack calm considerably. "That's...that's great."

The doctor stared at Jack for a moment. "You look nervous."

"He is doctor. We've only discovered our shifter animal very recently, and Jack never

knew he was a shifter at all. He was...let's say, adopted into a witch family."

"Ah, I see. Well, welcome to the family, Jack."

Maltin winked at him and Jack felt a lot of his nerves calm. "Thank you."

"It says here you think you may be with child. Well, shifters are very similar in most things, like breeding, but exceptions exist. Avian shifters, for example, have different rules than most, but hellhounds are far different still," he told them as he sat on a stool. "Have either of you shifted yet?"

"No," they answered in unison.

"Well, even without an examination, I can tell you that you won't be pregnant. Hellhounds must shift first at least once before becoming pregnant."

"Oh?" Maltin asked. "I...I knotted when we made love, so I thought..."

"Of course, and that is how it will happen. You're the alpha, I'm taking it, and you will knot at times; other times, you won't. It's telling you, however, that you will be shifting soon. I can't tell you when because that isn't known. Hellhounds find their mates differently; they mate only after shifting at least once, and their gestation is short."

"Short?" Jack was back to being anxious. "So, what? I can just have litter after litter?"

"No. The other thing about hellhounds is that they'll only give birth once. That's why, for one reason, they have more than one child, usually. There's no guarantee that there will be more than one child; it's just what has been observed. Believe it or not, most hellhounds are like you, Jack. They are afraid they'll be misunderstood and

they're not entirely wrong. Some people hear a man is a hellhound, and they...are worried that the hound is coming for them."

Maltin told Jack, "I read ahead a little in that book. It said a bit of this. I just...I trust doctors more than books, I'm afraid."

"Yes, but Maltin, we learn much from books. I've never met a hellhound, but my mentor met two. They lost one of their children but had three others, so they were able to go on after mourning."

Jack grabbed Maltin's hand. "That was me," Jack said without thinking.

Maltin explained, "He was given to the witch family after the witch mother had a stillborn."

"Oh? Are you sure?"

"Yes, very."

The doctor stood and stepped to the exam table as if he needed to hold onto it to steady him. "This is disturbing, to say the least. My mentor passed a few years ago, and...before he died, he told his wife he had to confess something. She never knew what it was."

"I'd bet it was about me."

Slapping the table, the doctor said, "Can you get up here and undo your pants for me? I'll do an ultrasound to assure you're the bearer of the children."

Maltin watched Jack moving to the table and said, "Doctor, this won't go further from us if it won't for you. If the doctor is dead, then I'm sure Jack's witch parents

will have to let it go.”

“Let’s hope. My mentor has a family. I hope they don’t become set on retribution.”

Jack felt like a tiny man in a world of giants. Maltin sensed this and stood next to the exam table, holding his hand. “Let’s get on with this, doctor. My mate will get sick if more worry is piled onto him.”

“Of course. I’m sorry, Jack.”

The ultrasound felt strange, the cold stick with lubrication to move it easier over his lower abdomen. It wasn’t long before the doctor told him he indeed had the organs inside of him to carry children. “See there? Your uterus and birth canal branch off your rectum. Quite different than a female, but there it is.”

“I’m a freak,” Jack said, then the doctor frowned at him.

“If you are, I am, and a lot of others, Jack.”

“Sorry. I just...never expected any of this. It’s not easy to get used to.”

Maltin’s hand gripped his tighter, and he told the doctor, “He’s thought he was a powerless witch all his life.”

“This is better,” the doctor told Jack. “I promise.”

Jack looked into Maltin’s eyes, knowing that was the truth. “You’re right.”

“Good. We all come with issues, Jack. Some of us have to get used to flying, some having four legs; others, like you, are made for an even greater destiny. We all have roles to play, and yours, well, you take evil from this world. That’s the most

important one, if you ask me.”

Jack hadn't thought of that. “Thank you, doctor, for...all of this.”

“So, another thing, you will go through a...season. But they won't last long and won't produce children yet, so I'll give you a suppressant, and once you turn, know that when Maltin enters you and knots, there is a great chance that you will have children.”

Jack sat up after redoing his pants. “Will they...come out like babies, or puppies or what?”

“Children, human children, Jack. They, like you, won't automatically shift until they've found their mates and will produce too, but that could be centuries.”

“Centuries?”

“Yes, Jack. Hellhounds are rare! Only so many come into the world, and then they may not have children for a long time. You're very young to have found your mate. Some never do.”

Maltin held up his hands and said, “Wait a moment, doctor. My father could have children with my mother, who wasn't his fated mate. They had me. I'm only half a shifter.”

“Then you're very rare, but it's not impossible. He wasn't the one who carried you, I am guessing.”

“No. Of course not.”

“Then that is the reason you are here. And you, Maltin, may never shift. Not all

children of shifters shift. Those that aren't full, like you, I can't tell you if you will or won't. I wouldn't expect to, however. I'm sorry to break this to you."

"No, no, thank you. We need to know all we can, of course."

When they left the office and returned to the limo, they filled Rodney in on everything the doctor told them. Rodney listened and then was sympathetic. "It's a little sad you might not shift, Maltin. You have finite witch power, and it seems possibly no shifter power."

"I'm fine with it. As long as my mate is okay, that's all I care about."

Rodney nodded quickly, then pulled out the carafe of cognac. "Let's drink, then! Jack can finally take a sip, which may help his nerves. We're about to head into the witches' lair!"

### Chapter Thirteen

The witches' lair, Rodney had said, and of course, he was right. A play on the phrase, into the lion's den.

Maltin had no worries for himself. He didn't have one worry about Rodney, who bore most of the power in the Hilderbrand clan. No, he only worried about a very fragile Jack.

Strong, tough, yes, he was both of those things, but his need for familial love ran deep in him. He may get that with his biological family, surely, but he didn't know them. Getting to know and feel anything for them would take time.

Maltin knew one way to cure it all, and it was something he, himself, wanted too.

Children.

Maltin knew instinctually that Jack would be the most amazing father. His own parentage would make him want to show his children every bit of love he could. That hole hanging open in his heart would fill with children's laughter and smiles.

As Jack sipped his cognac and stared out the window at the scenery rushing by, Maltin looked pointedly at Rodney. Without saying a word, Rodney nodded, knowing everything on Maltin's mind.

Maltin knew Rodney could have made the trip much shorter. In a blink, Rodney could have shortened their trip by hours. That wasn't what Jack needed, however. He

needed that peace of drinking a strong, warm drink in the back of a comfortable car. Two people on his side completely, making him feel safe and loved, and they were with him.

In fact, Rodney put music on for them, a soothing melody of nature sounds and musical notes. Everything they could do to calm the thrumming pulse in his veins as they grew ever nearer to the family that had cast him aside for not having their powers.

After two drinks, the lull of the tires over pavement and the music put Jack to sleep, and he lay his head over Maltin's lap, peacefully snoring. Maltin's fingers played with Jack's silky hair while Rodney watched the two of them, smiling a little wistfully.

"You deserve this, Maltie."

"I don't know about that."

"Why do you do that? You've lived a long time and had some heartbreak, lost loves, lost friends, but you're lucky. You do something you love in writing, and by some miracle, your fated mate shows up on your doorstep!"

Maltin hadn't thought of it that way. Still...

"Rodney, I buried myself behind all those pretty cars and pretended that was how I wanted to live. Now, I've been thrown for a loop, and I'm in love again, only this feels like the first time, and I'm..."

"You're doing well, whether you think you are or not. He's crazy about you, and I don't think it's all about fate or whatever. I think this man finally sees you. No one has except maybe for me and your mother."

“Mother’s never seen what she didn’t want to see.”

Rodney’s eyes rolled as he moaned, “You’ve never given my sister credit. What she had with your father? That defied fate, Maltin. Who’s to say that yours doesn’t? Just because you are supposed to be with him doesn’t mean that you can’t freely love him, and you do. And he loves you. It shows in his eyes whenever he looks your way. Stop fighting that.”

It was true. Rodney saw that. “I don’t...I don’t want it to be only fate that brought us together. I want to feel like my parents felt.”

Rodney leaned forward and stared into his eyes, unwilling to allow Maltin to look away from him. “Do you?”

Maltin’s eyes moved to the beautiful face of the man on his lap. His peace as he slept, his beauty so bright, almost hurt Maltin’s eyes. The love that washed through him was real; it was special. “Yes. Yes, I do.”

Rodney sat back, triumphant, and lorded his correctness over his nephew. “I really need to stop always being right!”

