



What the Hex (Blackhaven Manor #11)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Driven and ambitious are not words anyone would use to describe Kingston Mathers, but he's content with his lot in life. So, of course, fate throws him a curve ball that threatens to wreak havoc on his carefully constructed neutrality. Because there's no way in heaven or hell that someone like him should end up mated to an internationally beloved actor with legions of adoring fans.

Fame isn't all it's cracked up to be. Storm Black can attest to that. Even after years of monitoring his every word, action, and even his facial expressions, the lifestyle doesn't come naturally. Frankly, he's still not entirely sure how he stumbled into the limelight in the first place. When his latest role leads him right into the arms of his destiny, however, he's never been more grateful for the detour.

But strange things are happening at Blackhaven Manor. When Storm suddenly forgets everything about who he is, it's up to King to find the answers. He just hopes that when the hex is finally lifted, his mate's newfound obsession with him doesn't disappear with it.

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Chapter one

Typically filled with laughter, conversation, and music, the quiet emptiness of Blackhaven Manor was a little disconcerting. Still, a cautious excitement hung in the air, infecting the staff as it spread to every corner of the castle.

After months of waiting, the day had finally come.

Gathered in the hotel lobby with two dozen or so of his fellow co-workers, Kingston Mathers shifted from one foot to the other in anticipation as he awaited his instructions. He secretly hoped he would be working directly with their special guests, but honestly, he was just happy to be included at all. Even if he could only watch from a distance, he could hardly believe he'd been given such an opportunity.

Dressed in a sleeveless white sundress dotted with cherry blossoms, Skye Maddock held her dainty hands at her waist as she faced the group. She'd pulled her long, golden curls into a high ponytail, leaving a few strands loose at the front to frame her face.

With her cheery smile and Barbie blue eyes, she looked like spring personified.

"Kol, Wren, and Simon, you'll be in charge of guest services. Coordinating reservations, room service, currier deliveries, etc."

A small man with blond hair that fell down to his hips, Wren cocked his head to the side with a mischievous grin. "So, what we always do?"

Skye narrowed her eyes at him, but her lips twitched at the corners. “Watch it. I have no problem sending you back to Louisiana.”

“Bet you won’t,” the petite male responded with a smirk. “You love me.”

Kol, their lead concierge, elbowed him in the ribs. “Shut up.”

Skye simply rolled her eyes and moved on to the next group.

King hadn’t met Wren before that morning, and he still hadn’t decided how he felt about the guy. He had learned from other staff members that Wren was a previous employee who had transferred to the sister hotel in Hunters Hollow, Louisiana, a few years ago.

Apparently, he had “volunteered” to help out for the next three weeks at Blackhaven Manor.

Clearly, being friends with the boss had its perks. Considering the number of people employed at the castle, his assistance wasn’t exactly needed, but King fully understood why he’d requested to be there.

A number of scenes from the new gay drama, *Checking In*, had been slated to film at Blackhaven Manor in late February. Four months later, after several delays, the cast and crew were finally arriving that afternoon.

Most of the staff had never witnessed the filming process before, and they looked forward to the experience. At least, that was what they told each other. In reality, everyone was practically vibrating with anticipation of meeting the stars of the show.

With two other dramas and a full-length movie under their belts, the main couple had recently exploded in popularity. Seemingly overnight, they had amassed legions of

fans, and with several brand deals between them, even people who didn't follow the genre had heard the names Storm Black and Damien Frost.

Their shippers—fans who either wanted or already believed the actors shared a romantic relationship—were seriously next-level. The way they analyzed every little move, smile, or word took obsession into a whole new dimension. King couldn't imagine what it would be like to have so many people care that much about every mundane detail of his life, and he hoped to never find out.

While not a shipper himself, he admitted to being a fan. He considered both actors incredibly talented, and together, they had explosive on-screen chemistry. That was enough for him. As for who they dated or slept with, he couldn't have cared less.

"Cyrus," Skye said, speaking to the hotel's head of security. "Filming starts next Monday, but there are interviews and two fan meetings this week. We should also anticipate large crowds outside the hotel."

The hellhound dipped his head, his black eyes never wavering from the female. "My team is ready, and the sheriff's department is sending out a handful of deputies."

Skye nodded, then turned to a middle-aged male at the edge of the group. "Harry?"

Harry Bowen, who oversaw every restaurant and bar in the building, cleared his throat. "The catering menus and craft table selections have been approved. We're ready."

Satisfied, Skye continued down the list, speaking next with leaders and managers from other teams before finally reaching the housekeeping staff.

As she outlined their duties, it sounded as though not much would change for them. They would ensure the rooms and common areas remained clean, bring guests extra

towels and pillows, and respond to requests as needed.

A lucky few of them, however, would be helping out with cleanup during production, setup and breakdown during events, and maintaining the other cast and crew areas. No one had been assigned to those tasks yet, and they hadn't been given any indication as to who would be chosen.

An ingenious move on the part of their manager since everyone on the housekeeping staff had been especially diligent in recent weeks, hoping to earn an edge over the others.

"We're ready," Maia said. With a wide smile, she turned to those gathered and glanced down at her clipboard. "Celia, Libby, Jacob, Nita, Collin, and Eric. You will be taking care of the cast and crew areas."

She said a few more words after that, but King had stopped listening. Hanging his head, he bit the inside of his bottom lip to stifle his disappointment. Until that moment, he hadn't realized how much he'd been hoping to hear his name called.

"King?"

He jerked upright and squared his shoulders at the summons. It might have been his imagination, but he thought he detected a gleam in Skye's blue eyes when he met her gaze.

"You and Arlo are assigned to Mr. Black and Mr. Frost. You'll fetch drinks and food, keep track of their schedules, and really, anything else they need."

"Like a personal assistant?" With a quiet gasp, Arlo Eichen grabbed hold of King's wrist in a bruising grip as he waited for an answer.

Average height with a lean build, flawless tawny skin, and bright golden-brown eyes, the guy looked like he should be in front of the camera, not behind it. The fact that he had more charisma in his pinky than King did in his entire body didn't hurt, either.

They had started at the Manor around the same time, but Arlo had quickly become a guest favorite with plenty of admirers of his own. King, on the other hand, doubted most of the staff knew who he was, despite working with him for nearly a year.

Not that he cared. He certainly wasn't jealous. That would be ridiculous.

Skye lifted one shoulder in a casual shrug. "Something like that."

"Oh, sweet baby cherubs," Arlo whispered loudly as he shook King's arm. "I think I'm going to pass out. This is unreal."

While he definitely shared his friend's excitement, his came with a healthy dose of skepticism. "Don't they already have assistants? Or managers?"

At the very least, he imagined someone from the concierge team would be better suited to take on the task. Naturally, he was honored to have been chosen, but he couldn't help but think there were better options available.

"Maybe you—" He grunted when Arlo chose that moment to stomp on his foot, effectively cutting off his protest.

A knowing grin stretched across Skye's pink lips while she studied him for an uncomfortably long time. "If you don't want—"

"I want!" he interrupted, literally shouting the words at her. "I'll do it." He cursed under his breath and winced when he caught an elbow in the ribs from Arlo. "Both of us," he emphasized as he rubbed his abused side. "We'll do it."

“And I’m sure you’ll do a wonderful job.”

When she moved on to talk about other preparations, Arlo leaned sideways, bumping their shoulders together.

“Is it just me, or did that sound like a threat?”

“It’s not you.” He had clearly detected the uncertainty or else in her statement. “Don’t stress about it. I’m sure it will be fine.”

Skye might be tough, but she was also fair. He had never known her to fire anyone for an accident or mistake. In fact, he would venture that someone would have to be downright negligent or malicious to get sacked from the hotel. Even if he and Arlo screwed up royally, as long as they tried their best, they would be okay.

Probably.

“I think that covers everything,” Skye said, concluding the meeting. “Everyone back to work. Our guests should be arriving soon.”

As she spoke, her gaze landed on King, and he instinctively knew he hadn’t been dismissed with everyone else. Sure enough, a moment later, she asked him and Arlo to follow her to the welcome desks at the front of the lobby. There, she grabbed two sheets of paper and glanced briefly at them.

“Mr. Frost’s schedule.” She passed one of the pages to Arlo. “And Mr. Black’s.” She handed the second sheet to King. “You’ll also find a list of preferences at the bottom.”

Perusing the information, his eyes widened at the sheer scope of Storm Black’s schedule. Between meetings, filming, and all of his extracurriculars, every minute of

the day seemed to be filled. The guy even had time allotted for his meals.

By the gods, did he even sleep?

The bottom third of the page was dedicated to his preferences. How he took his coffee. What brand of water he liked. His favorite foods—listed by category. Items he requested be on set with him, like a humidifier and aroma therapy inhalers. Apparently, the actor was allergic to peanuts, which was uncommon for an Otherling, but not completely unheard of.

“Impressive.” Folding the sheet twice, he tucked the small square into the back pocket of his slacks. “Thank you. This will be really helpful.”

“Yes,” Arlo agreed, still looking over his own list. “Thank you.”

Without a word, Skye reached over the counter and came back with two old-fashioned brass keys.

Confused but unable to refuse, King took one of the keys with an arched eyebrow.

“Your rooms,” Skye explained. “You’ll need to be available twenty-four hours a day. Of course, you’ll be compensated accordingly.” She clasped her hands together gently as she glanced between them. “If that’s a problem—”

“No problem,” Arlo interrupted. “Right, King?”

Plenty of humans worked at the hotel, and town residents frequented the bars and restaurants, but they weren’t permitted to stay in the rooms of the castle. The exception being those who arrived with an Otherling companion.

So, not only would he be playing temporary assistant to one of the most famous

people in the country, but he would do so while staying at the Manor for free. He would be an idiot to pass up the opportunity, and while he could admittedly be a bit neurotic at times, he wasn't stupid.

"No problem," he echoed.

"Wonderful." Skye grinned, but she sounded distracted and uncharacteristically impatient. "Now, our guests won't arrive for a couple of more hours. Head home and make whatever preparations you need for the next three weeks." She glanced at an ancient grandfather clock behind the counters. "I'll see you back here at noon."

He and Arlo thanked her again, then waited until she disappeared down the narrow corridor to her office before turning to each other with identical beaming smiles.

"Can you freaking believe this?"

King could only shake his head. A year ago, he had been delivering room service. A few months later, he'd moved over to housekeeping, a position that came with more responsibilities, but also better pay.

This newest promotion, however temporary, seemed unreal. Things like this—good things—rarely happened to him.

He wouldn't necessarily say he had bad luck. Mostly because he didn't have any luck at all. He'd never won anything in his life. Not competitions, games, drawings, or raffle prizes. His one and only trip to a casino had lasted exactly nine minutes. That had been how long it had taken him to lose a hundred dollars on the penny slots.

He'd never found money in an old coat pocket. Never picked up a penny from the sidewalk. He'd never felt a tingling in his palm, an itch in his ear, or caught every green light on a busy road.

Then again, he couldn't blame it all on chance. Some things required a certain amount of drive and ambition that he just didn't possess. He didn't have dreams or aspirations. He didn't set goals for himself.

For as long as he could remember, he had been the epitome of average. Average height. Average build. Average looks and intelligence. Never the best at anything, but never the worst, either, always falling somewhere in the middle. And honestly, he was content with that.

Well, usually. As long as he didn't—

Nope, he wasn't even going to think about it. He didn't want that kind of negativity encroaching on what was shaping up to be the best day of his life.

Since he and Arlo lived in the same apartment building—a new construction off the highway that had once been the location of an antiquated motel—they decided to carpool. Sliding behind the wheel of his SUV, he grabbed a hoodie and a couple of empty water bottles from the passenger seat and tossed them into the back to clear a space for his friend.

On the drive, they continued to discuss their excitement and good fortune, while also pondering what the co-stars might be like in real life. They'd both heard horror stories about beloved celebrities being total douchebags off-camera and treating everyone around them like trash.

King prayed that wouldn't be the case for Storm Black.

“What do you think we need to pack?” Arlo asked just as King pulled into the parking lot of their apartment building. “Do we have to wear our hotel uniforms?”

A good question, and one he hadn't considered. “Uh, I don't know.”

After a bit of discussion, they decided to bring their uniforms, a few casual outfits, and a couple of nicer pieces. By King's way of thinking, that covered their bases, and they could always return for another closet raid if they needed to.

In the building's lobby, they went their separate ways, Arlo taking the stairs to his second-floor unit while King rode the elevator to the fourth. He had barely made it inside his apartment when his phone rang, the shrill ringtone echoing through his living room.

A quick glance at the name of the caller was enough to deflate any happiness he felt. Of course, he could ignore it. Let it go to voicemail and claim to have been working. Eventually, he'd have to talk to the person on the other end of the line, though. So, with a shaking hand and a weary heart, he connected the call.

"Hello, Mom."

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Chapter two

The drive from the airport in Colorado Springs to the sleepy town of Echo Falls took less than an hour, but it was like entering an entirely different world.

The urban jungle of steel and concrete gave way to open spaces and oceans of green for as far as the eye could see. The houses became increasingly smaller and older, while the yards that surrounded them grew exponentially. Instead of dogs and cats, animals like goats, pigs, and chickens roamed front lawns. One place had a horse just hanging out by the porch.

To Storm Black, it felt like coming home.

As a kid from a rural town in the Texas panhandle no one had ever heard of, he couldn't have imagined he would one day leave his family farm for the bright lights of the movie industry. If someone had told him back then that he'd grow up to be an actor with fans all across the globe, he would have laughed in their face.

By the gods, that seemed like a lifetime ago. In the past five years, everything had changed. He'd gone from sharing a two-bedroom apartment with three other guys, to living alone in a hillside mansion in upstate New York. The way he walked, talked, and dressed had changed. His smile. His mannerisms. His group of friends.

His name.

That last one had been the hardest to adjust to. There were still times when someone would call his name on set, and it would take him a moment to realize they were

talking to him. Apparently, Steven Blackburn wasn't glamorous enough for the film industry.

"Damn, would you look at that."

Beside him in the backseat of the rental SUV, his best friend and co-star, Damien Frost—real name—leaned across him to stare out the window. His auburn locks fell forward to hide one side of his face, and his bronze highlights gleamed when the sunlight caught them just right.

Slight in build with soft features and enormous jade eyes that dominated a heart-shaped face, he was the quintessential "pretty boy." He also happened to be a pro at navigating the line between being personable and personal. A skill Storm hadn't quite mastered yet.

Goddess, he'd nearly dissolved into a panic attack the first time an interviewer had asked him what kind of shifter he was. Maybe it was a question he should have anticipated, but he'd never had anyone ask him so bluntly before. Worse had been when she'd insisted he transform into a mountain lion right there in front of the cameras.

He still didn't know what he would have done if Damien hadn't come to his rescue. The werewolf had smoothly and deftly diverted the conversation to less dangerous topics, and he'd done so in a way that had made the interviewer think it was her idea.

Shaking himself out of his thoughts, he followed Damien's gaze to the enormous gothic castle in the distance. Everyone in the paranormal world had heard of the infamous Blackhaven Manor, though few ever had the opportunity to stay within its walls.

The hotel might cater exclusively to Otherlings, but only to those with deep pockets.

Or those willing to scrimp and save for months or even years to spend a single night in one of its rooms.

To an outsider, the description probably sounded bitter, but Storm didn't have an opinion one way or another. He saw a stay at the Manor akin to a trip to Disney World or going on a Caribbean cruise.

It wasn't just lodging. It was an experience.

"Did you hear that we're getting around-the-clock personal assistants?" Damien asked, settling back onto his side of the car. "That could be fun."

Storm shrugged. "Sure."

They typically had some type of aid on set who brought them water and snacks. It was a welcomed perk, but he couldn't imagine why he would need a dedicated assistant. He already had his manager breathing down his neck, and the idea of some stranger following him around twenty-four hours a day made him itchy.

The driver slowed to a stop in front of a set of wide steps flanked by massive stone dragons. Huge, arched double doors stood open in anticipation of their arrival, and a couple of staff members hurried out to greet them and retrieve their luggage.

For safety reasons, his manager or one of her assistants would typically check him into a hotel upon his arrival. Then he would slip in through a back door or a private elevator to get to his room.

It all felt very clandestine, and frankly, unnecessary, but as Damian liked to remind him, he was a celebrity now. Which meant certain protocols had to be followed.

Thankfully, the Manor had been closed to outsiders for their three-week stay, which

meant he could walk right through the front doors like a regular person. Of course, once they started allowing people inside for the fan meetings, he would have to be more cautious. For now, however, he planned to enjoy this small bit of freedom.

A statuesque female with dazzling blue eyes that seemed to peer right into his soul met them just inside the lobby.

“Welcome to Blackhaven Manor, gentlemen. I’m Skye Maddock.”

Her voice held a musical quality, and the smile she gave them appeared natural and sincere. She was beautiful, no doubt, not to mention charming, but instinct told him it was all a calculated facade. Not fake exactly, but definitely exaggerated.

In that moment, he felt a certain connection to the female. He knew what it was like to always be “on.” He understood the fatigue of upholding a particular image, constantly questioning every action and word.

“Storm Black,” he responded, taking her offered hand in a gentle grasp. “We’re excited to be here.”

“Very much so.” With a mischievous wink, his co-star nudged him out of the way, taking Skye’s hand and bringing it to his lips to brush a delicate kiss over the knuckles. “Damien Frost.”

Instead of the blush and giggle he’d likely expected, Skye arched one sculpted eyebrow and pulled her hand free with a bit of a snap. Storm turned his head and coughed into his fist to cover his laughter.

It was all for show, of course. He knew for a fact that Damien was so gay he couldn’t even think straight. The thinking part—or lack thereof—was what often led to hilarious mishaps like the one he’d just found himself in.

“Right,” Skye said after a significant pause. “I’m sure you’re eager to see your rooms after a day of traveling.”

As if summoned by magic, two male staff members appeared on either side of her, dressed in identical uniforms of white slacks and black button-downs. The one on the left, a willowy male with big, bright eyes, stepped forward to stand directly in front of Damien.