“Shut up,” Maltin said with a quiet laugh.

Rodney was right, and he’d never let Maltin live it down, but for once, he didn’t mind a bit. The way Jack felt lying on him, easily sleeping while in the middle of turmoil, it took away any worry that Jack only loved him because of fate.

Jack felt comfortable, trusting that Maltin would care for him. Maybe it was what they both needed most. If it was just fate, so be it. Maybe fate knew better than mere men who were stumbling through their lives, hiding behind cars or the need for money.

Throughout the drive, Jack woke and kissed him, smiling sleepily. “Are we there yet?”

“No, my darling.”

“We can be if we’re in a hurry.”

“You can do that?”

Puffing up proudly, Rodney proclaimed, “Easier than blinking one eye, my boy.”

Then Jack looked at Maltin, and again, he saw that trust all over his beautiful face. Maltin’s heart began to beat hard as he said, “A little longer, Jack. Get your mind and heart ready for the worst; that way, you can be pleasantly surprised if it’s not as bad as you thought.”

“Okay, Maltin. Thanks for coming with me,” he said then looked over to Rodney. “Both of you.”

“Oh, this will be fun. I’ve never liked the Pengroves. Awful snobs.”

“And you’re not?” Maltin teased.

“I have a right to be!”

“Lord.”

Jack giggled at the two of them. “Did you always bicker this way?”

“Surely. He’s the little brother I never wanted,” Maltin told Jack.

“You adore me and look up to me, Maltie. I got those bullies to leave you alone in fifth grade.”

Jack’s head spun so he could stare wide-eyed at Maltin. “He did?”

“He made them all start kicking each other until my mother came along and made him stop.”

Jack giggled and clapped his hands. “Love it. Well, I officially thank you for helping with my bullies.”

“Isn’t that the worst? Seeing your own kin as your bullies? Pengroves. Pish, posh.”

Maltin’s phone began ringing, and he laughed when he saw the caller ID. “Mother.”

“Oh, my dear Trudy. Answer.”

“I was going to!” Maltin hit the green circle and said, “Hello, Mother.”

“Where are you? I was scrying and saw you far from the city where you insist on residing.”

“You are stalking me? Mother!”

“I have every right. Where are you going?”

Roland answered, but Maltin wanted to smack him. “We’re off to see the Pengroves, Trudy. I’m here, so have no fear.”

“The Pengroves? Are you insane? On their own turf?”

Maltin stared at the phone, dumbfounded. “Their own turf? Is this a revival of West Side Story?”

“Maltin Theodore Graves, why on earth?”

Roland soothed, “As you know, Trudy, they are the family that raised your son’s mate. We’re going to inform them that he isn’t their biological child. That’s all.”

“That’s all? I’ll repeat myself, which you know I hate doing, Maltin Theodore Graves are you insane?”

Maltin watched Rodney laughing and promptly flipped him the bird. “Mother, I’m likely insane, but it’s hereditary.”

Silence was never good with Trudy Hilderbrand Graves.

“Sis? Are you there?”

“Mother, I’m kidding.”

“I’ll meet you idiots at the Pengroves. This boy of yours better be worth all this. I had a massage appointment!”

With that, the line went silent, and Maltin stuck his phone back in the pocket of his suit coat.

“Well, now you’ve done it,” Rodney teased.

“Is she going to hate me?” Jack asked in a small voice.

Maltin gathered him into his arms. “Not a chance. She may threaten to take a few

years off my life, but she's going to adore you."

"She's a lot of bluster, my sister, but she'll bring you into the fold and spoil you rotten. She always wanted another child."

"She had you," Maltin told Rodney. "You were at our house more than your parents'."

"True. But my folks were old and stodgy, and I love my sister. She's the best companion I could hope for, and Jack, she will love you. I promise that."

Jack nodded and Maltin kissed his head. "No more worrying. Rodney, take us there now, or Mother might level all of them before we can even speak to them."

"True. Okay, hold onto your stomachs. This never feels good for first-timers."

Maltin was familiar with the act, but he hated it. The feeling started at the base of his balls and felt as if something were inside of him, pulling from there.

Stretching, stretching until it felt as if his balls were in his throat, choking the life from him, and then, in an instant, it was over, and they were parking in front of a hedgerow, the sky dark with storm clouds.

As soon as they landed, Jack opened the back door and hurried outside to vomit, and Maltin followed him to make sure he was okay. "Jack?"

Jack was too busy upchucking to answer, but Rodney got out with them and stretched his back. "Long ride, huh?"

Jack stood straight, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "What the hell was that?"

“That, Jack, was us teleporting. Not everyone can do it, but my mother and uncle are proficient.”

“Don’t ever do that again. I thought my balls were being torn off.”

“Okay, we don’t have to, but your birth family lives much farther than this.”

Jack pondered and mumbled, “Maybe. If I’m still alive after this.”

“There you are,” a woman’s voice called. “What took you so long?”

Maltin saw his mother, the beautiful woman she was, walking toward them in her sky-blue suit and matching lizard mules. She looked even better then when he’d last seen her, not a wrinkle on her face, and her hair was blond this time. “Mother.”

Jack stiffened beside him, but Maltin whispered, “Don’t get nervous, baby.”

“Can’t help it.”

She walked over to them and Rodney pecked both her cheeks in greeting. “Trudy.”

“Rodney, how are you, darling?”

“Having a time, dear. May I introduce Jack Pengrove. Jack, this is your future mother-in-law, Gertrude Hilderbrand Graves.”

“Trudy, please,” she said, reaching out her white-gloved hand to Jack.

“Kiss the back of her hand,” Maltin coached.

He did and then said, “Nice to meet you, Ma’am.”

“Pish, posh,” she said with a sweet smile. “No ma’ams, and if you call me Gertrude, like my annoying brother, I’ll turn you into a fly.”

Jack paled, but Rodney laughed at her. “Sorry, dearest, but he is family now.”

“Of course, he is. Now, are we going to meet these people and let them down easily that their son is not really their son?”

“The fobs,” Rodney spat.

“Rodney, dear, they’re about to discover their son, their real son, perished twenty years ago. For a mother, that is terrible news. We will be gentle until they give us reason to be harsh.”

She led them, walking with her chin held high, her ten-thousand-dollar bag hefted on the crook of her arm while the other passed over her clothes to assure she was looking her best. Maltin teased his family a lot, but he loved them fiercely and suddenly felt terrible that he hadn’t visited his mother in three long years.

He took Jack’s hand, and they followed Trudy, all set on their quest. Rodney was almost skipping, ready for a fight, as always. The man loved showing off his powers.

The four of them walked up the gravel road as Trudy complained, “You couldn’t have aimed closer, Rodney? These shoes are Jimmy Choos!”

“Sorry, my dear. I’ll find you a new pair once we’re finished here.”

“And a pair of the snakeskin?”

“Of course, my dear.”

Maltin watched Jack, watching them. Maltin could tell he wasn't used to a family like his, one where the love was evident in the bickering they did with one another. "You'll soon be razzing them like we all do to each other."

"Not soon, but I'd like that. Really I would."

"Good. Now, head high, Jack. You have nothing to be ashamed of. You never have. They only made you believe that."

"What's this?" Trudy asked as she turned. "Were they cruel to you, dear?"

"Not cruel, exactly. More like..."

"Dismissive, Mother. Once he didn't show that he had their powers, they..."

"Why, that's intolerable! For all they knew, you were their son!"

There was a new fire in their eyes, and she started up the drive again, uncaring any longer about her shoes.

When the house came into view, Maltin nearly laughed. It was trite and predictable if ever he'd seen a house. Even Trudy was laughing. "My goddess, is this some old movie set? What the hell?" She seemed to think she'd hurt Jack's feelings, but when she turned to apologize, Jack just laughed.

"I always thought it was stupid."

The huge estate was made of black brick with blacker trim, towering gables, turrets, and spires, holding shining silver points on each. There were gargoyles and stained-glass windows out of a storybook castle that would house the wickedest of witches.

The front lawn was half a mile long, and two winged horses sat on either side of the wrought iron gate. “Trite,” Trudy said, then smoothed a hand down her suit again before arriving at the callbox.

Jack went to it and pushed the button. A male voice came over the speaker, “We don’t allow salespeople or solicitors of any kind. State your business.”

“It’s me, Jackson Pengrove. I’ve come to see Mother and Father.”

“Mr. Pengrove, you weren’t expected. You know your parents like you to call ahead.”

“Call ahead from their son?” Trudy was burning with anger, but Rodney hushed her with a look.