“Arlo Eichen. I’ll be your personal assistant during your stay. If you need anything, please don’t hesitate to let me know.”

“Actually, I could go for a cup of coffee. Where can I get that?”

Clearly excited to be of service so soon after their meeting, Arlo nodded eagerly and began ushering Damien across the lobby. “Right this way.”

Storm watched them go with a crooked grin, then turned back to the other male. “I guess you’re with me?”

“Yes, sir.” With his hands clasped together behind him, he stepped forward, but unlike his companion, stopped short of invading Storm’s personal space. “Kingston Mathers, but you can call me King. Anything you need, I’m happy to help.”

Oh, he was a cutie.

Storm estimated he had a few inches on the guy and at least fifty pounds. Unlike Arlo’s wiry physique, King was all soft lines and gentle slopes. With round cheeks, blond curls, and a smattering of freckles on his otherwise fair complexion, he checked every one of Storm’s boxes.

And those eyes. He had never seen eyes such a vibrant green. They didn’t sparkle,

though. They didn't gleam. Instead, they appeared lost, haunted, and it broke his fucking heart. No one that stunning should look so damn sad.

"Would you also like some coffee?" he asked when Storm said nothing. "Or I could show you to your room, if you prefer."

"My room, I think." Traveling always made him feel gross, and he wanted a quick shower and a change of clothes before he struck out to explore the castle.

"Of course. Right this way."

As he turned, his hair fanned out behind him, wafting the most enticing scent directly at Storm. It was sweet, with just a hint of spice, kind of like dark chocolate and cinnamon, but more complex.

Storm inhaled deeply, drawing the fragrance deep into his lungs.

Instantly, his heart tripped, stuttered, then kicked into a furious rhythm, thundering wildly against his ribs. Warmth, like pure sunshine, blossomed in the pit of his stomach and spread out to encompass every cell in his body. His hands shook. His fangs elongated. A deep growl vibrated his vocal cords.

Then, before he could even question what was happening to him, all hell broke loose.

Reacting on instinct, he lunged forward, grabbing King by the elbow to whirl him around. He hated the fear that shined in those brilliant green eyes. Even more, he hated he had put it there, but he couldn't find the words to reassure his mate. Hell, he couldn't seem to find his voice at all.

"Storm," Damien called his name as he approached. "What are you doing?"

With a firm grip still on King's arm, he faced his friend with a menacing snarl. "Mine!"

Well, at least he'd found his voice, even if it was too deep and contained way too much gravel.

Damien looked back and forth between him and King several times before nodding. "That's great, but you're hurting him. Ease up, dude."

Bullshit. He would never hurt his mate. "Mine!"

"Yeah, I heard you the first time, but seriously, you need to chill." His gaze flickered to King again. "You're scaring the shit out of him."

"No freaking way!" Arlo shouted. "You're mated to Storm Black?"

The resulting gasps and murmurs that rippled through the lobby finally pulled Storm from his stupor and dropped him rudely back into reality. With great effort, he retracted his fangs and shook his head to clear it. Once he had regained a bit of control, he loosened his grip on King's elbow, though he didn't release him completely.

"Are you okay?" The growl was gone from his voice, but he still sounded like he'd been chain smoking for the past fifty years. "Did I hurt you?"

"I'm okay."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, really. You didn't hurt me."

“Did I scare you?”

“You startled me, sure, but I’m not scared.”

Detecting no deception through his body language or chemosignals, Storm nodded. “I’m sorry. I don’t really know what came over me, but that’s no excuse.”

A shy smile curved King’s lips, and he reached up with his free hand to brush a stray curl away from his eyes. “Meeting your soulmate isn't something that happens every day. It looks pretty intense.”

Understatement of the century, and far more leniency than he deserved.

“Are you okay?”

Now, the guy was worried about him? Forget leniency. It was the man himself Storm didn’t deserve.

“I will be.” With great reluctance, he finally released his grasp and dropped his arm to his side. “I think we probably need to talk, though.” He glanced sideways at the eager expressions on Damien and Arlon’s faces. “Alone.”

King chuckled, and though it was quiet and lacked force, it was the most beautiful sound he’d ever heard.

“Come on. I’ll show you to your room. I think that’s about as much privacy as we’re going to get around here.”

“How good is your hearing?” Arlo asked, his eyes locked on Damien.

Damien, the fucking traitor, gave him a Cheshire grin. “Excellent.”

Palming his friend's face, Storm gave him a playful shove. "Go away."

"Oh, fine." Damien huffed dramatically, but his smile never dimmed. "We'll talk later."

King laughed again as he watched the pair disappear across the lobby toward the bank of elevators. "I thought Arlo was bad enough."

"Damien is worse." He really wouldn't put it past the wolf to post up outside of his door to eavesdrop.

"Don't worry. Your rooms are on different floors in separate wings." King leaned closer and lowered his voice. "Plus, I know the head of security."

King was taking the news of their mating better than Storm had any right to expect. Really, though, he was just glad to see that the haunting sadness had disappeared. At least, for the time being.

Whatever had put that look in his mate's eyes wasn't a surface-level problem. That kind of pain ran deep, and he imagined it wouldn't stay hidden for long.

"Hey, King. I hear congratulations are in order."

King looked over his shoulder at an approaching elf with sandy hair and a knowing smile. "I think everyone heard that, but thanks."

"I guess you got your wish."

His brow furrowed, and he tilted his head. "What do you mean?"

The other male blanched but recovered quickly and turned his attention to Storm.

“Oliver McKenzie. It’s nice to finally meet you.”

Storm relaxed as he shook the elf’s hand. “You wrote the screenplay for Checking In .”

“I did.”

“If you have time later, I’d love to pick your brain about my character.”

His face split into a wide grin as he tucked a lock of hair behind his ear. “I was hoping you’d say that. How about dinner tonight?” He glanced at King. “Unless you have other plans?”

“Tonight is fine,” King answered. “You should bring your mate.”

Storm shrugged. Whatever his mate wanted was fine by him. “Sure. That sounds great.”

“Stay here.” He pointed at the floor. “Don’t move. I’ll go make a reservation.”

Storm gave him a mock salute. “Yes, sir.”

“He looks happy,” Oliver mused as they watched King hurry over to the row of registration counters.

“Does he not usually?”

“Oh, he does. He’s the nicest guy you’ll ever meet. A little excitable maybe, but utterly selfless.”

Storm frowned. Granted, they had just met, but excitable was the last word he would

use to describe his mate.

“It’s just...” Oliver trailed off and sucked his bottom lip between his teeth.

“What?” True, it would be better to hear it from King, but he would take whatever help he could get.

Oliver shook his head. “Maybe it’s nothing, but he seems different lately. Kind of...”

“Sad?” he supplied.

“I was going to say quiet, but yeah. Sad.”

“And he hasn’t said anything about why?”

The elf shook his head again. “Not a word. Maybe he’ll talk to you.”

Storm wasn’t arrogant enough to think the guy would open up to him—a virtual stranger—when he refused to reveal his problems to his own friends. Then again, the magical bond between them defied logic, so maybe the idea wasn’t that farfetched. Either way, it wouldn’t stop him from trying.

And if he found out that someone had hurt his sweet mate, may the goddess have mercy on them because he sure as hell wouldn’t.

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Chapter three

King felt like he was doing a decent job of keeping it together on the outside. On the inside, however, he was completely losing his shit.

He had a mate! Not just any mate, either, but Storm fucking Black!

When Skye had assigned him to be Storm's assistant, it had literally been the best thing to ever happen to him. In his mind, nothing could top it, not even if he lived to be a hundred.

Then, only a few hours later, he'd been proven wrong in the best way possible.

He just wished he knew what had caused his luck to change so he could continue doing it. Nothing came to mind, though. As far as he could tell, his life had been as routine as ever until that morning.

Holy hell, Storm was even more gorgeous in person. Tall and muscular, with a dewy olive complexion and dazzling gray eyes, he captivated by doing nothing more than breathing. Even dressed in baggy jeans with a thin stocking cap covering his dark locks, he looked positively edible.

Despite his momentary display of possessiveness, he actually seemed like a nice guy, too. Although King had felt drawn to him from the moment their eyes had met, he'd chalked it up to being star struck.

He couldn't begin to fathom how intense their meeting must have been for Storm.

He hadn't been afraid, though, and despite Damien's concern, Storm hadn't hurt him. Yes, he'd been startled when the shifter had grabbed him, worried he'd done something wrong and screwed up his assignment already. Once he'd understood what was happening, he'd just felt confused.

At that point, he'd firmly believed that fate had made the mistake. It was the only thing that made sense because in no universe, alternate or otherwise, did someone like him end up with someone like Storm Black.

Finished confirming their reservation for later that evening, he took a deep breath, pasted on a bright smile, and went to rejoin his mate. Damn, that sounded weird.

"Okay, all set. Are you ready to see your room?"

Storm swept his arm out in a vague gesture. "After you."

He led the way to the elevators, wracking his brain for something to say. Nothing came to him. Instead, they rode up to the third floor in silence, and not a comfortable one, either. Every time a question would pop into his mind, he would dismiss it just as quickly, worried he would sound lame or ridiculous.

Desperate to fill the quiet, he even considered bringing up the weather. Thankfully, the elevator slowed to a stop with a quiet ding before he could form the words.

"Is this weird?" Storm asked as they exited the cab. "This feels weird. I have no idea what to say."

"Oh, thank god." He chuckled in relief as the tension melted out of his shoulders. "I was thinking the same thing."

Storm laughed along with him and reached over to ruffle his hair affectionately. It

felt...nice.

“So, how long have you worked here?”

Small talk. He could do this. “About a year now.”

“And do you live in town?”

“Yeah, in the new apartment building off the highway.”

Okay, this was easy. He glanced over expectantly, eager for the next question. It didn't come. Instead, Storm was staring at him with his brow furrowed and a slight frown.

The anxiety he'd been feeling all morning bubbled over into full-blown panic. Turning the conversation over in his mind, he couldn't figure out what he'd said wrong, which did nothing to calm his racing pulse. Chewing the corner of his lower lip, he reached up and tugged at his earlobe, a nervous habit he'd developed in childhood.

“Are you originally from Echo Falls?”

The constriction in his chest eased, making it a little easier to draw in his next breath. He didn't release the grip he had on his ear, though.

“I grew up in Colorado Springs.” It occurred to him then that he didn't need to wait for a question to supply more details. “My family still lives there.”

“Oh, do you see them often?”

Well, hell. Maybe he shouldn't have volunteered information, after all. “Um, not

really.”

If Storm noticed anything amiss, he didn't mention it. “Yeah, I get it. I try to make it home as often as I can, but life always seems to get in the way.”

That might be the case for him, but it definitely wasn't King's story. On the other hand, the shifter had just given him an out, and he'd be an idiot not to take it. Not wanting to outright lie, he simply nodded, letting Storm interpret the gesture however he wanted.

He sighed in relief when he realized the conversation had carried them to the end of the long corridor. Carefully removing the brass key from his pocket, he hoped his shaking hand would go unnoticed as he stepped forward to unlock the door.

“Here we are. Room 317.”

Technically, it was a one-bedroom suite with a king-sized bed and a balcony that provided a gorgeous view of the forest behind the castle. The common area boasted a sofa and loveseat upholstered in a deep shade of brown, an enormous flatscreen television, and a small dining table in the back corner by the balcony doors.

He was a little surprised that neither of the principal actors had been offered one of the tower suites. Maybe Skye had reserved those for someone else. Director? Producers? It wasn't his business, and it really didn't matter, but since the towers were their nicest accommodations, he found it curious.

“Take a look around,” he encouraged. “If you don't like it, we have other rooms available.”

“This is fine,” Storm responded without hesitation. “After today, I'll only be here to sleep anyway.”

King winced. “Right. No offense, but your schedule is crazy.”

To that, Storm shrugged. “It’s not like that all the time. Just when I’m filming or promoting.”

Or indulging fans. Shooting ad spots. Meeting with his manager, lawyers, or PR team. Sitting for interviews. Reading scripts, or any of the other gazillion obligations that consumed his life. No wonder he never had time to see his family.

Of course, he didn’t say any of that. Maybe one day they would have the kind of relationship where he felt comfortable voicing his opinions, but right then, it wasn’t his place.

“Your luggage should be in the bedroom.” He pointed to a door to the side of the television. “I’ll leave you to get settled in.” It occurred to him that he was supposed to be available for the duration of filming. “Uh, we should probably exchange numbers.”

“Good idea.”

They swapped cell phones, each inputting their information.

“If you need anything, just call. Otherwise, I’ll be here at six to pick you up for dinner.”

Storm cocked his head to the side. “That’s it?”

“Yes?” He didn’t think he had neglected anything. “Is there something I can do for you?”

“I thought we were going to talk.”

And they had. Sure, it had been a little awkward, but there had definitely been words involved. He really wanted the shifter to like him, though. Logically, he understood Storm would have to get to know him first, but that was also kind of the problem.

More than once, he'd been told he was something of an acquired taste, and most people became annoyed with him after the first ten minutes. He'd been in Storm's company for nearly twenty, and he didn't want to tempt fate.

"I figured you'd want to rest after your trip," he hedged as he continued to inch toward the door.

"Do you have to go back to work?"

He shook his head.

There were always things to be done in the castle, and it wouldn't be hard to find someone who needed help. But technically, his only job at the present was to assist Storm.

Taking his knit cap off, Storm dragged his fingers through his mussed hair. "Then stick around for a while. If it makes things easier, we can go over my schedule."

"You have interviews in the morning, then a fan meeting tomorrow evening," he recited dutifully before he realized the shifter had been teasing him. "Fine, I'll stay."

Storm sighed. "If you really don't want to, I'm not going to make you."

"It's not like that." Giving up on trying to be subtle, he laid all his cards on the proverbial table. "I'm just worried you won't like me."

Storm considered his words for a long time before speaking again. "What makes you

think that?”

He appreciated that his mate didn't automatically try to placate him with cliched reassurances. Since they barely knew each other, he wouldn't have believed them anyway.

“People think I'm weird.” Granted, Arlo was the only one who had ever said it to his face, and he'd done so jokingly, but he recognized the way people looked at him.

“Weird how?”

King shrugged. Where did he even start?

He had a bad habit of rambling when he was nervous—or mad, or excited, or because it was Tuesday. He was annoyingly indecisive, overthinking everything, right down to which pair of identical white socks to wear. He could be childish and temperamental, and there were days when his mood seemed to shift with the wind.

Realizing Storm was still waiting for an answer, he shrugged again. “I think I just get on their nerves.”

“Well, you don't get on my nerves.”

The unspoken “yet” in that statement was deafening, though neither of them acknowledged it. Still, he preferred that to flowery platitudes and meaningless promises.

Speaking of getting on people's nerves, he did have another concern. One that affected not just him, but Storm's entire career.

“What about your job?”

Storm bobbed his head in understanding as he crossed the room and flopped down on the sofa. “Come here.” He patted the cushion next to him for emphasis, waiting until King joined him before continuing. “Now, what exactly are you concerned about? Is it the lack of privacy, or something else?”

“Well, that’s part of it—”

“We don’t have to make some big announcement or anything. How much we tell the public is completely up to us, but I’d rather not lie.”

No, he didn’t want to lie, either. Secrets had a way of coming out, and it would only bite them in the ass in the end. It would probably take a while to get used to being mated to a star and the changes that came with it, but other celebrity couples made it work all the time.

The problem was that many of Storm’s admirers believed he was in a real relationship with Damien. They even went to great lengths and performed exhausting mental gymnastics to prove their theory correct. Somehow, he didn’t think they would appreciate him crashing that particular party.

“How do you think your fans will take the news?”

“Ah, you mean the shippers?” He laughed when King nodded. “Some actors play up the fan service, and to each their own, but Damien and I never have. People are going to think what they want, and I learned early on, you can’t please everyone.”

King nodded again, but he still had doubts.

“It’s also a little different for Otherlings than it is for other celebrities.” Storm took his hand and laced their fingers together. “Many fans will find a fated pairing a lot more exciting than a ghost ship.”

He didn't know why it surprised him that Storm knew the lingo of his own industry, but hearing it come from his lips sounded strange. Perhaps because the shifter just seemed so...normal. Nothing like how he expected a movie star to act or speak.

King hated to break it to the guy, but no matter how much he might want it to be true, his and Damien's association didn't fit the category of a "ghost ship." They were the real deal. Not some random pairing with only a few supporters.

Yet, he had a point.

It would be a lie to say that humans didn't have soulmates. He was proof of that. Compared to Otherlings, however, they had a poor time recognizing them. Maybe that was why many had become so obsessed with the idea of fated mates, equating them to the ultimate love story.

"If you think so." He still wasn't sold, though. "I mean, it's your career."

"But it's your life," Storm countered. "If we decide to go public, things will change. People will stop you on the street. Strangers will take pictures of you. Some might want to take pictures with you."

Talking about the sanctity of fated bonds in terms of practicality felt a little like sacrilege, but this wasn't a normal situation. He appreciated Storm's willingness to protect him, but if they intended to pursue a real, lasting relationship, they wouldn't be able to hide it forever.

He also recognized the unspoken question that lingered between them.

Was it worth it?

Yes, his life would change in many ways. Some could be beautiful and wondrous,

while others might be inconvenient and even outright frightening.

Was he prepared? Was he willing to give up everything safe to walk the path of the unknown with someone he had just met?

Storm wasn't just someone, though. He was a piece of King. A part of him that had been lost, or at the very least, hidden. A fragment inaccessible to him until something bigger and more powerful than both of them had finally rejoined the broken splinters.

Which, of course, all sounded very magical and romantic.

He wouldn't deny that he sensed a certain connection to Storm, a longing both achingly familiar and excitingly novel, but not even fate could fabricate emotions. In the perfect scenario, the tendrils of love would unfurl and grow from their unique bond, but it wasn't guaranteed.

Fate only ignited the embers. It was up to them to stoke the fire and tend the flames.

If they didn't announce their relationship, they ran the risk of it leaking before they were ready. Things like that always did, and the fallout could be catastrophic. If they went public right away, however, there was no turning back.

So, was it worth it?

Staring at their linked hands, he concentrated on the warm, solid weight of the grasp. It felt natural, as if they had done it a thousand times before, and the simple contact filled him with a sense of comfort and belonging.

Next, he looked inward, examining the slow, steady thrum of his own pulse. Despite the worry and excitement of meeting his mate, he was completely at ease with Storm. It might not make sense to someone on the outside, but he trusted the shifter, maybe

more than he'd ever trusted anyone.

Searching deeper, he recognized a spark right in the center of his chest, a glimmer of something that felt suspiciously like hope.

He had always felt like an outsider, both among his family and his peers, like an interloper in his own life without a definite place. With Storm, however, he just fit. For the first time in his life, he belonged.

"I get what you're saying, but I'm ready." He squeezed his mate's hand to emphasize his decision. "We should probably talk to your manager first, but hiding our relationship seems wrong somehow."

"I agree, but are you sure?" Storm didn't sound like he was trying to talk him out of it. More like he wanted to be sure King understood exactly what he was getting himself into. "It's a lot to ask of anyone."

"I know what I'm signing up for." Sure, it would be an adjustment, especially for someone who had spent most of his life being invisible. "I'm not suggesting it will be easy for either of us, but I'm not that great at deception."

Storm chuckled. "There's a selfish part of me that's glad to hear you say that, but I still worry it'll be too much." He placed his free hand against the side of King's neck and stared into his eyes. "I chose this life. You didn't."

King shook his head. Okay, maybe he hadn't specifically opted to be hounded by fans and have his entire world turned upside down. Still, he considered that more of a side-effect than a symptom.

"You're wrong." Placing his hand atop of Storm's, he turned his head to press a gentle kiss against the inside of his wrist. "I chose you." Then he lifted his head to look

directly into his mate's eyes. "I choose you, Storm Black."

Chapter four

“ Obviously, I’m happy for you, but I don’t know why you have to announce it right away.” Priya Salvi paced the living room of the suite, gesturing wildly with her hands as she spoke. “Why does it have to be now?”

Seated on the sofa with his ankle propped up on his opposite knee, Storm took the rhetorical question for what it was and said nothing. Priya had been with him since the beginning of his career, and in that time, he had learned a lot about his manager. Namely, it was best to let her rant without interruption. Nine times out of ten, she found the solution on her own without his input anyway.

“You haven’t even finished filming yet!” Her long, ebony hair flowed down her back to her waist, the ends swishing with her agitated movements. “You know the success of these dramas hinges on the viewers’ belief in the relationship.”

Yes, he knew, but it was also a bit more complicated than that. Still, he said nothing and let her continue her diatribe.

Her accent was heavy today, and several native words and phrases snuck in occasionally, a sure sign of her stress levels. While he didn’t speak Hindi, he could read between the lines to get the gist. Even that wasn’t necessary to understand she wasn’t happy with him, though.

“Can’t you just wait until after filming wraps?”

He could, but that wouldn’t be enough, and they both knew it. A more likely

timeframe would be several months after the last episode had aired. Altogether, it could end up being a year before Priya felt comfortable with him making the announcement, and then, only if he didn't have another project in the works.

Neither practical nor acceptable, in his opinion.

"If we don't announce it, however, fans are likely to find out on their own." She stopped pacing and cursed under her breath. "With help from the media, of course."

Storm dipped his head in agreement. Unless he planned to keep King under lock and key, or only meet him infrequently and in secret, it wouldn't take long for them to be outed. Hell, the tabloids wouldn't even need proof. In his business, rumors had a way of fueling themselves.

"Storm." She made a noncommittal noise in the back of her throat as she flounced over and dropped down onto the cushion beside him. After adjusting the skirt of her sleeveless lilac dress so that it draped over her knees, she pierced him with her intense amber gaze. "What does your mate have to say about this?"

"King understands what he's getting into."

"That's not what I asked."

Fair enough. "We talked, and he agrees that lying or hiding will only make things worse when our relationship eventually comes out."

Priya sighed. "You talked about how his life will change once you tell the world?"

"We did."

"And he's okay with that?"

Storm lowered his head a fraction. “He is.”

“What about you?” Her tone softened, and her posture relaxed. “You know this could potentially limit the roles you’re offered, right?”

“I know.” It was hard to sell a romance when at least one half of the on-screen couple was already deeply committed to someone else. “I’m sure you’ll make something happen.”

He’d already been approached about the lead role in a new paranormal thriller. Based on a bestselling books series, the first season had been green-lit for twenty-two episodes—nearly unheard of for a debut. Word on the vine was that showrunners anticipated high popularity, hopefully leading to multiple seasons.

Naturally, it was too early to judge success, but the part sounded right up his alley. Even better, it was slated to be filmed in New York, reducing how much he would be required to travel.

The best thing about the role, however, was that his character didn’t have a love interest. That could—and probably would—change in future seasons, but romance would never be the driving force behind the plot. In other words, his suitability wasn’t predicated on if he had a mate or not.

He’d spent a lot of time during the night, talking to King and planning his next moves. In that time, he had come to one very important conclusion. If push came to shove, he had no problem walking away from the business.

His fame had given him the opportunity at a life most could only dream of, and for that, he was grateful. He didn’t love it, though. Not like Damien. Not even like Priya. Honestly, he had kind of stumbled into his celebrity status, and he would be fine stumbling back out of it.

Still lounging in his current position with his arm draped over the back of the sofa, he glanced at his manager and spoke without inflection. “I think I’m going to announce it at the fan meeting.”

Priya’s eyes widened, and a vein in the center of her forehead protruded, throbbing madly to herald the coming emotional storm. Springing to her feet, she rounded on him with one slender finger pointed at his face.

“At the fan meeting?”

Storm dipped his head once.

“No, no, no.” She waved her hand with each repetition. “This is a delicate matter, and it needs to be handled—”

“Delicately?”

She narrowed her eyes at him, but otherwise ignored his interruption. “We’ll need to call a press conference and release a public statement. We can probably have something ready by the end of the week.”

Storm shrugged. “Now is better.”

“Are you even listening to me?”

Bit of a hypocritical question in his opinion, but he didn’t bother pointing that out. “Hear me out. Instead of making a whole thing out of it, if we announce my mating to fans in an intimate, casual setting, it will make them feel like they’re part of it. We get them onboard, then let them convince everyone else on social media.”

It was kind of comical to watch Priya’s expression slowly morph, her features

gradually softening and smoothing. After several seconds, she resumed her seat beside him, perching on the edge of the cushion with her legs crossed at the ankles.

“That’s actually kind of brilliant.”

Her surprise wasn’t exactly flattering, but he accepted her backhanded compliment with a short nod.

“The Q&A will be a good opportunity for Damien to offer his support as well,” she added. “I’ll talk to his manager.”

It might sound like she was forcing Damien into the situation, but in reality, she was looking out for him as well. A fact for which he was immeasurably grateful. While he would face the majority of the backlash, his best friend wouldn’t escape unscathed.

There would be questions, speculation, and giving Damien a chance to tell his side of the story was essential. Of course, they wouldn’t be able to please everyone, but that was true of life in general.

Growing up, he’d been taught that certain topics shouldn’t be discussed in public or polite company. It wasn’t until three months into filming his first drama, however, that he’d learned there were innumerable ways to be “problematic.”

In the realm of social media, there were always people ready and willing to berate him for one perceived misdeed or another. There was the group that attacked him for his food choices. Another who railed against his fashion sense. Some hated the sunscreen he used. Others took issue with the way he talked.

It would be all too easy to take those comments to heart and give in to the pressure. It wasn’t logical or practical, however, and frankly, no matter what he did or changed, it would never be enough to make everyone happy.

“Storm?” Taking the hand he had resting on his knee, she cradled it between both of her own. “Are you sure about this?”

“I am.”

“I knew you’d say that.” She sighed, just a small, quiet breath that still managed to speak volumes. “I had to ask, though.”

Sitting up, he moved to the edge of the cushions and angled toward her. “Everything is going to be okay. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“Of course, I’m going to worry about you.” Her pretty, chocolate eyes sparkled, and a smile curved her lips. Then she exhaled sharply and grabbed him by the shoulders to pull him into a fierce embrace. “I really am happy for you.”

Storm closed his eyes and hugged her back. “Thank you, Priya.”

“Okay.” She patted his back, then stood to smooth the wrinkles from her dress. “I need to talk to Sergio,” she added, referring to Damien’s manager. “We should decide on a backup plan in case this all goes to shit.”

He found her pessimism amusing, but he resisted the urge to laugh. “It won’t.”

She side-eyed him with a feminine snort but didn’t comment. “You need to get ready for the fan meet.” Resting her hands on her hips, she finally faced him fully. “You also need to prepare your mate. Don’t you dare let him walk into this blind.”

With a crooked smile, he drew an X over his heart with his index finger.

He and King had spent most of the previous day—and a good portion of the night—discussing various ways to approach the announcement. They’d even gone

over possible questions that might be asked, as well as the best ways to respond. As a fan himself, King brought a unique perspective to the conversation, which proved invaluable to their planning.

In essence, he was probably more prepared than Storm was.

“Good.” Priya dipped her head with a note of finality. “I’ll meet you downstairs in an hour for hair and makeup.”

The door had barely closed behind her when his cell phone buzzed on the coffee table with an incoming message. Guessing it was his mate looking for an update, Storm smiled as he reached for the device and pulled up his texts.

KING: How did it go?

STORM: She just left.

KING: I know.

Storm chuckled. While he would prefer for King to share his bed during the night, he supposed having him in the room next door to his suite was the next best thing. With that in mind, however, he couldn’t help but picture his mate flattened against the adjoining wall with his ear pressed painfully against the plaster. Or anxiously watching through the peephole for Priya’s departure.

STORM: Then why didn’t you come over?

KING: I wasn’t sure if it was a good idea.

STORM: Why wouldn’t it be?

Bouncing dots appeared on his screen, indicating King was typing, but after a few seconds, they disappeared. Storm waited, but instead of a new text, a response came in the form of a knock at his door.

Still grinning, he bounded over the back of the sofa to answer the summons.

“So?” King asked the moment the door swung open. “What did she say?”

“You worry too much.” Grabbing him by the elbow, Storm urged him across the threshold and into his arms. “Everything is going to be fine.”

King didn’t resist the embrace, but he sagged forward, and his shoulders rounded in a physical manifestation of his mood. “That’s not what I asked.”

“Priya is happy for us. She’s on board with the announcement, and she’ll talk to Damien and his manager to mitigate any backlash for him.”

King leaned more heavily against his chest, but it felt different now. More relaxed.

“Good,” he mumbled as he nuzzled against the side of Storm’s neck. “That’s good.”

Every cell in Storm’s body lit up, keenly aware of his mate’s closeness. His pulse sped. His breaths came faster and shallower. Saliva flooded his mouth, and the gums around his canines ached. A current of electricity raced across his skin, starting at the place where King’s lips rested against his neck and spreading to his extremities.

Blood that should have been fueling vital functions like higher reasoning and circulation pooled between his thighs, making his balls tighten and his cock swell. Yet, despite the interruption in executive reasoning, instincts told him that King wasn’t ready for the wicked things he wanted to do to him.

A kiss, however, just a small taste, might be acceptable.

Tucking a knuckle under his mate's chin, he urged his head up. King's content smile and slightly dazed eyes were almost his undoing, but he held a tight leash on his self-control as he leaned closer. He took his time, moving inch by inch while constantly monitoring King's reaction.

When he detected no hesitancy or apprehension, he closed the final distance and slanted their mouths together in a slow, tender kiss. He kept the touch light, barely a brush of lips, encouraged when he encountered no resistance. So, he pressed a little harder, fusing their mouths together with more firmness, and he was rewarded with a quiet, enticing gasp.

Taking advantage, he slid his tongue along the parted seam of King's lips, licking and teasing without entering. His mate's answering moan knotted the muscles in his back and made his cock throb, but he continued his slow, gentle seduction, coaxing rather than demanding a response.

Eventually, his patience was rewarded when King leaned into him and darted his tongue out to meet Storm's. It wasn't a battle for control, but a tentative dance and a silent request for something more.

All too willing to oblige, Storm slid his hand along his mate's jaw and around to palm the back of his head. He kept his hold light, more supportive than restrictive, and plunged his tongue between those plump lips. When King didn't retreat, he pushed even deeper, licking and exploring the depths of his mouth.

The first taste was unlike anything he could have predicted. Bright and alluring, like perfectly sweetened lemonade on a hot summer day, the unique flavor seduced and enticed. When a quick inhale filled his head with King's scent, the combination made his head spin, one only enhancing the other.

Fuck, everything about him was intoxicating and addictive. As much as he wanted to tumble King onto the sofa and lick every inch of him, he didn't. Timing was everything, and apart from King not being ready to take that step, Storm didn't want their first time to be rushed and fumbled. King deserved better than that.

Still, it was with great reluctance that he ended the kiss and smoothed his mate's honey-colored curls back from his brow. With his eyes wide and dazed and his cheeks flushed, he looked absolutely edible.

Choking back a groan, he pasted on a smile and whispered a chaste kiss to his lips. "Are you ready?"

"For what?" King squeaked.

Storm chuckled. "The fan meet."

"Oh, right. I knew that." King took a deep breath and nodded. "Yes, I'm ready. Are you still sure you want to do this, though?"

"Absolutely." Now, more so than ever. "You?"

King took a moment to think about it, then graced him with one of his signature smiles. "Absolutely."

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:25 am

Chapter five

Standing off to the side of the raised dais, King stared out at the crowd assembled in the grand ballroom. Nearly two hundred lucky fans had paid to meet their favorite celebrities in person, and they hadn't come empty-handed, either. From blinking signs to printed photographs, they waved their treasures in the air as they waited for Storm and Damien to take the stage.

They appeared immeasurably excited, but also surprisingly young. One girl in the front row really couldn't have been more than fourteen. Hell, she'd probably come straight from school to be there.

Knowing they would all sacrifice just about anything to take his place felt incredibly surreal.

His and Storm's first kiss had been relatively tame, yet he still felt the effects of it three hours later. His lips tingled from the memory, and his pulse still hadn't returned to a normal rhythm. Of course, that could have been partly from nerves, but he experienced a spike in his heart rate every time he exhaled and caught a hint of Storm's unique taste that lingered on his tongue.

While not something he would typically find appealing, the mixture of cinnamon gum and dark coffee had now become his favorite combination.

"Are you okay?"

Startled out of his thoughts, he blinked at Arlo a couple of times, trying to make sense

of the question. “I think so.”

“You look pale.”

Did he? Odd. He felt like he was on fire. “I’m really okay.”

“Nervous?”

“Obviously.” He saw no point in lying about it.

“Worried?”

That one was a little harder to answer. He trusted Storm, and he believed they were doing the right thing. Neither of them wanted to hide their relationship, and after that kiss, feigning disinterest would be damn near impossible.

At the same time, he did have concerns. Not so much for himself. Despite Storm’s warnings, he honestly didn’t think his life would change too drastically. His mate, however, had his entire career on the line. Possibly even his life.

That might sound dramatic, but Storm wouldn’t be the first celebrity to fall victim to some obsessed fan. Granted, as far as he knew, the shifter didn’t have any deranged stalkers, but crazier things had happened.

“A little,” he finally admitted.

Distracted by the conversation, he didn’t hear Skye announce the guests of honor, but he knew the moment they took the stage, thanks to the deafening cheers. It wasn’t just the noise, though. The entire ballroom erupted into a frenzy. Fans flew out of their seats with screams and squeals. Some waved their signs and banners. Others jumped up and down as they flailed their limbs like a one-person mosh pit.

He even spotted a few violently weeping after being so overcome with emotions. Flattering, sure, but also mildly frightening. He didn't think he'd ever been that excited or passionate about anything, let alone another person.

"Wow," Arlo said. "I mean, I get being excited, but this is—"

"Insane." King supplied with a dip of his head.

"I don't know how they do this all the time."

"I guess they're used to it."

King shrugged, but honestly, he had to agree with his friend. He didn't think he would ever be able to get used to this kind of reaction every time he entered a room.

"You look good, by the way."

Priya had wanted to make sure that he looked the part of a celebrity's mate when he took the stage with Storm. As such, she had dressed him in a pair of artfully ripped jeans with a cream-colored blazer over a black V-neck. Then he'd been buffed and polished to a shine by the makeup team, and his unruly curls had been tamed into something almost manageable.

Storm had found the entire ordeal insulting, insisting that he looked perfect just the way he was. He appreciated the sentiment, but he hadn't shared his mate's offense. Frankly, he had been happy to accept any help he could get.

"I thought I looked pale."

Arlo snorted. "Shut up, asshole. You know what I mean."

“I do, and thank you.”

It took another few minutes for the room to quiet enough for Damien to speak. The instant he opened his mouth, however, the uproarious din started all over again.

“Thank you!” Damien called. He wore a big, ingratiating smile as he waved a hand in the air in an attempt to bring some kind of order to the chaos. “Thank you all so much for coming out tonight!”

Eventually, apart from a steady thrum of murmured conversation, the crowd settled.

“We’re excited to be here with you,” Damien continued. “I know you guys have a lot of questions, and we’ll do our best to answer them.”

“But first,” Storm interjected, stepping forward until he stood at the edge of the stage. “We have an announcement to make.” He ducked his head and chuckled in a self-deprecating kind of way. “Well, I guess I should say I have an announcement.”

“Are you leaving the show?” one brave fan called out.

Storm laughed again. “No, no, nothing like that.”

The collective relief that swept through the room was palpable. As long as he wasn’t abandoning them, they seemed primed and willing to hear anything else he had to say.

So far, so good.

“Are you and Damien together?” A young man with a bright pink mohawk and horn-rimmed glasses stood from his seat. “Is that the announcement?”

King held his breath.