“I’ve come to speak to them about something important. I’ve brought guests. Perhaps they’ve heard of the Hilderbrand and Graves families?”

Silence in response for at least a full minute before the man came back on and said, “Come to the front, Jackson.”

The gate motor whirred, and soon, they were all four walking through, up the long drive. Maltin was close to Jack, knowing how hard this was going to be on him. It didn’t help, or perhaps it did, that Trudy was so taken back by their reception of their son.

“Call ahead, well, I never! Call ahead? I’d be overjoyed if my son dropped in on me. Ever. Even once.”

Maltin heard the accusation mixed in with her disdain. “Yes, Mother, but when are you ever in one place for long?”

“I’ve been in France, in the same chateau I’m in every January, for nearing two months now, Maltin Graves.”

“No Theodore? You must be losing your perturbation at me.”

“Don’t press my temper, Maltin. I’m in no mood. Suddenly, I’m very upset.”

Maltin didn’t take that lightly. Being upset for his mother could mean the entire estate would be leveled with the snap of her fingers. “Sorry, Mother.”

At the doors, finally, Jackson rang the doorbell, and one of the double doors opened to show a tall, menacing butler in a full tux with tails. “Mr. Pengrove, welcome home. Misters Hilderbrand, Mrs. Hilderbrand,” he said, unmoving from the doorway.

“That’s Mrs. Graves, and my son is Mr. Graves. My brother is the only one still Hilderbrand, or are you implying I had my son out of wedlock?” Trudy asked, pushing past him, and the other three followed her through.

Stammering, the butler objected, “I must announce all guests!”

“Then you’d better hurry, hadn’t you?”

Trudy was tapping her expensive shoe on the black marble floors as Maltin gazed around the foyer. Like Jack mentioned, it was beautiful but cold. There were no flowers or paintings to warm the stone walls, just statues of witches and a cold black and gray world.

When the butler returned, asking with much more respect for them to follow, they left the foyer and traveled through a hallway with impossibly tall ceilings and more marble floors.

Maltin held Jack's hand tightly, hoping to give him strength as they walked through to a parlor where two people stood tall and forbidding in the middle of a room filled with black and red furniture, right out of some silly amusement park haunted house.

They were both beautiful. Both had pale skin and black hair to match their black clothing. Suddenly, Maltin appreciated his mother's style and her mothering more than he ever had.

"Mr. and Mrs. Pengrove, allow me to present Mr. Hilderbrand, Mrs. Graves, and Mr. Graves, and you remember Jackson, of course."

"Jackson, welcome home. You know we like you to call first, especially if you're bringing guests," the mother said.

Jack went to her and kissed her lightly on the cheek. "Sorry, Mother."

"Please, sit," the man said, and Jack only nodded to him. What a strange exchange from people that were supposed to be family.

As they sat on the hard couches and chairs, facing the Pengroves, Jack began. "Mother, Father, it's come to my attention that you were lied to on the day of my birth."

"Oh?" The mother said, with no real interest. "How so?"

"I'm...I was born to other parents. Your...your real son, he was born...he was..."

Maltin laid his hand on Jack's to stop him and finished, "He was stillborn. I'm very sorry to you both. I'm sure this must be a shock. It was to Jack."

They sat together stiffly, but Jack's father did lay his hand over his wife's. "How can

you know this?”

“Because, Father, I, uh, I’m not a witch, as we’ve known for some time now. I’m actually a...a...”

“Spit it out, Jackson,” the mother snapped.

“I’m a hellhound shapeshifter, Mother.”

Both gasped and paled further if that were possible, and Mrs. Pengrove threw off her husband’s hand. “It can’t be!”

“Oh, it can,” Trudy broke in. “In fact, he and my son are fated mates.”

More gasping and Mrs. Pengrove started to fan herself with her handkerchief.

“This cannot be,” the father whispered. “But it makes sense.”

“Is this why you brought...them?”

The way she said it, like the Hilderbrands were beneath her, Maltin knew at that moment his mother’s mouth was going to start writing checks that she and Rodney would be only too happy to cash.

Trudy stood, and she was stone-cold angry, her face not hiding her utter disdain for the two people across from her. “Yes. He’s told my son how he was treated by you. All because he didn’t inherit your power. How could you? You thought him to be your son, and yet he’s to call before visiting? He’s treated like so much trash on his arrival? You should be ashamed!”

Jack ducked when his mother raised her hand, pulling Maltin down to the black and

grey Persian rug with him. “Duck!”

Maltin knew then that the war was about to begin.

### Chapter Fourteen

Jack held himself down over Maltin, but Maltin wasn't having that. He moved away from Jack, standing in the fray. Jack was about to follow him, unwilling to let his mate use his finite powers, but then, the craziest thing happened.

As lightning bolts landed all around them and a scream came from his mother, the smell of hair burning, furniture being dissolved into rubble, he felt his entire body shake. It wasn't in fear. It wasn't from the earthquake of powers being thrown back and forth by the witches.

It was him, his body, and it was changing.

Bones cracked loudly, but he felt no real pain. His arms bent the wrong way, his jaw distending, forehead retracting, fingernails growing into long, razor-sharp claws.

Maltin's scream made Jack look away from his own hands to see he wasn't the only one changing. His mate's face was malformed, bubbling like he was melting, but he wasn't. He, too, was changing.

The witches, seeing this, stopped their fighting, and Jack's mother screamed again, only it was in shock. Jack was lowering, his hands landing on the ground as they changed to heavily clawed paws, and he felt the bones in his skull displacing, and from his peripheral, he saw he was growing the horns he'd seen in the illustrations in the book Ms. Tempest had given them.

"Jack! What's happening to you?" He heard his mother screaming.

“He’s shifting, you daft fool,” his father yelled.

Trudy and Rodney were stepping away from them, but they weren’t afraid. They were just making room for the two because they weren’t only changing, they were growing.

Jack was nearly six feet tall, but that was nothing compared to how he grew. On all fours, he was nearly as tall as he was standing on two legs. A snarl came as he tried to speak, and his eyes...all he could see in front of him was the world covered in a red light.

When he was fully transformed, he turned his head to see Maltin, but Maltin being red, he was nearly invisible to Jack. All he could clearly make out were Maltin’s two glowing eyes.

Turning back to his parents, the ones that had treated him so poorly, everything inside him made him want to pounce on them and tear them apart, to taste their blood on his tongue, have their flesh stuck between his teeth, but he held back, knowing it wasn’t their time.

How he knew that was a mystery, but they didn’t know it, and that was good enough. They were crawling backward from him and Maltin, fear scenting the air like boiling copper.

Trudy stepped in front of them and held up her hand, and suddenly, the entire room was put right, the furniture recreated, the sounds of wood scraping on marble loud in his sensitive ears.

“I won’t hurt you,” she said. “I know this has been a shock. Jack is good and as you can see, more powerful than you could have imagined in your bigotry. My son has made me proud all his life, and he continues to do so now. Treasure your other

children. May they never know your hatred like Jack's had to feel."

Jack turned and started to run, feeling his mate behind him. Crashing through the double doors, he was out of the house and free, running across the lawn, feeling great clumps of sod being pulled up from his claws.

The air was soft and cool, the breeze whistling through the curl of his horns. He felt alive, happy, and loved for the first time, but more than that.

He felt power.

He could tear through anyone, crush their bones or he could run by them, letting them live another day, another ten. He had the power of life and death, which was the strongest power of all.

And no witch could hurt him. No power on earth could touch him.

He was free.

Beside Jack, Maltin ran, and he felt happiness pouring off his mate. They ran together, tearing through his parents' precious land, jumping, playing, and biting at one another until they both lay on the grass, and Maltin was purring. Then he realized, he was too.

"You two stop all that foolishness," Trudy called. "We have one more stop to make, and you both owe me a thousand dollars for a massage!"

Once they turned back to being human, Rodney provided them with clothes, and Trudy led the way back to the limo. Jack rushed to walk along with her. "Thank you, Mrs. Graves. Thank you so much for all you said and did."

“I didn’t do much. I could have killed the two of them. I maybe should have, but it’s not my place.”

“I don’t think they knew what hit them.”

“Of course, they did,” Rodney said. “They know power. They now know we have more than they do.”

Jack laughed happily, and Maltin was smiling right along with him. “Maltin, did you see? They were scared! I’ve never seen them scared!”

“They were in awe of you! As am I,” he said, taking Jack into his arms and kissing him hard, holding him harder. “I shifted.”

“I know. You were scary!”

“Me? You were amazing!”