“I’m afraid not.” The smile never slipped from Storm’s face, and if he was nervous, he didn’t show it. “You’re close, though.”

The whispers intensified as the fans all turned to each other, trying to guess what the cryptic statement meant. Fortunately, they didn’t have to wait long to find out. King, on the other hand, could have used a few more minutes to prepare for what was to come.

“Storm and I have always been honest with you. We’re friends, best friends, but nothing more.” Taking a step back, Damien looked to the edge of the stage, right at King, and motioned for him to join them. “That fact has never been more important than it is now because...”

He trailed off, leaving everyone on the edge of their seats with bated breath. Even King found it hard to breathe as he made his way to the center of the dais—after a gentle push from Arlo—to take his place beside Storm.

“Because,” Storm said, picking up where his co-star had left off. Clearly, they had done this many times in the past. “I am officially off the market.” Sliding his hand down King’s arm, he linked their fingers together and pulled him closer. “Everyone, I would like to officially introduce my mate, Kingston Mathers.”

There was a heartbeat of silence, a quiet so profound King could feel it in the pit of his stomach. It couldn’t have lasted more than a second, two at the most, but to him, it felt like an eternity.

Then, just as panic started to set in, the room erupted into the loudest, most boisterous cheers he’d ever heard. Voices reverberated off the high ceiling, and the windows at the back of the room vibrated with the volume of their acceptance.

They also wasted no time hurling about a billion questions at the stage, most of them alarmingly directed at King.

“What kind of Otherling are you?” one girl with reddish orange hair asked from one of the middle rows.

So startled by this sudden development, King nearly dropped the microphone when Storm passed it to him. In none of their preparation had he considered that he might have to interact or answer questions of his own. He had assumed Storm would take care of that while he stood there and tried not to hyperventilate.

“Uh, I’m not an Otherling.” His voice cracked twice, but he pulled his shoulders back and cleared his throat. Even if his insides felt like they’d been put through a paint mixer, he was determined not to embarrass his mate. “I’m human.”

For some reason, this seemed to ignite another bout of excitement from the crowd. He didn’t really understand it, but he didn’t have time to think about it before more questions came flying at him.

“Do you work together?”

“Actually, I work here at the hotel.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-three.”

And on and on it went. Although he hadn’t anticipated that he’d need to participate, he had expected questions about his and Storm’s relationship. Yet, no one seemed to care about those types of mundane details. Instead, the fans wanted to know everything they could about him specifically.

At first, it didn't make sense. Apart from his connection to Storm, he was about the least interesting person on the planet. As the interrogation continued, however, he slowly began to realize that was precisely why they cared so much.

He was a nobody. Just a human from a humble background with no money or influence to speak of. He was a regular guy who happened to be destined to fall in love with a superstar. It was the ultimate fairytale, and his story gave them hope that they might one day find their own.

"How did you know you were mates?" A male, a boy with a mop of blond hair who looked no older than sixteen, asked.

"To be honest, I didn't have any idea at first." Taking his cue from Storm, he chuckled lightly and lowered his gaze. "Downside of being human, I guess."

"But you are sure you two are really mates?" It was the same guy with the pink mohawk, and he sounded more accusatory than curious.

"I'm sure," Storm interjected. "Believe me, it's not something an Otherling would get wrong."

"King, are you happy?" The female who spoke looked a bit older, maybe closer to his age, and she graced him with the warmest, sweetest smile. "I mean, is this something you wanted?"

He took a moment to really consider her question, but not so long that anyone would think he wasn't telling the truth. "Being mated to Storm isn't something I even knew I could want. I still can't believe it's real, you know? But yes, I am extremely happy, and I'll let you in on a little secret about Storm Black."

The crowd quieted and subconsciously leaned closer, clearly eager to hear the insider

information about the shifter.

“He is one hundred percent as incredible as you think he is.”

“Oh, my gosh, he’s so cute!” one girl in the front row shouted as the rest of the room exploded into squeals and giggles.

King cleared his throat and thrust the microphone back to Storm as his face burned about twenty different shades of pink. When someone asked Damien what he thought about the news, he took that as his cue to make a quiet exit.

Only, Storm apparently had other ideas. Instead of letting him slip away unnoticed, he squeezed King’s hand and dragged him back for a quick, chaste kiss. Which, of course, initiated more giggles, screams, and applause from the fans.

“My mate, everyone!” Storm said into the microphone. “Isn’t he amazing?”

King finally made his way to the back of the stage amidst a chorus of agreements and practically collapsed into Arlo’s arms. “I’m going to kill him.”

“You loved it, and you know it.” Still, Arlo stroked his head comfortingly. “The fans did, too. You did great.”

“Do you really think so?” King lifted his head to meet those mesmerizing amber eyes. “You’re not just saying that?”

“I really mean it. Have I ever lied to you?”

True. Even when he might not want to hear it, Arlo had always been honest with him. If he had made a total ass out of himself out there, he trusted his best friend to tell him so.

“Okay. Good.” He straightened and took a couple of deep breaths. “I just need a minute. Can you keep an eye on things here?”

“Sounds like they’ve finally course-corrected to talk about the show, so take your time.”

Sure enough, once he tuned back into the conversation, he could hear Damien discussing his character in the drama. “Still, just text me if anything happens.”

Arlo rolled his eyes and nudged him in the middle of the back. “Nothing is going to happen. Go. Take a breath. Get something to drink. I’ll hold down the fort.”

“Thanks. Do you want anything from the café?”

“A large, iced cherry bomb.”

King arched an eyebrow. “What the hell is that?”

“Something new.” Arlo shrugged. “A chocolate cherry mocha.”

It didn’t sound all that palatable to him, but he smiled and nodded before exiting through one of the service doors behind the stage. The minute he entered the empty hallway, he paused, closed his eyes, and took a deep, cleansing breath.

Some people, like his mate, were meant for the spotlight. If the last fifteen minutes had taught him anything, it was that he was not one of those people.

Following the corridor to the lobby, he made a detour into the nearest public restroom. He didn’t need to use the facilities, so he went directly to the row of sinks and turned on the faucet. A shiver of relief rippled through him as the cool water splashed against his overheated cheeks, and with each repetition, his nervous system

slowly calmed to a resting state.

Once he felt somewhat normal again, he patted his face dry with a couple of paper towels, checked his reflection in the mirror, then turned to exit the bathroom. He only made it two steps before his cell phone starting buzzing.

Thinking it was Arlo needing him to return, he fumbled the device from the inside pocket of his jacket. It wasn't Arlo, though.

RHIA: You're mated to Storm Black? No fucking way!

ROYAL: Dude, is this a joke?

REINA: Did you slip him a love potion?

He didn't know how his siblings had found out about his mating, but their responses didn't surprise him. If there was one thing he could count on from his family, it was that they would always be there to shit on any semblance of happiness he found.

The youngest of the four, he'd always been the black sheep of the family. The outsider. The underachiever. It didn't matter to them, or his parents, that he enjoyed working at Blackhaven Manor, or that he was quite content with his life. Hell, even when he did try to please him, he could never live up to their expectations.

From an early age, he'd been made acutely aware that he lacked something. Or...everything. He'd never been smart enough. Ambitious enough. He was too awkward, too reserved. Everything from his diet and appearance to his circle of friends had been scrutinized and found unacceptable.

To be fair, his dad had never treated him that way. He never said hurtful things. Mostly because he never talked to him at all. He did talk at him sometimes, telling

him to sit, move, or pass the salt. Kind of like a tolerated family pet.

In a lot of ways, it was better.

Knowing his siblings wouldn't let it drop until they received an answer, he added them all to a group chat so he would only have to say it once.

KING: It's true, and no, I didn't dose him with a love potion.

The responses came almost immediately.

ROYAL: I feel so sorry for him.

RHIA: I can't believe he actually announced it. I wouldn't have told anyone.

REINA: When do we get to meet him?

ROYAL: Does mom know?

King had barely finished reading the last message when his phone began to vibrate incessantly with an incoming call. A quick glance at the name on the screen answered his brother's question.

"Hello, Mother."

"Oh, my goodness, I'm so happy. I can't believe it!"

He couldn't believe it, either. Had his mother called him by accident? The last time she had been pleased with him was when he'd won his fourth-grade spelling bee.

"Of course, I would have preferred it to be a woman, but that's neither here nor

there.”

“Uh, right.”

“Oh, we have someone famous in the family! You have to bring him to dinner this Friday.”

“Oh, I, uh...” Fuck. He didn’t know how to deny her, but he also didn’t want to subject Storm to his psychotic family. “I’ll have to check his schedule. He’s very busy right now with filming.”

“He has to eat. I’m sure he can spare a few hours.”

King squeezed his eyes closed and choked back a groan. “I’ll ask him.”

“Good.” Her tone implied the matter had been settled. “Oh, and dear, you really should be more careful with your diet. You’re looking a little pudgy, and you don’t want to embarrass your new...”

“Mate,” he said when she struggled for the right word.

She made a humming sound that might have been acceptance. Which was probably the best response he could have hoped for.

“Yes, well, my point is that you’ll be in front of a lot of cameras now, so you really should care more about your appearance.”

“I understand, Mother.”

It was a common complaint, and her constant criticism was always a nagging voice in the back of his head. Maybe because he wanted her to be proud of him, or maybe

because a little part of him agreed with her, but he always tried to do what she wanted. Unfortunately, it never lasted, and the whole process would start over again.

“Wonderful. I’ll let you get back to your...job.”

King gritted his teeth to hold in the uncharitable thoughts that danced on his tongue. “I’ll call you later.”

“No need, dear. I’ll see you this Friday.”

He sighed. “Yes, Mother. I love you.”

“Friday,” she repeated.

Then the line went dead.

His phone continued to buzz with messages from his siblings, but he was in no mood to deal with them. So, he muted the conversation and headed to the café off the lobby entrance.

“Hey, King!” Emrys—a male pixie with electric blue hair and dazzling green eyes—greeted him with enthusiasm. “How’s it going in there?”

“Honestly? It’s kind of crazy.”

The barista laughed. “You looked great on stage, though. Completely natural.”

King frowned. “You saw that?”

“It’s all over social media.” As he spoke, he retrieved his phone from his apron and poked around at the screen. “See.”

He flipped the device around to show King a video of himself that had clearly been filmed from one of the fans in the audience. A part of him wanted to agree that he did look good, in large part thanks to Priya. Another part that sounded suspiciously like his mother, however, could only see the flaws.

He lowered his eyes and grinned self-consciously. "I guess news travels fast."

Emrys' smile dimmed, and his eyebrows drew together as he slowly returned his phone to the pocket of his apron. "Everyone seems pretty accepting. Most of the comments are good."

Most. Meaning not everyone was happy about his and Storm's relationship. Fuck, he felt like he was going to vomit.

"Uh, can I get an iced cherry whatever?"

"A cherry bomb?"

He dipped his head.

Emrys continued to watch him from the corner of his eye as he rang up the order.

"Also, an iced matcha latte with oat milk." He didn't know if Storm could have the drink on stage, but it would probably keep until the fan meeting ended.

The pixie nodded. "Is that it?"

"One second." Since he had left Arlo back in the ballroom, he should probably return with something for Damien as well. He dug his phone out of his pocket, ignored the messages from his siblings, and shot off a quick text to Arlo. "Make that two matcha lattes."

“Got it,” Emrys confirmed. “Anything else?”

When he had left the ballroom, he’d had every intention of ordering himself an ice cream latte. Now, he didn’t know if that was such a great idea.

Although delicious, the latte contained a lot of calories and sugar. As such, he didn’t order it often. On the other hand, he’d skipped lunch, and it would be another couple of hours before he could sit down for dinner. A little pick-me-up probably wouldn’t hurt.

You’re looking a little pudgy.

His mother words rang in his ears as clearly as if she stood right beside him.

He probably should have developed some level of immunity to the criticism by this point, but he had never learned how to drown out the steady drone of disapproval. Even reminding himself that Storm liked the way he looked didn’t change anything. Telling himself he was a grown man capable of making his own decisions did little to help, either.

I feel sorry for him.

I can’t believe he actually announced it.

You really should care more about your appearance.

“King?”

Blinking, he looked up to see Emrys watching with obvious concern.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” He pulled his shoulders back and pasted on a smile he didn’t really feel. “I’m good. I was just thinking.”

“So...anything else?”

His insides twisted, and blood roared in his ears, but he never let his smile slip. “Just an unsweetened green tea.”

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:25 am

Chapter six

As the fan meet wound to a close, Storm felt on top of the world.

After the initial interest in his new mate, the conversation had gradually and organically shifted to the upcoming series. Once that topic had been exhausted, he and Damien had fielded a series of questions about their likes, dislikes, future plans, and all things Otherling.

All in all, it had gone better than he'd expected. Still, he knew this gathering of fans was only a small sampling. He hadn't had a chance to check his social media accounts, but he was well aware that not everyone would be happy about the announcement.

He just hoped King hadn't seen any of the nasty comments.

Glancing over his shoulder to the edge of the dais, his brow furrowed, and his lips pressed together in a straight line. King stood next to Arlo, but he wore a blank expression with glossy eyes that didn't seem to be focused on anything in particular. He didn't appear worried or upset exactly. He just looked...blank, like he had completely checked out from what was going on around him.

"King!"

His head snapped up at Storm's summons, his expression cleared, and a sweet smile stretched his lips. Twisting around, he grabbed something off the table behind him before hurrying up the steps and across the stage.

“Matcha latte with oat milk,” he said as he presented the drink with both hands. “If you prefer coffee, I can go get it, but I didn’t think you’d want that much caffeine this late.”

“This is perfect.” Taking the drink in one hand, he hooked his index finger into the breast pocket of his mate’s jacket and pulled him down for a quick kiss. “Thank you.”

The row of girls waiting to have their picture taken with him squealed and giggled as King blushed an adorable shade of red. Part of Storm felt bad for embarrassing him. That honestly hadn’t been his intention. In fact, he hadn’t really thought about it at all.

Still, there was another part of him that thought his mate looked stunning with his soft smile and pink cheeks.

“Um, can we get a picture with both of you?” One of the young ladies from the group stepped forward and waved her phone. “Please?”

Storm rose from his seat at the small folding table and reached out for King’s hand. “It’s up to you.”

King considered him for a moment, then took his hand and moved to stand beside him. “Sure. I don’t mind.”

This created another bout of giggles as the four girls rushed to huddle close for their photo.

A few members of the hotel staff had been co-opted to help out with the event. Mostly cleaning, refilling water pitchers, and the like. Some, however, had been assigned to the stage to maintain some kind of order and keep things moving smoothly.

The poor female positioned in front of his table suddenly found her hands full of four different cell phones with strict instructions of how to take photos with each. To her credit, she never showed an ounce of annoyance or displeasure. In fact, she looked eager to be of service.

Still, Storm refused to let his fans mistreat anyone in front of him, even unintentionally.

“Thank you,” he told the female when she had finished with the last picture. “I really appreciate all your help.”

“Yes,” King added. “Thank you, Nita. You’re doing a great job.”

Her dark ponytail bobbed as she clasped her hands together in front of her and rocked up on her toes. “Oh, I’m happy to do it. If you need anything else, just let me know.”

“These are amazing,” one of the girls said as she surveyed the photos. “Thank you so much!”

“You’re very welcome!”

Satisfied with the interaction, and that credit had been given where due, Storm signed the headshots they had brought of him, and smiled as they exited the stage. In his heart, he truly believed that most people were inherently good. Sometimes, they just needed a little reminder.

While he waited for the next person to approach, he leaned sideways and spoke out of the corner of his mouth. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Instead of an immediate dismissal, King sighed and shook his head. “I’ll tell you about it later. Let’s just get through this.”

Although worried about what had happened to upset him, he respected that King didn't want to talk about it in such a public setting. "Is there anything I can do in the meantime?"

King reached over and grasped his hand firmly but briefly before pulling away again. "Thank you, but I'll be okay. Just some family drama."

That could mean a lot of things, but judging by his tone and demeanor, Storm didn't think the issue constituted an emergency. As such, he let the matter drop, adopted a camera-worthy smile, and turn to greet the next person in line.

His smile slowly morphed from practiced to genuine when he recognized the male approaching his table. They weren't friends or even friendly, but Owen had made several appearances at different fan meets over the years.

They had only spoken twice, but the interactions kind of stuck with him. The guy's bright pink mohawk and thick black frames definitely left an impression.

He stepped forward with his hand outstretched. "Hey, Owen. Thanks so much for being here."

Obviously pleased at being remembered, Owen's eyes widened behind his glasses, and his lips curved as he took Storm's hand in a firm grip. At the same time, there was a reservedness, a stiffness that made Storm uneasy.

"Congratulations on your mating."

Everyone he'd spoken with had said the same thing, but there was something disingenuous about this interaction. Maybe it was the flatness of Owen's tone. Maybe it was the way his gaze cut to King and narrowed. Maybe it was the subtle surge of energy Storm had felt when they'd touched that triggered something inside of him.

Whatever the reason, his posture shifted from relaxed to guarded, and he sidestepped to place himself between Owen and King. Thankfully, the rational part of him not ruled by instinct butted in, reminding him that disapproval didn't represent an actual threat.

He had known this could happen. He'd understood that not everyone would be pleased to learn that he was in a relationship now. On the other hand, it could have been a lot worse. At least Owen wasn't being outright hostile, despite his disappointment.

"It's good to see you again." Benign as far as lies went. "Do you live near here?"

On the surface, it probably seemed like a regular question, typical small talk. Consciously, he might have even meant it that way. Subconsciously, however, he couldn't shake the innate need to protect his mate, and he wanted to know if this stranger posed an ongoing danger.

"Oh, no." Owen laughed. "I'm from Tucson. I'm just here for the week."

"That's quite the trip. I appreciate you coming out to see us."

"I wouldn't have missed it. I'm so excited about the new drama." As he spoke, he pulled out his phone and held it up. "Do you mind if I get a picture?"

"Sure thing." Seeing that Nita was busy managing the rest of the crowd, Storm looked to King. "Do you mind?"

Without hesitation, his mate hurried forward to take the cellphone. Once they were all in position, he counted down from three, then repeated the process twice more.

"Here you go," he told Owen with a grin. "Check them out and let me know if they

look okay.”

Owen flipped through the pictures with an unreadable expression. Eventually, he looked up with a small but authentic smile. “They’re perfect. Thank you.” Then he glanced between Storm and King. “Congratulations on your mating.”

And this time, he sounded like he meant it.

It gave Storm hope that the tides would turn, and those opposed would also come to some level of acceptance in the future. He wished he could invite them all to meet King in person, to encourage them to have a single conversation with him. Sure, he was biased, but he doubted anyone could dislike his mate after spending five minutes in his presence.

King radiated love and kindness, and he had such a generous soul. All he wanted was for those around him to be happy, giving everyone and everything priority over his own needs. In fact, he was so selfless, Storm worried he would give until the well ran dry, and he had nothing left for himself.

And that barely scratched the surface—just information he’d gathered from casual observations over the last thirty-six hours.

“Thanks for your time.” Owen chuckled as he backed away toward the stage stairs. “I’ll see you at the next meet.”

A frown tugged at King’s lips, and his brow wrinkled. “Does he mean the one on Saturday?”

Storm shrugged. “Probably.”

“They sell tickets for it, right?”

“Right.”

“A limited number?”

Again, he shrugged and waved a hand toward the mostly empty rows of chairs. “About two hundred or so. Why?”

“Huh?” King shook his head. “Oh, nothing.”

Yeah...no. “Tell me.”

“Really, it’s nothing. I was just thinking that he must be a dedicated fan.”

Only, it sounded like he meant something else. “I suppose. He’s been to a few events.”

“It’s impressive that he managed to get tickets to both fan meets this week.”

“He probably had a whole group of friends helping him.” As crazy as it sounded, he’d heard plenty of stories about the lengths people went to for the chance to attend these gatherings.

“Hmm.” King sniffed. “He doesn’t seem that interested in Damien.” He glanced toward the other end of the ballroom, where Owen stood with a small group by the catering table. “He didn’t even get in line to meet him.”

“Maybe he’s planning to next time.” The guy had stood in line for over an hour just to take a picture with Storm. If he had two tickets, splitting his wait time made sense.

“Maybe.”

King sniffed again, and he held a tight grip on his left wrist near his waist. His shoulders tensed, drawing up near his ears, and his jaw jutted at an obstinate angle. He wouldn't look at Storm, but his nostrils flared, and his heart was pounding loud enough to be heard over the other noise in the room.

“Wait...” Fighting back a grin, he shuffled closer. “Are you jealous?”

“No.” His mate practically spat the word.

Losing the battle, his face split into a wide grin. “Are you sure about that?”

“Of course, I'm sure.” His head jerked toward Storm, then back to face forward. “Don't be ridiculous.”

This was good. Not that he ever wanted King to have a reason to doubt him, but he couldn't deny he liked knowing the guy felt possessive over him. Plus, his sweet mate was kind of adorable while battling the green-eyed monster. He didn't have it in him to be a real hellcat. Instead, he looked more like an indignant kitten.

Yes, he'd shown his claws—sort of—but they weren't big enough to do any real damage.

As fun as it would be to tease him, Storm decided to take his mother's advice. She loved to tell him that he'd catch more flies with honey than he would with vinegar. In his experience, she'd been right.

“We're almost finished here.” Only two more groups of girls waited at the edge of the stage, but Nita was expertly stalling them to give him a small break. “Are you hungry?”

In answer, King continued to stare straight ahead and shrugged.

“Do you have any plans for dinner?”

He shrugged again.

Changing tactics, Storm asked a question he knew the guy couldn't ignore. “Do I have any obligations after this?”

As he'd expected, King sighed but finally looked at him. “I made a reservation for you at Matchstick. I wasn't sure if Priya, Damien, or—” His eyes cut to Owen again. “—anyone else would be joining you. I reserved a table for four, just in case.”

Then he went right back to ignoring him.

Too. Fucking. Cute.

“Damien is meeting with Oliver after this, and Priya is having dinner with her husband.”

King nodded sharply.

Tucking his fingers into the pocket of King's jacket, he jerked him sideways, causing him to stumble into him.

“What the hell?” he demanded in a hissing whisper.

Storm wrapped an arm around his waist, preventing his escape, and leaned closer to nuzzle his temple. At the same time, he was careful not to cause his mate any further embarrassment. To onlookers, it would look like he was simply telling him something private.

“How about we cancel the reservation and order room service?”

King's breath caught on a quiet gasp, and a visible shiver rippled through him. "If that's what you want."

"I want to spend time with you," he clarified. They still needed to talk about this family drama situation, but he didn't mention that. "What do you say?"

"O-Okay."

"Is that a yes?" He knew the answer, but he would never tire of hearing it.

"Yes." King sighed again, though this time it sounded more exasperated than annoyed.

In a surprising move, he turned his head and smacked a quick kiss to Storm's cheek. Apparently, he'd surprised himself as well because his eyes rounded when he realized what he'd done, and his mouth fell open in a little O.

"Go on," Storm told him with a chuckle. "You can hide backstage while I finish up here."

He shook his head quickly. "No. I can stay."

"Now, that dog don't hunt."

"Really, it's not—what?"

It took him a minute to work out why King looked so confused, and when he did, he had to laugh at himself before translating. "Not a good idea."

"Ah." King arched an eyebrow, and one side of his mouth pulled up into a sexy smirk. "Careful, Tex. Your roots are showing."

The slight purr in his voice wasn't helping the situation going on in Storm's jeans.
"You like that, huh?"

King's tongue darted out to wet his bottom lip, and Storm had to fight back a groan as he tracked the motion.

"I don't hate it."

Fuck, the guy was going to kill him. He was about three seconds away to saying the hell with the rest of the meet and dragging his mate up to his suite.

"Go." He coughed to clear the gravel from his voice and gave him a push between his shoulders. "I'll find you when I'm finished."

If he survived that long.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:25 am

Chapter seven

“ Y ou look better,” Arlo commented when King ducked behind the curtain.

“Thanks...I think.”

“Are you going to tell me what happened earlier?”

“Nothing happened.”

Nothing he cared to talk about anyway. Arlo might be his closest friend, but even he didn't know about King's dysfunctional family. No one did, and he planned to keep it that way.

For at least the next hour.

Even if Storm hadn't just risked his entire career for him, the shifter was still his mate. He supposed the argument could be made that being bonded by fate was actually a damn good reason to keep him in the dark. It would be kinder, for sure, but it wasn't very practical. Besides, he didn't want to build their future on a foundation of lies and secrets.

Storm deserved better than that, and frankly, so did he.

Maybe.

Probably.

“My family wants to meet Storm,” he said, realizing he had to give Arlo something.

“That’s great!”

He didn’t know what expression he wore, but Arlo’s smile slowly faded, his excitement deflated, and he started shaking his head.

“Or not.”

“They’re just a little judgmental.”

Arlo snorted. “He’s rich, famous, and not to mention, gorgeous. What fault could they possibly find?”

“How do I count the ways?” he mumbled under his breath.

First, Storm was a shifter. As far as his parents were concerned, that meant an automatic strike against him. Yeah, he had fame and fortune going for him, but being an actor wasn’t the same as being a surgeon. Or an attorney. Or anything else that required a billion years of university and just as much money in student debt.

Despite his success in the film industry, Storm still planned to take over his parents’ farm one day. He’d even obtained degrees in agriculture and business management in preparation. Any reasonable person would consider it an admirable goal, but King knew his family wouldn’t see it that way.

The judgment wouldn’t end there, either. Storm wore baseball caps, and he ate fries with his fingers. Unforgivable offenses in his mother’s eyes.

His family would also dissect the way Storm walked and talked. How he sat. His posture. If he was too friendly or not friendly enough. Too forthcoming or too

guarded. The car he drove. The type of cell phone he used. If he slept on his back or his side. The heavens forbid he slept on his stomach.

The list of possible sins was endless and ever changing. Meaning, he had zero chance of preparing his mate for the interaction.

“Don’t stress about it,” Arlo encouraged. “I’m sure they’ll love him.”

“You’re probably right.” He didn’t actually agree, but he did appreciate the show of support. “Thanks.”

“Hey, I need to check on something real quick.” Arlo’s gaze darted to the service door at the back of the room. “Can you keep an eye on things here?”

“Of course.”

The abruptness seemed kind of weird, but he didn’t ask questions. Not only because it was none of his business, but also because he got the sense that it didn’t relate to work. Arlo looked tense, and King was pretty sure he’d seen someone disappear through the service door only a few seconds previously.

“Thanks.” Arlo patted him on the shoulder as he passed, but he didn’t look at him. “I’ll be right back.”

Right back turned out to be forty-five minutes later, right as Storm and Damien were wrapping up the event. Again, it was suspicious, but Arlo didn’t comment on what had kept him for so long. In fact, he didn’t bring it up at all, almost like his disappearance had never happened.

He did look more relaxed, though, if a little distracted.

“Everything okay?” King didn’t want to pry, but if something had happened, he wanted to help.

“All good.” Arlo gave him his signature million-watt smile that turned his already good looks into an almost ethereal beauty. “I’m going to see if Damien wants to change before we head to dinner. Do you and Storm have any plans?”

“We’re going to order room service.”

“Ohh, sexy.”

King flipped him off. “Shut up.”

Chuckling, the asshole winked over his shoulder before ducking through a part in the curtains.

King rolled his eyes and followed after him.

Most of the crowd had dissipated, the fans leaving to return to their regularly scheduled lives. The few stragglers who remained were being gently shepherded toward the exits by hotel employees. Other staff members had started the clean-up—clearing the buffet tables, picking up trash, and stacking chairs.

Damien and Arlo stood off to one side of the stage, engaging in a lively conversation with a middle-aged man dressed in a dark suit. King couldn’t remember his name, but he thought it might be Damien’s manager.

He scanned the area, looking for his mate, and found him with Nita by the floor-to-ceiling windows. From that distance, he didn’t know what they were talking about, but Storm had his hand on the female’s shoulder, and she appeared to be crying.

Jogging down the stage steps, he hurried across the room, winding through the remaining chairs to join them. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing,” Nita assured him.

A muscle in Storm’s jaw ticked, and he patted her shoulder. “Some guy claiming to be her boyfriend showed up.”

“What?” King didn’t know anything about the woman’s love life, but it had to be bad for her to look so miserable. “Are you hurt?”

“No. No. I’m fine.” She sniffled and wiped her eyes. “I’m overreacting.”

King looked between Storm and Nita with a wrinkled brow. “Did you two fight?”

“He got in her face and grabbed her arm.” The shifter’s gaze was as stormy as his name.

He was in full protector mode, with no sign of the shiny veneer he showed the rest of the world. A vein along the side of his neck throbbed, and his handsome face was distorted by hard angles and deep shadows.

His murderous expression probably should have been frightening, but King found it hot as hell. Add the reason for his anger—the defense of a virtual stranger—and he might have fallen just a little in love.

Pushing that aside, he focused his attention on Nita. “Do you need anything? Can I call someone for you?”

“No, no, I’m fine.” She took a deep, shaky breath. “Just overwhelmed.”

Not knowing how else to comfort her, King pulled her into his arms and hugged her tight. “I’m sorry that happened to you. Is your shift over?”

“I still have to help clean up.”

“Go home.” Releasing her, he took a step back but kept hold of her hands. “I’ll take care of it.”

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

King smiled. “You didn’t. I’ve been here longer than you, which gives me seniority.” His smile widened when she giggled. “I’m telling you to go home and get some rest. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Thank you, King.” Nita hugged him again and pressed a chaste kiss to his cheek. “You’re a good guy.” Then she turned and hugged Storm as well. “Thank you, too.”

“Don’t mention it. I’m glad you’re okay.” He gave her another squeeze before easing her away. “Is it safe for you to go home? Will he show up there?”

“I’m staying with my parents for the time being.” She shook her head. “I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“Do you need us to take you home?”

Nita shook her head again. “Thanks, but I’ll be okay.”

“If you’re sure.” Storm didn’t sound pleased about it, but he seemed to recognize he couldn’t force her. “Be safe.”

“And text me when you get there,” King added.

“I will. Promise.”

Once she had slipped through the big double doors, Storm sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. “I wanted to punch that fucker in the face.”

“Probably best that you didn’t.” No matter how satisfying it would have been, the fallout definitely wasn’t worth it. “You know this isn’t your fault, right?”

Storm shrugged. “Yeah, I know. Doesn’t change anything.”

No, he supposed it didn’t. He hadn’t even witnessed the altercation, and he wanted to punch the guy as well.

“Come on. Let’s get this done so we can get out of here. I’m starving.”

Damn, he’d completely forgotten about their dinner date. “You go. I’ve got this.” He pulled his phone out and opened his notes app. “Tell me what you want to eat, and I’ll order it for you.”

“Believe it or not, darlin’, I’m perfectly capable of ordering my own food.” He wound his arm around King’s shoulders and pulled him close. “I’m not leaving you here alone.”

“I don’t have any admirers lurking around.” He spoke quietly, gently, not wanting to dismiss his mate’s concerns but still needing to make a point. “No one is going to hurt me.”

“I’m not leaving, so just let me help you.”

“Actually, can you talk to Skye? She needs to know what happened.”

“Security dragged the guy out, so I’m sure she’s already been informed.”

In that case, how had Storm become involved? “What exactly happened?”

Storm dropped his head and rubbed his cheek against the top of King’s head. “I don’t know all the details. I was wrapping up on stage when I saw them talking. It looked pretty intense.”

King nodded. So far, he was following.

“I was headed over to check on her when he grabbed her arm. Security reached them before I did, and they took him out of the ballroom.” Sighing again, he finally released his grip on King and pressed a kiss to his forehead. “You showed up a couple of minutes later.”

“I wonder what they were arguing about.”

Storm quirked an eyebrow. “Does it matter?”

Maybe not, but without all the information, he didn’t want to jump to conclusions, either. Naturally, he was worried about his friend, and he didn’t like the idea of some asshole putting his hands on her. At the same time, Nita was a she-wolf and more than capable of protecting herself.

It didn’t add up.

Nita had a sweet, bubbly personality, but she also didn’t take shit from anyone. He’d watched entitled guests literally scream in her face, and she hadn’t even blinked. She damn sure never broke down in tears or needed to be rescued.

Maybe it was nothing. After all, the typical rules didn’t really apply to matters of the

heart. Still, while he made it a rule not to involve himself in other people's business, something didn't feel right.

"So, what happened with your family earlier?"

King instantly stilled as his pulse quickened. It was a timely, albeit harsh, reminder that he had enough problems of his own without adding Nita's to his plate.

"My mom wants us to come to dinner on Friday."

"That's great." As he spoke, Storm grabbed a nearby chair and stacked it onto the one next to it. "Perfect timing, too, since I don't have filming this week."

Yeah. Perfect.

King nodded but remained silent.

"I thought you said there was some drama." There was no accusation in his tone. Only mild curiosity.

"Oh, that." Now that it had passed, it didn't seem like such a big deal anymore. "My siblings think I slipped you a love potion to make you think we're mated."

He didn't know what kind of response he expected, but laughter wasn't it.

"My sisters said the same thing."

Surely, he'd heard that wrong. "Why would they think that?"

"According to them, you are far too cute and sweet to be with an asshole like me."

He didn't sound offended, though. More...indulgent.

"I didn't know you had siblings. How old are they?"

"Seventeen. Twins." Storm chuckled and shook his head. "They're a pain in my ass, but what can you do?"

"Right." Somehow, he doubted their situations were similar at all.

"What about you?"

"Two sisters and a brother. All older." He moved down the row and started stacking chairs at the other end. "We're, uh, not that close."

"You still talk, though?"

"We do." Although, he hadn't decided if that was a good thing.

"Well, that's something. I mean, if they didn't care, they wouldn't bother at all."

King had never thought about it that way. He just assumed they loved bullying and mocking him. What Storm said made sense, though. If his siblings actually hated him, they would just pretend like he didn't exist.

Like their dad did.

Either way, it was probably best to change the subject. "You know, this event wasn't nearly as chaotic as I expected."

Storm laughed. "I have a feeling we can thank Miss Maddock for that. These things—" He waved his hand vaguely toward the stage. "—aren't usually so chill.

The public ones are the worst.”

“Public?”

“Yeah, we just announce we’re going to be somewhere and don’t sell tickets. Those are a night—”

A loud, echoing growl had them both jerking toward the exit. A small crowd had gathered in front of the doors, and it took a moment for King to figure out who the sound had come from.

“It’s Cyrus.” Eyes wide, fangs bared, their head of security looked beyond crazed. “Let’s go.”

Abandoning their task, they made their way across the ballroom to the hellhound. A few feet away, however, Storm grabbed him by the arm and held him back.

“That’s close enough.”

“Get away from me!” Cyrus snarled as he shoved at the other security guards. “Get your fucking hands off me! You can’t keep me here.”

Keep him there?

“No one is trying to stop you from leaving,” Brenden, a new guard, told him. He was doing his best to speak calmly, but it couldn’t have been easy with almost two hundred pounds of hellhound raging against him. “You have to calm down, though.”

“Where am I?” Cyrus demanded. “What is this place?”

In that moment, King finally recognized the look on the guard’s face. Sheer and utter

terror.

“Where is my mate?” Cyrus threw a punch, but it sailed wide, throwing him off balance. “What did you do to Emrys?”

Thankfully, the pixie arrived then. Well, arrived might have been too tame of a word for it. He was literally dragged into the ballroom by two of the housekeeping staff.

“Emrys!” Struggling against his fellow guards, Cyrus called his mate’s name twice more. “Get away from him! Don’t touch him!”

It took nearly ten minutes for Emrys to calm his mate and convince him that no was trying to abduct, murder, maim, or otherwise threaten them. Even then, as he allowed himself to be led away, Cyrus looked wild and, honestly, dangerous.