In the limo, Rodney poured them all drinks and they toasted to their achievement. Trudy was smiling from ear to ear and Maltin leaned over to take her free hand in his. “Mother...I can’t tell you what that meant to Jack and me.”

“You’re my son. If you ever think I’m as uncaring as those two? Just use those powerful jaws and take me out.”

“I could never hurt you.”

Jack said, “He’s right. You were amazing. I just saw lights and furniture breaking, and it was incredible.”

Rodney said, “I think you both felt threatened. The magic being thrown about, you

took that fear and caused your first shift. Bravo to you both!”

Maltin was happier than Jack had ever seen him, and Trudy noticed something else. “Malty, you...look younger.”

Rodney noticed it too. “Maltin, you...are you immortal now?”

“What? No! I couldn’t be.”

“We never got that far in the book,” Jack said.

Rodney snapped his fingers,, and the book appeared on his lap. With a wave of his pointer finger, the pages began to flip.

Maltin chuckled at his uncle, but Trudy only rolled her eyes. “Rodney, showing off is so...gauche.”

“So was that house. Sorry, Jack.”

“I’ve never liked that place. It was a little obvious.”

“A little?” Trudy asked. “Say what you will, though, I think they were hurt. Not physically, but knowing their child had died, and knowing you were not theirs.”

“Please, Mother,” Maltin said, but she disagreed.

“You wouldn’t see it, Maltin. You will, one day, when you have children. A parent sees the pain of another parent. In her eyes, I saw it. It’s why she’s still breathing.”

Jack wanted to believe that but had trouble with it. “I can’t believe it, but I hope you’re right.”

“Get this to where we’re going,” Trudy told her brother.

“A moment, Trudy, dear. I can’t believe it, but Maltin’s kind...he’s mentioned here.”

“What?” The three of them said in unison.

“A hellhound shifter can mate with another powerful being, and if that occurs, that half-blooded hellhound will take on the powers of both and be stronger in each. They will become...”

Maltin was at the end of his rope with the dramatic pauses. “Rodney, I swear, if you don’t finish...”

“A super alpha, possessing the strongest of each of his halves. It’s a coveted degree, Maltin.”

Trudy covered her mouth with her fingers. “Oh, Maltin.”

Jack’s pride in Maltin grew a thousandfold. “Maltin! Your powers aren’t finite anymore!”

“No, they’re not, Maltin,” Rodney said in awe. “Damn! You might be more powerful than I am!”

Jack kissed Maltin and Maltin could only stare at him. “I’m...a little afraid right now.”

“Maltin, you’re my super-alpha. You’re...you’re amazing.”

“I’m amazing,” Maltin said, laughing. “It’s all because of you.”

They started to kiss, and Jack felt again that heat that flowed through him before, like he was in season, and he figured he was. This time, when they mated, he knew he'd become pregnant, and he'd give birth to Maltin's children. The thought was elevating his happiness, his love.

Maltin's hands on his face, their breath, their lips and mouths, they were together, then and always.

They didn't stop kissing until they heard Rodney clearing his throat obnoxiously.

"What, Rodney?" Maltin yelled.

Rodney held up both hands. "Don't destroy me with a blink or anything, Maltin, but you're in mixed company. Save the make-out until you're alone."

"Stop it, Rodney. It's romantic. He's more like his father than I'd have guessed."

"Mother!"

Rodney teleported them to the north side of Alberta, Canada. The limo and all. Jack felt cold immediately, but the car warmed quickly once Rodney snapped on the heat. "We're meeting your real family, Jack. Are you ready?"

With Maltin's hand in his, Jack knew he could face anything. "I'm ready, Rodney. Thank you all for being with me."

Trudy reached across and cupped his cheek in her palm. "Dear boy, you're family now. I'd like at least one granddaughter, of course. I need someone to leave my jewels to."

"Yes, ma'am."

Jack got out after Maltin and they were in a snowy wood, the smell of the air crisp and clean, the trees towering around them. It was breathtaking.

“They live here?”

“I’m magic, Jack. I asked for them, and the magic took me here.”

“I feel them,” Maltin agreed. “I feel those like us.”

Jack closed his eyes, ready to tell them they were crazy, but then, like a heat was beckoning, he felt it too. “What is that?”

“Heat, like the fires of hell, Jack,” Maltin said with his neck craning to the north. “It’s warm, though, not hot. And I feel no threat.”

Jack didn’t feel a threat either. In fact, the opposite. “You’re stronger than me, Maltin. Point the way.”

Maltin grabbed his hand and led him into the trees, through a trail Maltin couldn’t have known was there.

It was a well-worn trail, shoe prints marking the way.

“Mud! Rodney, you owe me five pairs of shoes now!”

“Yes, Trudy. I’ll get you ten, straight off the drafting tables.”

Maltin called back, “Don’t worry, Mother. We’re close.”

Jack was about to ask how close when Maltin stopped. Jack came up beside him, and there on the trail stood four people. An older couple, man and woman, and two

younger women...about Jack's age. Maltin let go of Jack's hand and let Jack take a step ahead of him as he felt the familial presence of them.

They were all so like him, it was as if he were staring into a mirror. The man looked like his older twin, and the girls, with blond hair long to their waists, had tears streaming down their faces.

The older woman was crying too, as she stepped flush with her husband. "You've come home," she said, her voice cracking.

Wearing plain clothing, they were nothing like the Pengroves, but he didn't care. In fact, he liked the jeans and flannel they wore, and the wistful smiles that were blooming on each set of cherub lips.

"Are you...are you my parents?"

The woman nodded and held out her arms, and Jack hesitated only for a moment before he ran to her and was finally held in the arms of a mother.

That night, he slept under the roof of his family after talking with them for hours. It turned out that the Pengroves found them and sent word that he was coming. Jack could barely believe it. The first charitable thing they'd done for him since he was thirteen years old.

His sisters were on the search for their fated mates, but there was no hurry, they assured him. They were happy as they were, living in the woods, with nature, watching the birds hatch in nests each spring, and the bear searching the forest for food.

Their house wasn't fancy or big. Made of stone and logs, it had been in their family for generations. It was a place where each taught the next how to seek justice for

those who no longer belonged in the world.

Jack cried, laughed, and enjoyed the visit. The next morning, feeling his season getting stronger despite the suppressants the doctor had given him, he knew they had to leave.

His mother understood. “I couldn’t have been stopped when it was time to make the three of you. Send word the moment the babies are born.”

“I will. And before that, I’ll keep in touch. I’d like you all to come visit too, soon and again when they’re born, and a lot after that.”

Again, in the arms of his mother, he felt what he’d always wanted—real love from a parent. His father gave that same love to him as he was hugged goodbye, and his sisters as well.

They were teleported home, and that was where Trudy and Rodney left them after a lot of tears and many thanks for their help.

Maltin took him into the warehouse and stared at all his cars. “These should be beds,” he surprised Jack by saying. “Every single one of them.”

Jack felt his heat growing, his loins on fire as he felt his alpha mate beside him. They were so alike in so many ways. Maltin thought his powers were finite and, therefore, rarely used them. Jack thought himself completely powerless.

After learning what they truly were, they connected in a way that went far beyond that of simple fated mates. They were connected by their shared pain, the pain of never feeling like they mattered or that they were special.

“Maltin, when we make...babies, promise me, no matter what, they’ll never feel like

they're less than."

Maltin moved around to face him, his hands cupping Jack's face, holding him there, staring into Jack's eyes with a promise and a vow to him that was real. Jack felt it in every part of him. "Our children will never know anything but acceptance, unconditional love, and most of all, security in us and themselves."

Maltin's breath on his lips right before he was kissed sealed a deal, and finally, Jack knew why people who got married kissed at the end of the ceremony. That touching of lips sealed those vows. It wasn't for those attending, but it was between the two, a silent pact that they'd move through the sometimes-harsh sea of life, together.

As they kissed, Jack made that vow to Maltin. No ceremony was needed for them, as their vows were written on their souls. Fated mates meant for each other in every way possible, and true love that went beyond that.

Jack felt Maltin's love for him in that kiss, and he stored that memory in his heart.

Taking his hand once the kiss was over, with the taste and feel of it still on Jack's lips, he was led to the stairs. "We'll make it back down here eventually."

Jack laughed with a heartfelt boom in the echoing warehouse, and as he was taken into the loft, he felt the power that was radiating from Maltin.

Knowing he was a super alpha, it had changed him. A new confidence, a new purpose surrounded him, and Jack could barely catch a breath in his presence. Maltin stopped them in the middle of the loft near the couch, waving a hand over him and Jack felt the coolness of the room on every bit of his flesh. "Now that you can, you're going to use your magic all the time?"