The ballroom fell eerily quiet after that. The remaining employees kept casting glances at each other as if looking for answers, but no one seemed to know what to say.

King, however, was more convinced than ever that something wasn’t right at Blackhaven Manor. One employee having an uncharacteristic outburst was one thing. Two in the span of half an hour didn’t exactly feel like a coincidence.

He also had a bad feeling that Cyrus wouldn’t be the last. But why?

What the heck was going on?

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Chapter eight

A n hour later, when Storm entered his suite, he had the strangest sensation that he had forgotten something important, but he had no idea what. Of course, if he could remember what he'd forgotten, it wouldn't be forgotten.

Or something like that.

Whatever.

He'd been riding a wave of adrenaline for hours, and it had finally started to ebb. Coming down always left him tired and a little disconcerted, so he wasn't too concerned. Besides, if he really had forgotten something important, King would remind him.

His mate was good with things like schedules and lists and organization. Hell, the guy was good at everything. Talking, walking, smiling, singing. Okay, so he hadn't heard him sing, but King probably had a fantastic voice.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say he was obsessed with the guy. Not in a creepy way, though, but in a perfectly acceptable, non-serial killer kind of way.

"Storm, are you even listening to me?"

"Absolutely." He hadn't heard a word. "I love listening to you talk."

"Uh, okay." Closing the door behind him, King paused in the entryway and studied

him with a furrowed brow. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Just tired and hungry. Why?”

“It’s nothing.” The concern in his eyes didn’t dissipate, though. “So, what do you want to eat? Chicken and vegetables? A salad?”

Storm scrunched one side of his nose. If King wanted him to eat those things, he would, but it didn’t sound that appealing.

“Or not.” King chuckled. “Okay, Tex, what do you want?”

“A burger. With cheese and bacon. Oh, and fries.” He snapped his fingers and pointed at his mate. “And a milkshake.”

King stared at him for a full minute before he sighed and retrieved his cellphone from his jacket pocket. “Priya is going to kill me.”

Storm stiffened, and a low growl vibrated in his chest. “I would never let anyone hurt you.”

That same mask of concern settled over his mate’s face again. “Are you sure you’re feeling okay?”

The tension drained out of him, and he stood upright with a bright smile. “Right as...as...”

“Rain?” King suggested.

“That’s the one.”

“Right.” He dragged the word out as his face became more and more pinched. “I’ll order room service. Why don’t you go jump in the shower?”

Storm really didn’t want to leave his mate, but he couldn’t deny him, either. If that was what King wanted, that was what he would get.

“Okay. I’ll be fast.”

“It’ll be at least half an hour before the food gets here,” King muttered, his attention on his phone screen. “Take your time.”

And have to wait that much longer to see him again? No way. “I’ll hurry.”

“Hmm,” King hummed distractedly.

Turning on his heels, Storm raced for the en suite, stripping out of his clothes as he went. In the bathroom, he jerked the lever for the shower, nearly breaking it off in the process, and stepped under the spray before it could even warm. He washed quickly and scrubbed his hair, then did a couple of turns to rinse away the suds before shutting off the water.

He stood dripping on the tiles for several seconds, just staring at the open door. That feeling of forgetfulness had returned, but once again, he didn’t have a clue what it meant. All he knew was that he had been away from his mate for too long.

He rushed from the room and rounded the corner, skidding to a stop at the end of the sofa. King stood right where he’d left him, his eyes still glued to his phone.

“Did you forget something?” he asked without looking up.

By the goddess, he was so beautiful. His honeyed curls gleamed, and his fair skin

glowed with an inner light. Storm didn't know how the hell he had gotten so lucky to have been blessed with a mate like King.

“Storm, is everything—oh, my god! What the hell are you doing?”

“I'm standing here.”

“I can see that.” King's eyes widened, and his nostrils flared. All that smooth, creamy skin flushed a startling shade of crimson, and he seemed to be looking anywhere except at Storm. “Why are you wet?”

“I took a shower.”

“Fucking hell,” King mumbled. The cords in his neck strained and bulged as he did his damndest to twist his head in the opposite direction. “Where are your clothes?”

Oh. He stared down his nude, wet body and chuckled. So that was what he'd forgotten. “My bad. I'll be right back.” He turned around but stopped to look over his shoulder. “Don't move.”

“I'll be right here.”

Satisfied with the answer, he trotted into the bedroom. Standing at the foot of the bed with his hands on his hips, he glanced at the closet, the dresser, then stared down at the king-sized mattress.

Why the fuck was he here when his mate was out there ? Damn, he loved that word. Mate. He wanted to shout it from the rooftops.

Excited to share the good news, he rushed back to the sitting area and grabbed King by the shoulders to get his attention. “Did you know we're mates? Like, holy fucking

shit, dude! That's so cool! Isn't that cool?"

"Yes. Amazing." King sounded like he was choking, and his face was that weird shade of reddish purple again.

Unable to contain his emotions, he took a step back and pumped his fist into the air as he bounced on his toes. His cock—fully erect and standing at attention—slapped heavily against his thigh, which he found hilarious.

Only, his amusement didn't last long because King looked like he might be having a stroke. Or a seizure. It was kind of hard to tell. He had one hand slapped over his eyes, while he flapped the other around as if he'd lost control of the limb. He held himself rigidly as he turned one way, bumped into the wall, then turned around and nearly fell over the back of the sofa.

"What's wrong, darlin'?" Concerned, he immediately rushed to his mate's side, only to be met with the smack of a palm to his chest. "Are you hurt? Is the light too bright?" Reaching for the nearest lamp, he slid his hand down the top of the shade and crushed the bulb in his hand. "Is that better?"

"Oh, my fucking god!" King gasped. At least he'd finally stopped covering his eyes. "Have you lost your mind?"

"It was hurting you," he answered defensively.

"I'm fine. Besides, you could have just used the damn switch!"

Storm didn't know what he was talking about, and he didn't really care. He'd taken care of the problem and protected King. He was totally crushing this whole mating thing.

“I was just shocked because you are still very, very naked,” King continued. His gaze wandered down Storm’s body but stopped near his belly button before flying back to his face. “Where are your clothes?”

Right. Yes. That. “I can’t find them.”

“I’m sorry...what?”

Storm shrugged. “Where do we keep them?”

“Did you look in the dresser?”

Yes, of course, he had looked there. He wasn’t an idiot. “What’s that?”

“What’s a dresser?”

Was King asking him? Was this a test?

“You know what, never mind.” He marched past Storm, catching his hand as he did, and dragged him toward the bedroom.

Staring down at their linked fingers, Storm giggled. Just being able to hold the guy’s hand felt like winning the lottery.

“Are you drunk?”

“I am intoxicated by you.”

King looked back at him with a wrinkled nose and creased brow. “Okay, I’m going to find you some clothes, then I’m calling Priya.”

“Cool. Who’s Priya?”

“Oh, for the love of...” He trailed away with an exasperated huff. “You. Sit.” Taking Storm’s wrist, he guided him to the foot of the bed and pushed at his shoulders until he sank onto the burgundy comforter. “Just stay there.”

“Okay.” He liked this game. It was fun, and he was good at it.

King took two steps, stopped, then reached over the bed for one of the pillows. “Here.” Unceremoniously, he stuffed it into Storm’s lap. “You’re going to put someone’s eye out with that thing.”

It seemed his mate had a real problem with nudity. It was freaking adorable. Although, it could make certain activities more challenging.

“How long have we been mated?”

King paused with a drawer halfway open. “Almost two days.”

Wow. Two whole days. “Have we kissed?”

“Yes.”

Damn, he wished he could remember that. It had probably been awesome. “Have we had sex?”

King made a choking sound in the back of his throat. “No.”

Thank the goddess. He’d hate himself if he’d forgotten that. “Have you ever had sex?”

The choking turned into hacking coughs, and King gripped the white tee in his hands until his knuckles cracked. Eventually, with a few gasping breaths, he managed to get himself under control.

“I don’t think we need to talk about that right now.”

Storm took that as a no. Which explained a lot, like the guy’s aversion to nudity. For a minute, he’d been worried that King just didn’t want to see him naked.

“Please put these on.” His mate handed him the T-shirt and a pair of navy pants. Then he immediately put his back to him. “Do you need anything else?”

Storm stared down at his bare feet and wiggled his toes. “Do I have any...feet gloves?”

“Feet...you mean, socks?”

“Sure.”

King dug through another drawer and tossed him a pair of white...socks. “I’m going to call Priya now. Do you think you can handle this?”

He pulled the T-shirt on, only getting his head stuck in the sleeve once before finding the neck hole. “I can dress myself.”

King held his hands up as he backed out of the room. “Just checking.”

Left alone to his own devices, it took Storm a bit more effort to get his pants on, but he managed it after only three tries. Despite the socks being fairly intuitive, they didn’t feel that great on his feet. He was still trying to figure out where he’d gone wrong when King returned, sans his phone.

“Priya suggested getting some rest and seeing how you feel in the morning.” He didn’t sound overly convinced by this, but he also didn’t offer an alternative. “What are you doing?”

“My socks feel weird.”

King knelt at the foot of the bed and inspected the garments. Then, without comment, he twisted them around so that the seams rested on the top of Storm’s toes instead of the bottom.

“How’s that?”

Storm grinned. “Perfect. Just like you.”

“You really have to stop saying stuff like that.”

“Why? It’s true.”

Sighing, King rose to his feet and held his hand out to pull Storm up from the mattress. “Look, I don’t want to freak you out, but I think something’s wrong.”

“With you?”

“No. With you .”

That didn’t make any sense. He had never felt better. “Mmm, I don’t think that’s right.”

“Do you remember what happened with Cyrus in the ballroom?”

He understood the words, but not necessarily the context. “Who’s Cyrus?”

“The security guard.”

“And we were in a ballroom?”

King chewed the corner of his bottom lip for a moment before speaking again. “What are you sisters’ names?”

“I don’t have any sisters.”

“What about your parents?”

“I don’t have those, either.”

Okay, technically, that wasn’t correct. He hadn’t just sprouted out of the ground fully formed, meaning he must have had parents at some point. Only, he didn’t have any recollection of them.

“It doesn’t bother you that you can’t remember your parents?”

“A lot of people don’t remember their parents,” he argued.

“Fair enough.” After a long, awkward pause, King took both of his hands and gripped them tight as he adopted an indulgent smile. “You said I’m perfect, right?”

Finally, something they could agree on. “Absolutely.”

“And you trust me?”

“Of course.”

King squeezed his hands. “Then I need you to trust me now that something is going

on around here. People are acting strange.”

“Including me?”

“Yes. Including you.”

While he didn’t think anything was “wrong” with him, he had been feeling slightly off since entering the suite. More than once, he’d been overcome with the sense that he had forgotten something important. It hadn’t been enough to worry him, but King clearly saw things differently.

“I have parents?” he checked.

King nodded. “They own a farm in west Texas, and you have twin sisters.”

He had sisters? “How old are they?”

“Seventeen.”

If he was understanding correctly, he had a whole-ass family living in Texas. That seemed like information he should have readily available. As he tried to access those memories, however, he realized he had no recollection of his childhood at all. In fact, he couldn’t remember anything before entering his suite with King.

Speaking of King, he knew the guy was his mate, and he had a lot of feelings about that, all positive. At the same time, it was another topic he had limited information on. Hell, he didn’t even know how they’d met.

“I believe you.”

Yet, he wasn’t all that torn up about it. Having his entire life erased should have

caused at least a modicum of concern, if not outright panic. Taking inventory of his thoughts and emotions, however, all he found was King. As long as he had his mate, nothing else really mattered to him.

King's tense muscles melted in relief. "Good. That's good."

"So, what do we do about it?"

Before King could answer, a knock at the door announced the arrival of their dinner.

"Let's eat and get some sleep."

"Good idea." With any luck, maybe things would sort themselves out during the night.

Yeah, he just needed some sleep. Everything would be better in the morning.

Chapter nine

Things were not better in the morning. Not that King had expected them to be, but a tiny part of him had been holding onto the hope that whatever was happening to his mate and friends was temporary.

He'd spent a restless night going over and over what little he knew about the situation. So far, only Storm, Nita, and Cyrus had been affected. Storm and Cyrus still remembered their mates, but nothing else about their lives. Nita, on the other hand, remembered her parents, but not her current boyfriend.

When he'd finally dozed off on the sofa, he'd had no more answers than when he'd started. Worse, he didn't even know which questions to ask.

He'd slept fitfully for a couple of hours before being awoken by the sound of Storm's shouts. Apparently, he'd forgotten how to operate the shower controls, and King had found him jumping around under the scalding hot spray like a cracked-out jackrabbit.

Once he'd gotten his mate sorted out, he'd then had to remind him that Blackhaven Manor was not a clothing-optional facility. Although Storm had been confused and a bit indignant about why he had to wear clothes, he had been amiable in allowing King to dress him.

Breakfast had been a test in patience, and more than once, King had felt like he was babysitting an emotional toddler rather than sharing a meal with a grown man. There had been a couple of entertaining moments, however. Like when Storm had forgotten the name for the utensils and had instead called them "food weapons."

As the day wore on, things only seemed to get worse. Twice, Storm got lost...in the lobby. He consistently couldn't remember the name for common items, and he seemed to have no recollection of anyone at the hotel. Not even his best friend.

"So, you really have no idea who I am?" Wearing a crisp white shirt under a glittery black jacket, Damien looked like a walking constellation.

"Nope," Storm confirmed. "You seem like a cool guy, though. For a werewolf."

"Storm!" King chastised.

His mate shrugged. "That's what he is."

Arlo didn't even attempt to hide his amusement at the situation as he laughed right from his belly. "You know, I think I like him better like this."

Damien chuckled along with him. "You're right. I guess losing his memory dislodged that giant stick up his ass."

Storm actually twisted around to stare at his backside. "I don't have anything in my ass." He turned back to the werewolf. "Is that something I used to do? It sounds uncomfortable."

King pressed both hands to his face and groaned as the other two burst into more peels of laughter.

"Have you guys met my mate?" Storm asked out of nowhere. "This is King. He's amazing. I don't know if you can tell, but he smells like dark chocolate and cinnamon. He also does this thing where he wrinkles his nose when he gets annoyed with me. It's really cute."

King groaned again as heat crept up his neck and into his cheeks. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, they needed to find a solution, and fast.

When he finally dropped his hands and looked up, he was startled to discover Damien's face was nearly as red as his own. A heartbeat later, he realized it had nothing to do with embarrassment, though. The wolf was trying desperately to suppress his laughter.

And frankly, failing miserably.

"Oh, look at his blush. Isn't it adorable?" Wrapping an arm around King's waist, Storm dragged him next to his side. "It goes all the way to the tips of his ears. And he has the most perfect ears. Then again, everything about him is perfect. Sometimes, when he's thinking, he does this thing—"

Only King's hand over his mouth prevented the shifter from continuing. "I think they get it. You can stop now."

He waited for his mate's nod of agreement before slowly lowering his hand. Even then, he remained tense, afraid Storm would simply confess something else he loved about him.

Thankfully, Damien changed the subject, probing to find out how much—or little—Storm actually remembered about his life. While they spoke, King turned to Arlo. Instead of the mischievous smile he'd expected, his friend was looking at him with a pinched expression.

"So, he remembers everything about you, but nothing else?"

"Not everything," King clarified. "He knows who I am, but his memory of me seems to start when we got back to his room last night."

“But he’s so...”

“Fixated?” King suggested when his friend struggled to find the right word.

“I was going to say obsessed, but yeah, that works, too.”

“I don’t get it, either, but I wonder if it has something to do with us being mated.”

Arlo tilted his head, and a shallow valley formed between his eyes. “I guess that makes sense. How did it happen, though?”

But King was no longer engaged in the conversation because he had just spotted someone who might be able to provide some insight. “Emrys is here. Let’s go talk to him.”

Arlo glanced over at Damien and Storm. “Do you think it’s okay to leave him alone?”

Without looking at them, Damien dipped his head and motioned with his hand for them to go. Confident his mate would be okay for the time being, King grabbed his best friend by the wrist and dragged him toward the café.

As they neared the counter, he realized Emrys wasn’t alone, however. To his surprise, he found the pixie in a murmured conversation with his mate. Unlike the previous evening, Cyrus now appeared quite calm, and since he was dressed for his shift, King could only assume that meant he’d made a full recovery.

While it gave him hope that Storm would eventually regain his memories as well, he had a lot of questions for the couple.

“Hey!” Emrys tucked a lock of electric blue hair behind his ear and stepped up to the register with a radiant smile. “What can I get you gentlemen this morning?”

“I’ll have another one of those iced cherry bombs,” Arlo answered immediately.

King glared. They weren’t there for refreshments.

“You got it.” The pixie grabbed a cup from the stack on the counter and scribbled across the side of it with a marker. “And you?”

King waved him away. “Nothing for me.” Not sure how to approach the subject, he decided to just dive right in and pray for the best. “Um, about what happened last night.”

“I’m okay now,” Cyrus assured him. “I apologize if I upset you.”

“What? No. That’s not what I meant.” He moved to the corner of the counter to speak with the hellhound. “It’s just, what exactly happened?”

“The fuck if I know.” A deep growl rumbled through Cyrus’ chest. “Emrys filled me in on some parts, but I have no actual memory of it.”

“What do you remember?”

“We had escorted a werewolf out of the ballroom, and I was talking to some of the security guys about it because something seemed off.” His obsidian eyes narrowed as he reached up to rub the back of his neck. “The next thing I remember is waking up in bed this morning.”

Okay, not much to go on, but the information did spur another thought. “What was weird about the werewolf?”

“Well, we took him out because he was causing a scene with that little she-wolf from housekeeping.”

“Nita?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. She was crying and saying she didn’t know him, but he claimed to be her boyfriend.”

King bobbed his head. “Did you believe him?”

“Honestly? Yeah. He was pissed about us interfering, but otherwise, he just seemed confused.”

“I heard she called out today,” Emrys interjected as he and Arlo came to join them. “Apparently, she’s still pretty upset about it.”

King understood the mask of bewilderment he wore. It didn’t make sense to him, either.

“Doesn’t really sound like her, does it?”

Emrys shook his head. “Not the Nita I know.”

“Well, Storm can’t remember shit,” Arlo announced before taking a sip of his drink. “Like, the dude doesn’t even know how to tie his shoes.”

While not incorrect, he probably could have been more tactful about it.

“Except King,” he added. “He is big obsessed with King.”

Hooking his arm around Cyrus’ elbow, Emrys rested his head on his mate’s shoulder and chuckled. “Sounds like this guy here. He punched the television last night because he thought the people on the screen were real.”

Cyrus shuffled his feet uncomfortably. “I don’t remember that.”

“He thought they were going to kidnap me,” Emrys continued with a quiet laugh. “It was funny, but I’m glad it’s over.”

King wrung his hands together, dragging his thumb over the opposite palm on each pass. “Do you know how? Did you do something?”

Beside him, Arlo snorted. “Oh, they did something . Look at his neck.”

Sure enough, a shiny set of punctures—the exact width of a set of fangs—practically glowed like a neon sign on the side of the pixie’s neck. Beneath the new wounds, King could still make out the faint pink of his original mating mark.

King feared Emrys would be embarrassed, but he just smiled and shrugged while Cyrus pulled his shoulders back and puffed out his chest. It was actually kind of refreshing to see such a confident couple. Still, he didn’t think he would ever be so comfortable talking about his sex life in public.

“There’s your answer.” Swaying to the side, Arlo bumped his shoulder against King’s. “Get Storm to claim you. That’ll fix him.”

“Maybe.”

Just because it had worked for the other pair didn’t mean it would work for Storm. Fuck, he didn’t even know what “it” was. Besides, having sex with the guy in his current state seemed wrong. Sure, Storm had become somewhat irrational in his fascination with him, but it wasn’t an accurate account of his feelings. Not really.

It was more like...

Did you slip him a love potion?

He clearly hadn't done any such thing, but his sister's assumption did trigger another thought. "Could it be magic? Like a curse or something?"

"I think that's a fair guess," Emrys agreed.

"Okay." Arlo slurped from his straw again. "Whose ass do we have to kick?"

To that, no one had an answer. Other than the fact that two of the victims worked at the hotel, none of them had anything in common. If someone had been specifically targeting Storm, why not Damien as well? And where did Cyrus and Nita fit into the scheme?

For that matter, what the hell kind of hex was this? What did the caster hope to gain by causing Storm to forget everything except King? Was it someone who wanted him out of the way? Someone jealous of his success? Had Cyrus and Nita simply been in the wrong place, at the wrong time, and gotten hit with the blowback from the curse?

The more he tried to logic his way out of it, the less sense it made.

"Cyrus, do you think I can see the security footage from the ballroom last night?"

The hellhound gave him a toothy grin. "I like the way you think."

Emrys patted his mate's chest and stepped away. "Go catch bad guys. I have to get back to work."

"Same." Arlo angled away from the counter but turned back almost immediately and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Actually, can I get a large vanilla latte with an extra shot for the big guy over there?"

King rubbed his tired eyes as he fought back a yawn. “Make that two. And a matcha latte with oat milk.”

“Rough night?” Cyrus asked as they waited for Emrys to fill their order.

“You have no idea.”

Or maybe he did. The difference was the hellhound couldn’t remember all the chaos.

Since he’d picked up the tab the previous evening, he didn’t argue when Arlo offered to pay for the drinks. Then they thanked Emrys and made their way back across the lobby, where the co-stars were still emersed in their conversation.

When Storm noticed the hellhound behind him, he bared his fangs and pulled King behind him, partially blocking him from view. For the love of all things supernatural, he was too damn tired for this nonsense.

Instead of snapping, however, he took a deep breath and reminded himself that it wasn’t Storm’s fault. “Here, drink this.” He pushed the matcha into his mate’s hand. “Storm, this is our head of security, Cyrus Rathborne. I told you about him, remember?”

Storm relaxed, but only marginally. “You said he had the same problem as me.”

“Right. We’re going to go look at the footage from the security cameras last night. Maybe we can figure out what happened.”

As if the tense encounter had never happened, Storm shrugged and gave Cyrus that movie star smile that made the whole world weak in the knees. “Sounds good. Where are we going?”

In response, Cyrus led them across the lobby to a narrow door situated beneath the grand staircase.

Maybe King watched too many movies, but the security office looked exactly as he had imagined. A square, stark room with a couple of chairs, a table, and a huge desk positioned in front of a wall of monitors. Granted, it was brighter than he'd anticipated, with ample light glowing from the fluorescent bulbs overhead.

The security system also proved to be a lot more efficient than he had seen in films. With only a few clicks of the mouse and a couple of taps to the keyboard, Cyrus pulled up the correct recordings on a separate monitor located on one of the arms of the U-shaped desk.

“What exactly are we looking for?” Storm asked, leaning forward to get a better look at the screen.

Since King was the only one there who hadn't been cursed, it fell to him to recall pertinent details. It was against hotel policy for the staff to take anything from the catering tables. He also knew for certain that the only thing Storm had consumed during the event was the latte he'd brought him. Therefore, he could rule out the possibility of the food or drinks being tainted.

Plus, if that had been the case, many more people would have been affected.

Cyrus swiveled his desk chair around and cleared his throat. “We should look for someone who interacted with all three of us—me, Storm, and Nita.”

And that was why he was head of security. Still, they needed to narrow it down.

“Storm interacted with everyone there,” King said, speaking slowly as he thought back to the evening. “Even most of the staff.”

“In my experience, this kind of hex requires touch.”

King chewed his bottom lip. Storm had signed a lot of stuff and taken just as many photos. He hadn’t touched everyone he’d spoken to, though.

“So, Nita was the first one to start acting oddly.” He pointed to the hellhound. “Then you. I didn’t notice anything wrong with Storm until we got back to the room last night.”

“That’s good,” Cyrus praised. “So, we’re looking for someone we all three had some kind of physical contact with, and in that order. Nita. Me. Storm.”

“Were there any witches at the event?” King asked.

“Sure.” The hellhound turned back to the monitor. “Along with other magic users. I couldn’t tell you who is who on the recording, though.”

While disappointed by the information, King understood. With a couple of exceptions, he wouldn’t recognize any of the guests out on the street. He likely wouldn’t be able to discern if they were human or Otherling, let alone what designation of paranormal.

After ten minutes of staring at the screen, watching guests enter the ballroom and begin milling about, he realized what an arduous task they had ahead of them. From start to finish, they had at least three hours of footage to scour, all while keeping track of who Storm, Cyrus, and Nita had interacted with.

Another ten minutes passed before the hellhound echoed his thoughts. “This is going to take a while. If you guys have something else to do, I can take it from here.”

Storm had been scheduled for an interview that morning, but Priya had decided it was

probably best to keep him out of the public eye for the time being. Honestly, she had taken the news of her rising star's amnesia better than expected. At least, she had appeared outwardly calm.

As such, they didn't have anywhere to be until after lunch, but King got the sense they were more hinderance than help.

"I'm going to try to get ahold of Nita and find out if she remembers anything from last night."

Cyrus didn't take his eyes away from the monitor. "Good thinking."

"Thanks for doing this."

"Trust me. I want to know who's behind this as much as you do." Finally, the guard lifted his head and turned to face him. "I'll let you know as soon as I have something."

King thanked him again before leading his mate out of the office. "We have a few hours. What do you want to do?"

"Let's go for a walk."

Glancing through the windows on the other side of the lobby, King winced at the crowd gathered in the parking lot. "Outside? I'm not sure that's such a good idea."

"Come on." Storm dropped his mostly full cup into a nearby receptacle, grabbed King's hand, and began dragging him around the staircase. "We'll sneak out the back."

"Do you even know how to get there?"

“That’s why I have you.”

The fans gathered in hopes of catching a glimpse of their favorite stars had been restricted to the front of the hotel. If he and Storm stayed quiet and kept to the trees, it would probably be okay.

Of course, he hadn’t accounted for his mate’s current condition, or his unpredictable behavior. As soon as they stepped through the door that opened onto the south lawn, Storm started whooping like he’d just scored the winning touchdown at the homecoming game.

“You didn’t tell me there was a lake here.”

“No. We can’t—Storm!”

But it was too late. The shifter took off, sprinting across the lawn and down the grassy slope to the lake at the bottom of the hill.

Objectively, King had to admit the lake was beautiful. Surrounded by a grove of trees, the sandy banks led to crystalline waters that rippled gently in the wind. The late morning sun glittered over the surface, turning something already extraordinary into absolute magic.

It was the last place they should be, though.

Resisting the urge to call for his mate, he chased after him, but Storm was bigger, faster, and he had a head start. So, by the time King reached the edge of the lake, the shifter had already stripped to his bare skin and was wading into the water.

“Storm, get out of there!” he hissed. “And put your damn clothes back on.”

Of course, the asshole ignored him. “Come swim with me. The water feels amazing.”

“This is not—”

An ear-piercing, feminine squeal rent the air, followed by several shouts of Storm’s name. All King could do was watch as the horde of screaming fans thundered down the hillside, phones in hand. Some of them were already recording.

Fuck, he was so getting fired for this.

Well, if Priya didn’t kill him first.

Chapter ten

Storm sat in the passenger seat of King's SUV with his hands clasped between his knees and his head bowed. He really didn't see what the big deal was, but his mate had been pissed at him for the past three days.

He wasn't the only one, either. A lot of people he didn't know had ranted and raved about his "performance" down at the lake. Priya had been particularly irate. Some guy he'd been told was a film director had just about shit kittens over it.

Damien, however, had found the entire ordeal hilarious. He still couldn't remember the guy, but he was beginning to see why they were friends.

"Don't do anything weird tonight," King bit out from the behind the wheel.

Was that meant to be offensive? Should he be offended? "Weird how?"

"For starters, try to keep your clothes on."

Ah, so they were back to that.

He wasn't claiming King didn't have justification for his anger. The poor guy had endured his share of the ass-chewings being dished out. He'd also been stressing about the possibility of being fired from his position at the hotel, although nothing had come of that. Not even a reprimand from his boss.

Still, Storm wasn't oblivious to the havoc he'd caused. He just didn't understand why

everyone was getting so bent out of shape over it. So what if a bunch of strangers had seen him naked? It wouldn't be the first time. He was a shifter for fuck's sake.

Apparently, pictures and videos of him at the lake had ended up on some kind of clock website. He wasn't clear on the details, but that was what he'd gathered from Priya's screeching.

"You're all over TikTok!"

A bunch of timekeeping enthusiasts posting pictures of him didn't make a hell of a lot of sense, but everyone had been pretty upset about it. The word "scandal" had even been tossed around, which sounded like a bit of a stretch.

"Can you please just talk to me, darlin'? I honestly don't know what I did wrong to piss you off."

King gripped the wheel tighter and sighed. "I know you don't, and I'm not mad at you. I'm angry with myself." Slowing, he turned on his indicator light as he merged onto the highway that would take them into Colorado Springs. "It's not so much about what you did. It's more about who you are."

"You said I'm famous." An actor with legions of devoted fans.

Since Storm's earliest memories were only a few days old, he was forced to take the guy's word for it. Still, his journey from a farm kid in the Texas panhandle to the glitz and glamor of the silver screen sounded unbelievable.

According to more than one person, his introduction to films had happened during an open casting call during college. He and some of his friends had decided to audition as a joke, and the rest, apparently, was history.

Of course, Storm couldn't remember who he'd been or why he'd made the choices he had. All he had to go on was the person he was now. For that person, the joke part of the story resonated, but he couldn't reconcile his decision to continue in the industry. Especially when he had no desire for fame.

"Exactly," King confirmed. "Until things go back to normal, I just don't want you to do something you might regret once you have your memory back."

That was fair, and Storm appreciated that it came from a place of caring. His mate was essentially trying to protect him from himself, or at the very least, protect a potential future in case Storm decided to continue down that path.

It was all quite confusing, and frankly, he didn't want to think about it anymore. Time to change the subject.

"Tell me about your family."

"What do you want to know?" King's fingers tightened around the wheel again, and the muscles in his shoulders tensed.

"Let's start with their names."

"Well, my parents are Tim and Daniella Mathers."

"What do they do?"

"My dad is a cosmetic surgeon. My mom—" King shook his head. "—doesn't work. She supports a lot of causes, though. Mostly to do with animals."

Both respectable uses of time, so he didn't understand why his mate sounded so apprehensive. "You said you have siblings?"

“Yeah, Reina is the oldest. She’ll take over dad’s clinic when he retires. Rhiannon is a district judge. She prefers to go by Rhia.” He licked his bottom lip and took a deep breath before continuing. “Royal is a robotics engineer, but don’t ask me to explain what he does. I don’t understand half of what he says.”

Storm chuckled in solidarity, but he wasn’t concerned. Even if he didn’t understand their jobs, he figured they could always find something else to talk about.

His mate had quite the impressive family. Some might even say intimidating. He imagined there was a lot of pressure to live up to the family legacy.

“And you’re the youngest?”

“Yeah, my brother and sisters are all two years apart, but Royal is fourteen years older than me.”

“That’s quite the gap.”

It did explain why King claimed not to be close with his siblings, though. They would have all graduated by the time their baby brother started kindergarten.

“Yes, but my mother swears I was planned.” He flipped his blinker on and checked his blind spot before changing lanes to pass a slower moving vehicle. Then he shrugged. “Maybe she was bored.”

Well, that was a pretty bleak way of looking at it. Sure, waiting that long to have a fourth child might not be the usual, but it wasn’t so strange. He also considered the possibility that King’s birth had been a happy accident, and his mom had told a small fib to protect his feelings. That still didn’t mean he had been unwanted.

Clearly, there was more to these family dynamics than his mate let on. Instead of

interrogating him about it, however, he decided to wait and find out for himself when he met the Mathers clan.

Which turned out to be sooner than he had anticipated. The last signage he'd seen had reported another twenty-two miles to Colorado Springs, but a few minutes later, King exited the highway and turned onto a narrow, two-lane road.

Businesses gave way to residential neighborhoods, which eventually became rows of densely packed trees with the occasional glimpse of mountain peaks in the distance. They didn't speak, and King appeared to barely be breathing, growing more tense with each passing mile.

After a while, King slowed once again, turning onto a paved lane that led to a massive wrought-iron gate set into what appeared to be a brick wall. Reaching overhead, he pressed the center button on a remote attached to his sun visor. With a loud creak and a low rumble, the gate parted, rolling away to permit them entry.

The lane turned out to be a long driveway with lush, manicured lawns on either side. A fountain topped with a life-size fairy was displayed like a centerpiece in the middle of the circular part of the drive. Carved from white stone, it glimmered in the fading sunlight while waterspouts skipped merrily over the surface of the basin.

The house itself was an interesting mixture of traditional and modern with large bay windows, more white stone, and dark wood trim. The porch stretched the length of the home, though apart from a few potted plants, it didn't appear as if the residents spent much time there.

No chairs. No swing. Nothing to indicate it was for anything more than decoration.

Exiting the vehicle, he met King at the bottom of the front steps and offered his hand. He wouldn't push the issue, but he wanted his mate to know he was there if King

needed him.

After a brief hesitation, King smiled and linked their fingers together. “Are you ready?”

“Ready.”

“I’m just going to go ahead and apologize in advance for anything my family might say. They have absolutely no filter.”

The guy didn’t seem to realize he wasn’t responsible for the behavior of others, but he was dealing with enough stress at the moment. As such, Storm decided to keep his comments to himself and wait for a more appropriate time to discuss it.

Besides, he fancied himself easygoing with a fairly high tolerance for bullshit. If they wanted to offend him, the Mathers would have to work hard for it. As long as they didn’t disparage his mate, he could take whatever they dished out to him.

“I promise not to take it personally.”

He knew he’d said the right thing when King nodded and let out a deep breath before leading him through the front door. The sounds of conversation came from deeper within the house, but even when King called out, no one came out to meet them.

Following his mate through a beautiful sitting room decorated in neutral shades of sand and sage, he couldn’t help but notice how unused everything appeared. The mocha-colored sofa and its matching armchairs had probably cost a fortune, but there was no sign that they were actually used for their intended purpose.

The walls were decorated with eclectic pieces of art, including metalworks, wood-carved masks, and modern paintings. The mantel over the fireplace contained vases

of fresh flowers, along with half a dozen miniature sculptures. A stack of self-help books adorned the coffee table, and weird bowls of wicker balls sat atop a long table just beyond the foyer.

Nowhere, however, did he see a single photo, or anything else that might hold meaning. Honestly, it kind of felt like walking through a museum, and he tucked his hands into the pockets of his chinos to avoid even accidentally touching anything.

From there, they passed through a wide corridor that reminded him remarkably of a waiting room. With a brick wall on one side, and a glass wall on the other that looked out onto a courtyard, the only thing that occupied the space was two benches and some fairly generic paintings.

They hung a left at the end of the hallway and entered an expansive dining room with a long, marble-topped table surrounded by eight leather chairs. More generic paintings took up valuable space on the walls, and a couple of fake palms in wicker baskets filled each corner of the room.

An arched doorway led to a kitchen that appeared small and outdated compared to the rest of the space, but Storm only caught a brief glimpse. The main attraction was the east wall, which consisted of glass accordion doors that stood open to a covered patio that abutted a huge pool, complete with a natural rock waterfall.

That was where they found King's family, gathered in another sitting area with two sofas and four additional armchairs. Directly behind one of the sofas was a fully stocked tiki bar, which the Mathers seemed to be putting to good use.

"King!" A young woman with golden curls just like his mate held up a colorful cocktail with an equally colorful paper umbrella. "What are you drinking?"

"That's Rhia," King muttered from the side of his mouth.

Before King could do anything more than nod, the matriarch spoke.

“He’ll have water.”

Daniella Mathers was undoubtedly beautiful, with a curtain of wheat-colored locks that brushed the tops of her shoulders. Despite the casualness of the gathering, she wore a full face of makeup, as well as a fitted black dress that looked more suited to a five-star restaurant than a pool-side patio.