Not answering, Maltin simply stared hard into Jack's eyes. Damn, Jack felt like he

could melt under that heated gaze.

Baby, get down on that floor, on all fours, like you were when you were shifted. I want you, now, and I'm not stopping until I put my children inside you to grow strong."

Jack nodded ever so slightly, unable to do much more than what his alpha commanded. He was on all fours in seconds after that nod, and he felt Maltin's naked body move to his knees and station behind him, a soft touch at first, his hands on Jack's hips.

"Are you ready, Jack? Are you ready for me?"

Jack peered over his shoulder, and he fell over to the floor as he saw Maltin and how he'd changed.

Maltin's body had always been perfect. He was lean and muscled, but not heavily, and had an unassuming strength.

But in that moment, he saw the changes that had been achieved by the first shift. Maltin was bigger, his muscles taut and swollen, his neck thicker, eyes more piercing. Jack's jaw hung as he stared, and when his eyes moved down to Maltin's cock, he saw that it, too, had changed.

Thicker, longer, veined and pointed straight out from his crop of pubic hair. "Maltin..."

Reaching out his hand and using two fingers to move Jack's chin back in place, Maltin's voice had a more growling quality as he pled, "Please, baby. I need you. Now."

“Anything, Maltin,” Jack whispered. “Anything you need.”

Jack moved back to his hands and knees, and he felt Maltin touching him, a tender brush of finger over his hole before that finger breached it, moving just inside and then he pulled it away, and Jack readied for what he knew was going to be a rough coupling.

“Let’s begin.”

### Chapter Fifteen

Jack was so full he thought he would explode from the ass out. Maltin wasn't only bigger, he was hotter. He felt as though his ass was on fire as Maltin pushed in as easily as he could, but that wasn't easy by any stretch of the imagination.

Baring down, using his own new power, he released into his body the endorphins that would take the pain and turn it into a pleasure like nothing he'd ever felt in his life.

Flying high, like he was weightless, soaring through the clouds, he barely felt his body, but he felt his mate inside him. Maltin touched parts of him he didn't know he had. His hands curled into fists as he dropped to his elbows, smiling, singing out a moan like there was a chorus of voices instead of only one, his.

When Maltin became brutal, it was exactly what they both needed. They needed to fuck hard. They needed it all, every bit of it inside him, connecting to his mate in the most fierce way. They were animals; they were hell animals, able to take on the most powerful creatures in the world and drag them back to hell.

So, being creatures of unfathomable powers, their coupling made its own power. The air was sparking with it; the two of them glowed, and the warmth alone could melt the rest of the snow that had dumped on the city from that terrible blizzard.

Maltin banged into him like he was trying to break his bones, but he was stronger than that. He could take it and wanted it harder. Their love was new, but it was solid, unbreakable. They were fated mates, hellhounds, men, in any order, they were in love.

Maltin pulled out of him and quickly flipped him over, falling on his palms to stare into Jack's eyes when he pushed back inside him. Sneering, as if showing his fangs, Maltin's smile was wicked, and he leaned in, kissing Jack roughly, growling into the kiss.

"Mine. My mate. You're mine, no one else's, ever! Ever! Take my seed, make my children!"

Jack's power vibrated, sending him into a climax that rocked him into a new place. He was no longer on that floor but tumbling end over end in a space free of care or worry. It was warm there, a kiss of breeze across his neck.

When he came back to reality, Maltin was carrying him down the metal stairs. Once on the concrete floor, Maltin tossed him on the hood of a '72 Camero and flipped him onto his stomach. "Need you here," he grunted, then pushed back into him, and he didn't stop there. He moved his body over Jack's, and Jack soon felt sharp teeth, fangs, biting into the back of his neck and holding him still like that. Jack screamed so hard that he left a cloud of vapor over the cold metal hood.

Jack reached for the end of the hood and slipped his fingers between the metal and the windshield wipers. The metal bit into his fingers as Maltin pulled back on Jack to meet each brutal thrust. The air was chilled, keeping him from sweating for only a moment, and then he was hot, sweat rolling off him, making a layer between him and the hood so he was moving steadily over the hood, but Maltin didn't stop. He'd never stop.

Blood trickled down his neck and the smell of it took over his senses. He smelled that blood and felt his fangs growing. He wouldn't shift, he wasn't on a mission, didn't feel threatened, but part of him wanted his fangs out, and he bit into his own arm, needing the taste of blood on his tongue.

“Ahhghghhh,” he screamed, but it was muffled and gurgled by his own blood. Maltin went harder, and the car began to move again, just like it had the first time they’d fucked on one.

Soon, metal was crunching into metal, and the cars that Maltin had held so precious were being totaled—not from some random wreck, but from them, their coupling. It was incredible and joyous to hear that screaming metal as it clashed in that warehouse.

Being fucked so hard on that car, his fangs hitting bone, then healing again, he began to cry with the joy of it. All his life, he wanted powers to belong and wished for them. What he needed most was to belong first, and then he received them. That was all it took. For him to belong, and he did. To one glorious man, his family, and then his own.

The first time Maltin knotted, Jack felt like he’d be torn apart, his bottom half torn away from the top. He panted through it on the hood of the Camero, holding onto the edge of the metal, and laughter poured from him as he felt life beginning inside him.

“One down,” he said between harsh breaths. “How many are we trying for?”

“I’ll decide when I’m through with you.”

They made it to the bed for their second round and then to the bathroom, where they’d tried to wash off some of the sweat, dried blood, and saliva.

He was hung over the railing after the shower, hands gripping the metal rails as Maltin pushed into him, and he felt as if he were flying over the room.

The living room floor, their bed again, busting the bottom out of it and not stopping when they did. The slapping of their flesh as they fucked was echoing through the loft

and warehouse, loudly, viciously combining with their screams and guttural grunts.

Jack's ass should feel like ground beef, the way he was fucked over and over those few days. Night into day, day into night, and once Maltin knotted, and then the swelling left, Jack healed, ready to go again.

He had no idea how many days it had been that they rutted. The entire warehouse was a mess of tangled metal and busted tires. Not one car was left unscathed, but it was the last time they were together in that way that Jack would always remember most.

Maltin carried the mattress from the bed down to the living room like it weighed nothing at all. He laid it on the floor, made it with fresh sheets and brought the pillows down for Jack to lay his head. He stood over Jack as Jack lay on the bed, and he smiled in such a way that Jack saw tears about to fall.

"I can't believe how happy I am. I'm not tired. I'm not sore. I could do this another month, but I don't think we have to. I think it's time to celebrate being together instead of copulating for our future."

Jack lay a hand over his stomach. "I know you're right, Maltin. You're my love, forever."

"Good. This is just us now, just...being together."

Jack opened his arms, and Maltin knelt on the bed, crawling over him and kissing him as deeply as he ever had. He moved to his side, and Jack followed, facing one another, smiling, laughing under their breaths.

Maltin's hand tenderly ran down Jack's side, resting on his hip while his lips kissed over Jack's top lip, then his bottom, each corner, and then each eye.

Loving caresses, humming noises as they kissed fully, Jack's fingers threaded through his mate's thick hair, his need for the man having nothing to do any longer with satiating his heat.

No, Maltin was right. Like it was their wedding night, Maltin took Jack as if it were the first time they'd ever touched. He was inside Jack gently, moving in slow, deliberate circles, their eyes barely taken off the other.

When Maltin came, he didn't knot inside of Jack. He lay there, breathing heavily as he placed his hand on Jack's stomach, smiling as tears finally flowed down his cheeks. "We're going to give them the life you should have had, baby. They're going to know they're loved. They're going to know that no matter what power they might or might not have, the greatest power is our love for them."

"That's all I can ask for, Maltin."

They slept finally, for two straight days and nights, never moving away from one another. Jack woke when hunger tore at his gut, and he rose as the sun was setting.

The place was a mess, including the kitchen. He barely recalled fucking in there, making the pots and pans rattle and crash to the floor. As he picked them up, he laughed silently, knowing the rest of the loft and warehouse would be nearly impossible to tidy.

But he forgot that his mate was powerful and able to use it. Just as he had breakfast finished and the coffee poured, Maltin woke with a groan and waved a hand for the loft to be set right, as it had been before they'd coupled. "You've got to stop making such a mess, Jack," he said as he paused on his way to eat to kiss his mate.

"Me? You were the animal."

“You make me do these things. I’m usually much more reserved.”

They ate together, and then Jack followed him to the warehouse so Maltin could restore the cars to pristine condition. “My poor cars. They’ve taken a beating lately.”

“Next time we go see my parents, can we take one? They live so simply, and I’m sure they’d like a ride in one of the fancier ones.”

“I’ll do one better, Jack. I’ll give them one. But though you’d think they’d appreciate one of the fancier ones, as you put it, where they live? I think the Escalade would be best. Four-wheel drive and all that, heated seats.”

“You’re right, of course. But, Maltin, that’s fancy too, you know?”

“Pish, posh,” he said, laughing, mocking his uncle. “It’s a hideous thing I bought when they first rolled out. I only got it on a lark.”

“I miss your mother and uncle.”

“We’ve been fucking for like four or five days, and you miss them? I must be doing it wrong.”

Jack smacked him playfully. “You know that’s not what I meant. I just...it’s true. I have my real family now, but they were first.”

Maltin kissed him on the cheek. “I know. They’re special. Arrogant and spoiled, but special.”

“You were, too, when I first came here.”

Hanging his head, he admitted, “You were too beautiful. I could see you, Jack, that

you weren't some...tradesman. You were someone I could fall for, and I haven't let myself fall for anyone in a very long time. You see, my darling, I never knew I would have a fated mate. I only thought I would go through my life alone or heartbroken."

"And now?"

Maltin sighed happily. "Now I have the entire world."

Rodney and Trudy did come again about a month after they returned to France after meeting Jack's family. Jack greeted them with open arms, taking their hugs and kisses to his cheeks.

Rodney was the first to comment on his belly. "Where is that slim, trim young man I recently met?"

"I'm not fat. I have babies inside me."

His hands rested on his stomach. Trudy placed hers over his. "Jack, do you...know...?"

"No. When we saw the doctor, he asked if we wanted to know the sex of them, and Maltin got so pale, he looked like he was about to faint."

"Where is my son?"

"Delivering his latest script to the studio. He finally finished it, only a month late."

Rodney waved a hand over the table and served lunch, Trudy insisting to sit near Jack. "When I was pregnant with Maltin, he gave me terrible heartburn the entire time."

Jack laughed and pointed to his stomach. “Well, his kids are doing the same to me. No acidic foods, no juice, no eggs. The babies hate them.”

“What are you craving, dear?”

He giggled and admitted, “Raw meat.”

“Oh heavens!”

Rodney laughed. “You, my darling sister, are the one that mated with a damn beast from hell.”

“I suppose. Tell me you’re at least telling the doctor all of this.”

“I am. He says what I am craving is likely what my body needs. He’s also said I am gaining the perfect weight, that all the heartbeats are strong, and there are three.”

Neither of them had told their parents how many children they were having. Jack had secretly wished for more, though he’d never shared that with Maltin. Their one and only shot at having kids, and he’d dreamed of a house filled with little voices. Three, however, was a good number.

“Three,” Trudy whispered. “Oh, dear, that is a joyous thing!”

“You two are hearing it first. Maltin and me are...saving most things for the two of you to know first. You were my family first.”

Trudy hugged his shoulders and then insisted she had to powder her nose and left for the bathroom. Rodney whispered to him, “She’s going to cry, and you’ll never see the proof of it. She’ll be perfectly made back up when she emerges.”

“I didn’t mean to make her cry.”

After a wink, he said, “She loves to cry, and they’re happy tears.”

Maltin got home just as they were finished eating, and after Trudy came back to the table, full makeup intact. “Son, how are you?”

“Better now, Mother.” After greeting his uncle and mother, he kissed Jack quickly. “I have a surprise for you, my darling.”

“Oh? What is it?”

Maltin sat at the table, and Rodney waved his hand to produce a plate of food for Maltin. They all stayed at the table while he ate and told them his news. “Well, I have been thinking about the kids, where we should live, and everything. A loft over a warehouse of cars isn’t ideal.”

“Thank goodness, Maltin,” Trudy said. “This is nowhere for growing children.”

“No, of course not. So, I’ve been meeting with a realtor. I didn’t want to tell you, Jack, until I was sure. She has some houses for us to look at on nice, quiet streets, grass, trees, a yard where we can build them a play area.”

Jack’s heart began to thump wildly. “A house?”

Trudy corrected him. “A home, dear.”

“Let your mother decorate, Maltin. No more steel pipes and bricks, for goodness’ sake,” Rodney quipped.

“I happen to like the décor Maltin’s put in place, Rodney,” she told him. “But not for

babies. They need more light and less metal.”

“Yes, Mother.”

“A home,” Jack whispered, suddenly ready to cry, but that wasn’t unusual, exactly. The pregnancy brought a lot of tears, both happy and sad ones. It had also brought with it morning sickness, strange cravings, all those stereotypes he thought he might avoid, being a man and a shifter to boot.

Trudy handed him a lace handkerchief and settled an arm around his neck as she stood behind him. “It’s almost over, dear. There, there.”

Maltin winked at him, and Jack appreciated him more than ever. He’d put up with all the mood swings, and they’d been bad at times. He’d bared his fangs more than once at Maltin, with every intention of tearing out his throat.

“My darling, it is almost over. Another two to three weeks at most.”

The time had flown. Sure, his gestation was short as a shifter, but he knew he’d miss it, no matter the downsides. “I know. I’ll miss them being so close.”

“I felt the same with Maltin,” Trudy told him as she retook her seat. “They are born, and you actually miss them, even while they’re in your arms.”

“That makes no sense, Trudy,” Rodney said as he and Maltin stared at the two of them.

Jack gazed at her and said, “It makes all the sense in the world.”

While Maltin slept peacefully next to him, Trudy and Rodney safely at the best hotel in town, Jack read over the book Ms. Tempest had given them. Learning about

himself, about his mate and their children, Jack found himself wanting to know more.

Books could only contain so much. As he felt the children in him move, he knew it was difficult to express how scared he was and how excited he felt. Simultaneous fear and anticipation. It was crazy, but he had both crowding him.

In the morning, once Maltin was occupied at his desk writing a movie for After Life Streaming Services, a little tale of a hellhound shifter finding his fated mate, Jack decided to go out for the morning. "I'll be gone for a couple hours," he told his mate.

"Why not wait for me, darling? I'll only be another couple of hours."

"I'd rather go alone. I love you, but I won't be alone soon, once the babies are here."

Maltin kissed his forehead and whispered, "Be very careful, Jack. You're precious cargo."

"The babies will be fine."

"I'm not just talking about the babies, Jack. You're every bit as precious to me."

With that to cloak him in love and security, Jack drove the Thunderbird out of the industrial district. He found he'd miss it, though Maltin would never give up the warehouse. Not only were his cars stored there, but so were the memories of their meeting and falling in love.

Jack drove to the city with one destination in mind. He hadn't been back to the library, that wonderful place of knowledge and entertainment, since he and Maltin had checked out the book on the seat beside him.

Smiling wistfully, thinking about that day, how nervous they were, and how curious,

Jack knew more than he had but still wondered.

He parked in the lot behind the library, walking slowly to enjoy the cool of the day. The apple trees were leafless, but they were beginning to bud, and the green grass was taking over the yellow in the soil between those trees.

An old city, a vibrant one, Valleywood had given him more than he'd ever imagined.

He stopped on the sidewalk to pay it thanks, seeing the rising buildings downtown, watching the cars hurrying to the studios to make their movies and shows. Every kind of car from the most expensive money could buy to old beaters, like he'd once owned. The hierarchy of the city of dreams for all beings supernatural.

Continuing to the wide stairs secured by the winged lions, Jack felt his babies begin to flutter madly in his stomach. "What is up with you kids?"

The closer he got to the doors, the more movement he felt from them. He laughed, as it kind of tickled, like they'd found all his tickle spots inside him. "Settle down! You have to be mellow in a library. Oh well, you'll learn that the first time Ms. Tempest scowls at you."

Inside, he didn't see her at the front desk, so he started strolling around the stacks, in no hurry. He saw the great authors of both human and supernatural realms. Tomes of witchcraft for beginners to the highest priests and priestesses.

"Jack, how are you?"

He turned to see her pushing a cart of returned books. "I'm..."

As he laid his hands on his big, round gut, she smiled warmly. "I can see. I'm happy for you."

“I am, very happy, that is. Maltin is...wonderful.”

“I’m glad of that. Not all fated mates are good. It’s the roll of the dice, I’m afraid. More than I’d like to admit don’t live happy lives just because fate deemed them to join together.”

“How did you...know? Who are you, really? I read in that book that there are...gods at play with certain shifters.”

As her lips curled into a smile, Ms. Tempest suddenly lost all the lines and wrinkles formerly on her face. Her hair grew thick, coming out of the bun she usually wore to cascade down her shoulders.

A very young woman, she stood before him, leaning on the handle of the cart, her bright blue eyes shining in the dim light of the room. “You’re too smart for your own good, Jack Pengrove.”

“Jack Graves,” he said proudly. “I took Maltin’s name, because...well, biological parents, adopted ones, it doesn’t matter. He and the babies are my family now.”

“Don’t cast away those that you’ve been born to, whether you came from their genes or not, Jack. All of us have our tests and trials, and we don’t conquer them all, but there are a few we succeed over. Hold onto those.”

Jack heard this and it all but confirmed his suspicions. “I’ve read the book you gave me. It speaks of a fury, a goddess of the underworld, the avenger of murder.”

“Don’t believe everything you read, Jack,” she scolded as her smile grew.

“Your first name, Ms. Tempest. It wouldn’t happen to be Tisiphone, now would it?”

With a dismissive wink, she waved a hand over herself, and she was once again the old woman with the lines and harsh gray bun. “You have a strong mind, Jack. Use it for better things than learning about things that are best unsaid.”

With that, she backed out of the stack and disappeared around a corner, the clanking of the cartwheels the only thing marking her leaving.

Jack smiled, knowing he’d been in the presence of a real goddess, in all senses of the word.

### Chapter Sixteen

Maltin worried over Jack when he was out of sight. Jack was the love of his life, even besides being his mate. He went to the window over and over, trying to catch a glimpse of Jack on his way home, but that only showed the road.

Outside, he paced, and when Jack finally did pull into the yard, Maltin wanted to yell at him for making him worry. He didn't, of course. Coming to his senses before Jack emerged from the Thunderbird.

"Were you worried about me?" Jack said as he laughed, feet scraping on the gravel.

"No, I was getting some air."

"Sure," he said, then kissed Maltin sweetly. "I just had to get out for a while. You know, if I feel threatened, I shift. I'm pretty much the safest person in this town."

"Shift and fight with the babies?"

"Maybe they'd come out and help me fight."

Maltin was ready to strangle him. "Go upstairs and get your feet up. Mother will be by soon, and if she sees you tired, she'll throttle me."

"Sure, for your mom, I will go rest."

Jack's hand was taken, his fingers threading through Maltin's as they entered the

warehouse and walked past the center row of cars. “Jack, when they come, we won’t have a lot of time together. I hate to admit it, I’m already jealous.”

“You won’t have time for jealousy after, so I’ll let you have that now.”

“You...I’ll miss you terribly.”

Jack stopped and turned to Maltin, obviously seeing his worry. He never could hide his emotions well. “Maltin, we have forever. I’ll be here with you when the children are grown and searching for their own fated mates. They’ll sleep sometimes, and we have a few people that wouldn’t mind babysitting, I’m sure.”

“We do have a couple of grandmothers that are chomping at the bit to get their hands on these kids.”

“Exactly. I’m yours. Always, Maltin.”

That afternoon, the couple left the warehouse to meet with Trudy and Rodney at the first of the three houses they were thinking of buying. Jack saw the place, at the end of a peaceful block, big oak trees in front providing shade. It was a two-story Craftsman with a wide front porch where Maltin had pictured them sitting and playing with the babies. It was his favorite, and that was likely why he’d brought them to that particular house first.

Jack’s bright face showed he loved it too. He knelt on the grass in front, staring at the yellow-painted door. “Maltin, it’s beautiful here.”

“The house needs a little work, but that won’t be a problem for us at all. The backyard is big enough for a pool or a big jungle gym. Whatever we want. Three main bedrooms upstairs and a small one on the main level.”

Jack heard the excitement in his voice and turned to him. “You love this one.”

His mother had other ideas. “Never go with the first one you see, boys. This is rather small!”

“Mother, it’s perfect. We don’t need a stale, cold mansion or a chateau in France. We want to be here, with others like us. So the kids don’t think themselves so different and have to hide themselves.”

After a resigned sigh, Trudy whispered, “Fine. Then, I guess it’s fine. But we must see the others, so Jack has a choice!”

“Yes, Mother.”

They did look at the other homes, but Jack insisted the first was his choice. Maltin called the realtor to make an offer, and while he was doing that, Rodney was waving his hands around wildly.

“Rodney, no! Don’t...put spells on them to accept. We should get this fair and square. If fate wants us here,” Jack pled.

“It wouldn’t hurt to help fate along a little!”

Maltin laughed and said, “No, Rodney. As Jack said, we want this done right.”

“Fine. You two are entirely no fun now that you’re parents. It will be up to me, as the children’s favorite uncle?”

“The children’s only uncle,” Maltin pointed out.

“As their favorite relative, then, to inject some fun into their lives.”

Maltin didn't want to think about the kind of fun Rodney would get them into. He suddenly saw all the walls of their home colored with fingerpaints and the constant racket of noisy toys breaking through their morning routines.

Jack was already laying down the law. "Fun is great, Rodney, but don't get them into mischief or you'll be in trouble like they are."

Trudy whispered to her brother, "We'll spoil them silly, Rodney, don't worry."

The offer was accepted that very day, and Rodney swore he had no hand in it. They moved the following week after paying cash for the place, and just as the last coat of paint was on the walls of the nursery, Jack went into labor.

Maltin was setting the paintbrush down as Rodney complained for the tenth time about how much he hated paint fumes. "Rodney, we can't have Jack up here. The fumes aren't good for him or the babies!"

"Why must we smell them at all? With the wave of one hand?"

"Jack sees this as a love letter to our children. Doing things by hand, putting sweat into it. He's washed and ironed all their wardrobes four times just since we moved in. It's part nesting and part of that love letter. This is our part, and you're not getting out of it."

"Trudy is shopping. Why can't I shop?"

"My children don't need diamond studded cufflinks or Prada loafers, Rodney, especially in size ten."

"I want to look my best for them when they first see me! How would I ever explain wearing last year's trousers?"

Maltin was about to give up when they heard Jack screaming from downstairs, and both used magic in lieu of running to get to him instantly. “It’s...it’s time! Gods, Maltin, it’s time,” he said as his face grew redder by the second.

Finding he couldn’t move his feet, or breathe, Rodney sprang into action. He snapped his fingers to produce a limo outside the big picture window, and he then took Jack’s arm to help him walk to the door, calling for Maltin, “Dad, get in gear!”

Maltin was shaking, his breath caught in his throat, choking him. Once Jack and Rodney were out the door, Maltin felt his chest moving, getting around that block of pure air, and he felt his feet moving with it.

He was out the door, walking as if in a dream, and the faster he ran, the further away the car got from him. The world was spinning, the trees whispering laughter in the summer breeze, and Maltin felt like screaming.

Before he could, however, his mother was there. She had hold of him, leading him to the car. “This is a frightening thing, son, but you have to be there. You’d never forgive yourself if you fell apart when Jack needed you most.”

“M-M-Mother, I can’t. I...he doesn’t need me! I’ll faint. I’ll...”

She got in front of him and snapped her fingers right in his face. “Maltin Theodore Graves, don’t you dare fall apart and let that poor boy do this alone, or worse! With your Uncle Rodney!”

That was what he’d needed. He came out of his shock and kissed his mother’s forehead. “Thank you,” he told her and then ran to the limo, closing the door before she could get in behind him. Rodney reopened it for her and together, the three surrounded Jack, holding his hands, soothing him with loving words.

Maltin saw the pain his mate was in and felt it all the way through himself. Jack was bringing their children into the world, he was strong, sure, but Maltin feared for all of them.

Neither minded when Rodney grew impatient with the traffic near Valleywood Bridge and snapped them to the hospital. Rodney ran for a wheelchair and Maltin held Jack while they waited. “You’re doing splendidly.”

“This feels like I’m being torn apart from the inside!”

Maltin kissed his temple and said, “We’re here. The doctors can help you now.”

“Don’t leave me. Not for a second, please?”

Jack, the man who had come into his life to fix a hole in the roof, had also fixed the one in his heart and in his life. Maltin was overcome with emotion, but he refused to let Jack see any weakness in him. Jack needed his mate to be strong and stand beside him, and that was the only place he wanted to be.

Once Rodney came with a group of nurses and orderlies, Jack was whisked into the hospital, up an elevator, and to the end of the hall where the labor and delivery rooms were located.

It was in that room for the next four hours that Maltin had to watch the love of his life in excruciating pain.

He held Jack’s hand and talked him through the breathing, the contractions making him scream. He washed his face with cool cloths, gave him ice chips, and waited.

Rodney poked his head in now and then, but seeing Jack in pain was hard on him as well. Jack had grown on them all, bringing new light into the dark lives of the old

family—love. Jack had brought love.

Yes, their family had loved one another, but it took Jack to remind him of how good it could feel to be a family.

When the babies started coming, Maltin watched with his heart bursting wide open, seeing his children's faces as they came into the world.

Maltin clipped each umbilical cord and watched as the nurses took each of them to the tables to clean and weigh them. Jack was laughing, tears streaming down his beautiful face, as he held Maltin's hand tightly. "Maltin, did you see? Did you see?"

"They're so beautiful, Jack. Just like you."

The kiss they shared the second before the two of them were being handed the babies was a vow that Maltin gave his new family. He'd do anything for them. He'd protect them, love them, and always be there, no matter what.

He was given the little girl while Jack was holding both of their sons. Maltin gazed into his daughter's bright gray eyes and dripped tears all over her face. "You are the most beautiful girl I've ever seen," he whispered. "Daddy loves you dearly."

"Maltin, look at our sons."

Maltin looked over the head of his daughter to the two boys, one lying in each of Jack's arms. One looked red, getting ready to start wailing, while the other gazed peacefully at Jack. "I see the one that's going to be trouble."

Jack laughed as the little boy screamed his tiny lungs off. "We'll call him Rodney."

"Oh, that is perfect."

Rodney and his mother soon came into the room, and Trudy kissed the faces of all three before she took the little girl from Maltin and walked off with her. “Grandmother will buy you lace and silks, ribbons for your hair, ponies, kittens, and whatever you want, my darling.”

Jack laughed at Maltin’s frustration. “Maltin, she’s waited for two hundred years for this. Leave her alone.”

“They’re going to be spoiled rotten, Jack.”

“Yes, they are.”

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### Chapter Seventeen

Jack was so tired he could barely keep his eyes open, but he did regardless. He didn't want to miss a second of his children's new lives.

"Rest, Jack. I'm right here with them," Maltin urged.

"What if...what if you fall asleep?"

"We're surrounded by nurses and doctors, not to mention a doting grandmother and uncle."

"Where are they?"

Maltin sighed, "The gift shop, where else?"

"Ugh, they're relentless. It's sweet."

"Wait until you're cleaning up all that mess."

"With your help," Jack countered.

"I'll hire someone. Maybe from Hands-E-Men."

Jack waved a fist at him. "You have all the handy and all the man you need, Maltin Theodore Graves!"

Just then, a nurse came in with an announcement of visitors. “Your parents are here to see you, Misters Graves,” she said, and Jack looked over to her after hearing a familiar voice.

As Maltin started to argue that Jack’s parents couldn’t come from Canada for another week, Jack smiled at the nurse, whom he knew better as a librarian.

She smiled back and gave him a wink. “Your babies are beautiful, by the way. Would you like me to bring them in while your parents are visiting with you?”

Maltin was still trying to argue, but Jack and Ms. Tisiphone Tempest didn’t pay him a bit of attention. “Yes, nurse. Thank you so very, very much.”

“It was you, Jack. I just...helped.”

As she left the room, Maltin just stared at him for a long time. “What was that all about? Was she one of your...your clients or something?”

“I had no female clients, Maltin,” is all he would say.

The real shock for him, however, was who came through the door next. It wasn’t his biological parents. It was the Pengroves.

Jack sat up a little straighter, though the move hurt his abdomen and balls something awful. “Mother? Father?”

“Jack. We came as soon as we heard,” his mother said before tentatively taking a step into the room. “We...wanted to say...to say that...”

“What your mother...I’m sorry, Jack, what my wife is trying to say is that we wanted to tell you congratulations. We’ve been wrong, about, oh, so many things. When you came to confront us, it made us see how unfair we were to you.”

Jack's mother came to him and took his hand, and he was too surprised to pull away. "I'm so very sorry. You should never have been taken from your real mother and given to me. Never. I treated you badly, and I'm sorry, Jack. We're sorry."

Maltin was growling low like he was ready to attack, but Jack reached for his hand and took it. "It's okay, Maltin."

"Thank you," his mother said. "We won't stay long. We just wanted to wish you and your family well."

Ms. Tempest, disguised and dressed in pink scrubs, pushed the wide hospital bassinet into the room. "Here they are," she announced.

Jack watched his parents get on either side of the bassinet, and Maltin tensed beside him until Jack's mother began to cry. "They're just beautiful."

"Thanks, Mother. Father. I'd...I'd like you to come visit, often. Maybe we can start over, as friends, if not family."

Jack's mother rushed over to him and kissed his cheek. "I'm sorry, for everything, Jack. You are a brave and wonderful son. Your real mother is lucky to have you back in her life."

When they left, Jack lay back on the pillows, smiling as Maltin took one of the boys into his arms. "That was a surprise."

"Yes. I'm glad, though. Maybe people can change after all."

"I would have never believed it, Jack. Not in a million years."

Home with the children was hectic, as they had so little sleep. Jack's real parents and sisters came, helping them get a couple of hours of sleep here and there.

Trudy and Rodney left to let the other grandparents enjoy their time, but they came back quickly, unable to stay away from the babies for long. So, to solve the problem, Trudy did what she said she'd never do. She moved to Valleywood.

And what's more, she moved right down the road.

Maltin groaned and complained, but Jack saw how happy he was that his family, their family, would be so close. No matter which set of Jack's parents were in their lives, Jack felt as if his first real mother had been Trudy.

So, the first day they brought home the babies, he'd asked Trudy to name their daughter.

After flooding two handkerchiefs with tears, Trudy came up with a name that made Maltin and Jack the next two to cry.

Jacklyn Malti Graves.

After that, giving the boys their names was a two-night ordeal. Of course, they'd thought of names before the children were born. They'd gone over names they loved; names with meaning and more, but none seemed appropriate once they saw the babies.

Finally, what they did was to name one Beck, the nickname given to Maltin's father by his mother, and Benji, like Jack's real father. Their middle names, however, were the same.

Rodney.

Life with triplets kept them busier for that first year than they could have guessed, but they quickly got the hang of it. Maltin worked on his scripts and Jack began to study for college. He wanted to become a writer, like Maltin.

The happiness each smile from their children granted them couldn't be measured. They'd been lost and alone for so long; the continuing gift of their family gave them both a lasting gratitude that showed each day they were all together.

A family.

When Jack shifted again, it wasn't until the children were nearing their eighteenth month. It was dark, and the rest of the house occupants were asleep. He got up to relieve himself and suddenly felt his body begin to change.

He hadn't felt it for almost two years, so it caught him by surprise. When he figured out what it was, he felt a stabbing of fear that left as soon as his clothes were in torn strips on the bathroom floor, and he saw himself in the mirror, with glowing red eyes and curled horns on each side of his head. Busting through the door, he felt himself running so fast he knew he'd be a blur to anyone who could witness.

A crack of breaking wood sounded loud to him as he escaped the house and began to run north, away from the city lights that lit up the sky to the south of him.

Away into the night, he ran, knowing the name of the man he'd fetch to the underworld. Fenton Moorehouse, a fabled mystique, selling his wares on one of the cable channels local to Valleywood. One of those late-night infomercials that he'd watched a thousand times, it seemed, when the babies kept him up most nights.

That wasn't why he was being taken, however. He was a hellhound, created by the avenger of murder, and in his youth, Fenton Moorehouse murdered seven people and used his petty magic to cover up the crimes. It was time for him to pay for those crimes and for Tisiphone to have vengeance.

As he ran, he saw it, saw himself busting through yet another door, bounding up a flight of stairs to snatch the man's leg between his jaws as he heard the piercing scream from the man's terrible awakening.

A lighted circle appeared, and he saw her, the young figure of Ms. Tempest, the fury, beckoning him to enter the doorway. He dragged the man with him past her into the red light that awaited.

Awaking the next morning to his mate tapping his shoulder, Jack came to and noticed he was naked. “Were you taking advantage of a sleeping man, my love?”

Maltin’s cross stare told him that wasn’t the case. “Would you like to tell me what happened to two doors of our home?”

Jack’s smile was quick as he said, “It wasn’t a dream. I really did that.”

“That’s not an explanation, Jack.”

“It’s a good one. Care to let me tell it over a cup of coffee, dear?”

Maltin sighed heavily. “I may need to add a jigger of scotch to it but come on.”

The end