“Mom.” The other sister—Reina, if he remembered correctly—brushed her chestnut hair over one shoulder and sighed. “Relax.”

She wore an understated sundress and a disapproving scowl as she squared off with her mother. Storm liked her immediately.

King cleared his throat and shuffled forward. Storm followed, linking their hands together and squeezing to lend his support.

“Everyone, this is my mate, Storm Black. Storm, this is my family.”

He started with Rhia, and went around the group, introducing each one by name. The two sisters smiled and nodded. The brother, Royal, beamed and gave him a big wave. Daniella folded her hands together at her waist and bowed her head.

King’s father, Tim, however, didn’t move from his seat on the sofa, other than to briefly glance up from the book he was reading. His expression held only the barest hint of acknowledgement without any sort of welcome. Since he was just as ardently ignoring his own children, however, Storm didn’t take it to heart.

Clearly, the guy had been coerced into the gathering by his wife and felt they were all intruding on his time.

“Beer?” Royal saddled up beside them and held out a bottle by its neck.

“Thanks.” He accepted the drink, but before taking a sip, he turned to King. “What about you?”

King shook his head quickly. “I’m not a big fan of beer. Enjoy.”

“Here, drink this.” Bouncing over to join them, Rhia pushed a cocktail of some electric pink concoction, ringed with yellow and topped with at least half a dozen cherries, into King’s hand.

“Uh, what is it?”

His sister shrugged. “The Rhia special.”

King’s gaze flitted to his mother, then back, before he took a tentative sip. He must have liked it because his head popped up, and his eyes widened. “It tastes like candy.”

Rhia smirked. “Told you so.”

“Just be careful,” Reina warned. “It definitely packs a punch.”

While Storm appreciated her concern, he wouldn’t let anything happen to his mate. “Just have fun. I can get us home.”

King answered by leaning into him with a warm smile and a quick nuzzle under his chin.

“Okay, be honest,” Rhia blurted. “He totally slipped you a love potion, didn’t he?”

“Don’t be stupid,” Royal argued. “How would he know if he’d been given a love potion?”

Reina scoffed. “You’re both idiots. A potion would wear off. It’s obviously some kind of spell.”

The tone of the conversation was light and teasing, and it was obvious none of them actually knew how potions or spells worked. To Storm, it was nothing more than some good-natured ribbing of their baby brother.

Yet, King wasn’t laughing. Hell, he was hardly breathing, and he looked for all the world like he wanted to crawl under the nearest rock and disappear.

“Interesting theory,” he noted casually. “Have you considered that I’m the one who gave him a love potion?” He tilted the mouth of the bottle toward them with an arched eyebrow. “I mean, he is pretty cute.”

“That’s fair,” Rhia allowed as she reached out to muss King’s curls. “He gets it from me, of course.”

“King,” Daniella called from the open doorway. “Come help me in the kitchen.” Then she met Storm’s gaze and smiled. “Please, make yourself at home. We’ll be ready to eat soon.”

“Thank you, ma’am. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Oh, no, that’s okay. We’ll manage.” Her smile disappeared as quickly as it had come. “King?”

“Coming, Mother.” He rolled his shoulders back and took a deep breath. “Sorry,” he mumbled. “I’ll be right back.”

When Storm turned back to the siblings, he noticed identical looks of concern on each of their faces as they watched their little brother disappear into the house.

“Shit,” Reina cursed. Without preamble, she snatched the cocktail from her sister’s hand and downed the remainder in one swallow.

For a moment, it looked as if Rhia would argue, but after a moment, she simply shrugged.

“What?” Storm asked. “What’s wrong?”

Royal shook his head. “It’s probably nothing. Just, sometimes, our mom has a tendency to be a bit critical.”

“Especially when it comes to King,” Rhia added. “She’s always been harder on him.”

Storm had simply assumed that Daniella wanted to talk to her youngest about...well, him. Now, he was wondering if allowing King to leave his side was the right call. Worried for his mate, he kept one ear on the conversation while tuning into what was happening in the kitchen.

“Oh, honey, you’re a mess. Just look at this shirt. It’s dreadful.”

For the evening, King had chosen a pair of black dress slacks with matching loafers. His black polo fit him beautifully, and the bands of red on the sleeves and collar complemented his creamy complexion.

Storm thought he looked quite dashing, and he failed to see how Daniella could find fault in the outfit.

“You’ve put on more weight, too.” Her disapproving tut was followed by a long sigh.

“We talked about this, yes?”

“Yes, Mother. I’m sorry. I’ll do better.”

It broke his fucking heart to hear how beaten down and defeated King sounded. Especially since there was no basis for Daniella’s complaints. King was perfect just the way he was, and Storm loved his soft curves and adorable bubble butt.

“Have you been avoiding carbs like I recommended?”

“Sometimes.”

“That’s good. Remember, if you’re hungry, drink green tea. It’ll help.”

Oh, fuck that. There was no way in heaven or hell he was going to allow his mate to starve himself out of some misguided desire to please his overbearing mother. What the hell was this female’s problem, anyway?

“So, you’ve been all over social media this week,” Royal said, interrupting his eavesdropping. “That was quite the show you put on.”

“I just wanted to swim.” It really wasn’t a big deal.

Reina nodded sagely. “I get that. It must be exhausting having people dogging your every step.”

“Dogs aren’t the problem.” What a strange thing to say. “It’s people that suck.”

Little snorts escaped Rhia’s nose, and her eyes started to water. Eventually, she couldn’t contain it any longer, and she barked out a sharp, shrill laugh.

“I’m putting that on a T-shirt.”

Loud throat-clearing drew their attention to the other side of the patio. Rhia instantly ducked her head and stopped laughing, looking properly abashed.

“Sorry, Dad,” she mumbled.

King had told him he wasn’t close to his siblings, but from what he could tell, they were a pretty good bunch. Yet, how they had managed to turn out so normal with such hypercritical parents remained a mystery.

“Now,” Daniella was saying when he returned to the conversation going on in the kitchen. “Have you started looking for another job?”

“I like my job.”

“Yes, dear, but it’s not exactly suitable, is it?”

Storm failed to see how honest work wasn’t suitable . He didn’t have to wait long to find out, though.

“Your...partner is famous,” she continued. “How is it going to look for him to be with a maid ?”

“Storm doesn’t care about stuff like that.”

“Do you honestly believe that? Of course, he cares. How could he not be embarrassed?”

Pretty bold of her to make assumptions about someone she didn’t even know.

He might not have all of his memories, but he liked to think he'd never been a prick who cared about status or money. King liked his position at Blackhaven Manor, and he enjoyed the people he worked with. It was also a perfectly respectable job—just like any employment that didn't involve criminal activity.

“I just don't understand why you won't apply yourself. Do you want to clean up after other people for the rest of your life?”

“Yes,” King answered, and he sounded confident. “I like cleaning. It's calming. All the better that I get paid for it, and I like knowing I can make guests' lives a little better. Even if it's just coming back to a tidy space after a long day.”

“Oh, don't be so stupid, Kingston. Those people don't care about you.”

Her statement was followed by a loud crash and the sound of breaking glass.

Both sisters gasped, and Royal cursed as they all jerked at the sound of the commotion. Storm, however, had a very different reaction. Instead of shock or surprise, he chose violence.

Driven by instinct and incapable of rational thought, all he knew was that his mate was in danger. Maybe. Whatever. Whether King was in peril or not, it didn't matter. Even a possible threat needed to be neutralized.

Permanently.

While everyone else remained distracted, he kicked off his shoes and stripped out of his shirt before sprinting toward the kitchen. He started his shift as soon as he cleared the patio, and by the time he'd crossed the dining room, he was clawing out of his chinos.

As a cougar, he was bigger, stronger, and a hell of a lot more lethal. While he would have preferred a moment to settle into his sable fur, that wasn't an option this time. King needed him.

Hissing and snarling, he bounded into the kitchen and leaped onto the kitchen island, sending metal pans and ceramic casserole dishes flying in every direction. He flicked his tail in agitation as he bared his teeth and growled.

The low, menacing rumble echoed through the room, but it couldn't compete with Daniella's high-pitched scream.

"Storm!" King yelled, rushing over to him and stroking the fur on his neck. "Calm down. Please do not eat my mom!"

"What is that? What's happening?" Daniella screeched.

"It's a cougar," King responded calmly. "Well, technically, he's my mate." Then he went right back to ignoring her as he rubbed both hands along the sides of Storm's neck. "Come on, big guy. Ease up."

At least, Storm thought that was what he'd said. It was kind of hard to tell with all the screaming and wailing going on.

"He tried to attack me! Call the police! Call the park rangers!"

"Shut up, Mother!" Entering the kitchen with her siblings close behind, Reina breathed out a deep sigh when her command shocked the matriarch into silence. "That's better."

Royal snickered. "This might be the best day of my life."

Unfortunately, Daniella recovered quickly and began screeching again. Only, this time, she wasn't passive about it. Grabbing an empty cookie sheet from the floor, she gripped it in both hands and began swatting at him with it.

“Back! Get back! Shoo!”

When one of her attempts brought the pan near his muzzle, Storm caught the edge of it between his teeth and ripped it easily from her hands. Apparently, that was Daniella's tipping point because she dissolved into hysterics as she ran from the room, slipping and tottering on her four-inch heels.

Completely ignoring the monstrous cat in their kitchen, the siblings rushed forward to surround King.

“Are you okay?” Reina asked as she brushed his hair back from his face. “Are you hurt? What happened?”

“I'm fine.” King looked more confused than scared. “I was hoping you could tell me what happened. Why is my mate losing his mind?”

“We all heard the crash,” Royal explained. “I think Storm was trying to protect you.”

“Crash?” King glanced around at the chaos. “Oh, that. I hit that ugly tea pitcher with my elbow and knocked it off the counter.”

Royal bobbed his head. “Best. Day. Ever.”

Oddly—or maybe not, all things considered—none of them seemed to be particularly worried about their mother. Under different circumstances, Storm might have felt sorry for her, but she had kind of brought it on herself. It also hadn't escaped his notice that at no point during the ordeal had King's father made an appearance or

shown any concern for his family.

Calm now that he knew his mate was safe, he lowered onto his haunches and relaxed his tense posture.

He'd done a decent job of clearing the countertop during his initial assault, but he'd missed a small bowl near the corner. It obviously wasn't bothering anyone. It sure as hell wasn't a threat. He still couldn't stop himself from nudging it with his paw.

"Storm, stop that."

He jerked his head up to look at his mate, but his foot seemed to have a mind of its own as it continued to push the bowl right off the edge of the island. It tumbled to the floor and bounced, but it didn't break. Bummer.

"Storm!"

There were a couple of snickers from the siblings, but Storm ignored them, distracted by a hand with manicured nails reaching toward his head.

"Sorry," Rhia said. She stopped moving, but she didn't retreat. "Can I? Please?"

She did realize she was asking to pet a grown ass man, right? Humans were weird. Still, it cost him nothing, and if it made her happy, he could play along. With a soft purr, he dropped his head and stretched his neck toward her.

Giggling like a child, she tentatively ran her fingertips from his brow to his crown. After a couple of repetitions, her confidence grew, and she began scratching behind his ears.

It was actually kind of nice.

“We should probably go,” King said a few minutes later. “I don’t doubt that my mom really will call the police.”

“Good idea,” Reina agreed. “Go on. We’ll sort things out here.” She looked over her shoulder toward the patio doors. “Uh, should we find his clothes?”

“It’s fine. He can ride home like this.” He arched an eyebrow when Storm whined at the suggestion. “I don’t want to hear it.”

Unsure of what he’d done wrong, Storm whined again and nuzzled his mate’s cheek. King, however, wasn’t swayed.

“No, sir.” He spoke with resolution as he pushed Storm away. “You had one job. Just one.”

Storm meowed. The closest he could get to a question in his current form.

King’s lips turned down at the corners, and he huffed. “All you had to do was keep your fucking clothes on!”

Chapter eleven

“ I ’m sorry.”

It was about the nineteenth time Storm had apologized since they’d left the disastrous dinner party. Maybe it would have been more believable if he knew what he was atoning for, but it just seemed like he didn’t want King to be mad at him.

In which case, he could stop feeling bad because King couldn’t remember ever being happier. Sure, he’d been scared shitless when the big cat had first burst into the kitchen. His mate had been spitting mad—literally—and he really had worried Storm might attack his mother.

After the initial shock had worn off, however, he hadn’t been able to stop smiling. It had felt good to see Daniella Mathers put in her place for once, instead of the other way around. The incident also had the unintended side-effect of showcasing his siblings in a much different light.

The way they had rushed to his defense had been surprising, especially when Reina had told their mother to shut up. The look on Daniella’s face had been priceless, and he wished to hell he had thought to capture it in 4K.

According to Storm, his siblings had been concerned for him as soon as he’d left the patio. Another surprising revelation. Now, he was reconsidering everything he thought he knew about them. Had he really been misreading them this whole time? The way they had surrounded him to make sure he was unhurt kind of made it seem that way.

“Stop apologizing,” he said, also for the nineteenth time, as he unlocked the door to Storm’s suite and pushed it open. “No one was hurt, and Royal is so happy he’s going to be insufferable for at least a week.”

Despite what he’d said in back in his mother’s kitchen, King had allowed his mate to shift back and dress for the ride home. Mostly because he didn’t know how to explain a mountain lion in his passenger seat, nor how he would get Storm back into the castle without everyone losing their shit.

“But your mom—”

“Deserved it.”

He couldn’t count the number of times he’d wanted to tell her to back the fuck off and leave him alone. He’d simply never had the courage. Like most bullies, though, she was all bark and no bite. When push came to shove, she’d been the first to retreat.

It could be argued that anyone would react similarly when faced with an angry mountain lion, but she had also been cowed by Reina’s verbal reprimand. It was kind of sad when he really stopped to think about it.

“I shouldn’t have lost my temper like that. I ruined dinner. You didn’t even get to eat.”

Tossing the brass key onto the side table, King turned with a warm smile. “We’ll order something.”

“That’s not the point. I shouldn’t have—”

King quieted him by placing two fingers to his lips. “Thank you. Really.” Yeah, it might have been an overreaction, but knowing Storm would fight for him was the

best feeling in the world. “No one has ever stood up for me like that. No one has ever put me first. You have no idea how much that means to me.”

Encircling his wrist with his long fingers, Storm pushed his hand down but kept a loose hold on his arm. “I will always put you first. I love you.”

King shook his head. “Don’t say that.”

Not because he didn’t want to hear it. Not because he didn’t feel the same way. If Storm woke up from this spell to find it had all been a fever dream, however, it would kill him.

“I mean it.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying.”

Storm’s brow creased, and a muscle in his jaw ticked angrily. “I might not remember who I am. At least, not all of it, but I know how I feel.”

“What if you don’t?” King asked sadly. “What if you only feel this way because of the hex?”

“Bullshit,” Storm spat. “I love you. I’m always going to love you.”

King wanted to believe that, but the risk to his heart terrified him.

“Do you love me?” Storm asked.

“That’s not fair.”

His mate dragged him closer and cupped his cheek. “Answer the question, darlin’. Do

you love me?”

Self-preservation be damned, he couldn't lie. Especially not when Storm looked at him that way.

“Yes.”

“Then let that be enough for now.”

His other hand came up to cradle King's face, and he leaned in, slanting their mouths together. It wasn't at all like the first time. There was no hesitation, no slow and gentle buildup. The shifter kissed him like he owned him, and with enough passion to set the whole damn castle on fire.

Without releasing his claim to King's mouth, he lifted him from the floor, holding him securely with both hands clasped around his backside. Scrambling for purchase, King wrapped his arms around his mate's neck and encircled Storm's narrow waist with his legs.

He didn't have any experience, but some things were purely instinctual. For once in his life, his mind was blissfully blank. No overthinking. No second-guessing. He just felt, and damn, did he feel it all.

His heart thundered against his ribs, pounding out a heavy drum in his ears. Adrenaline seared through his veins, and his muscles coiled with anticipation. Hard and throbbing, his cock pressed against his zipper in a bid for freedom, and his balls ached with the desperate need for relief.

Carrying him to the bedroom, Storm bounced off the wall, knocking down one of the ugly floral paintings, then stumbled into the small table by the balcony doors. Still clinging to each other, they laughed as Storm finally made it into the bedroom and

tumbled them both onto the mattress.

Their laughter faded away as their mouths met in another hungry, searching kiss. Tongues dueled, danced, sliding together in an intimate caress, breaking apart only long enough for them to quickly undress each other.

Storm fell into the cradle of his thighs, and they both groaned as their hard lengths rubbed together. Trembling with desire, and maybe a bit of nerves, King stroked his mate's handsome face, simply marveling that his amazing person belonged to him.

"Are you okay?" Storm asked. "Do we need to slow down?"

Too overcome with emotion, he shook his head and grabbed Storm's shoulders, pulling him into another desperate kiss. His breath caught, exiting on a quiet moan as he was pressed into the mattress by Storm's weight. Rather than heavy or suffocating, being surrounded like that felt safe, secure.

"There's lube in the top drawer of the nightstand."

His cheeks heated at the admission, but technically, it belonged to Storm anyway. He wasn't so naïve that he hadn't known its purpose, but he admitted to a small amount of trepidation when he'd first encountered it while looking for his mate's phone charger.

God, that seemed like a lifetime ago.

Storm stretched over him, reaching his long arms across the bed for the nightstand. After a bit of rummaging, he returned with a small, clear bottle with a purple cap. King hadn't been sure how much of this particular dance Storm would remember, but thankfully, he appeared to know exactly what to do next.

Which was a damn good thing because despite a generous amount of slick to ease the way, the invasion of a single digit ached like hell.

“Relax, darlin’. Breathe.”

King did as instructed, taking several deep breaths as he focused on unwinding the tight muscles in his body. It worked a little, but the tension returned tenfold when Storm added a second finger.

Instead of continuing to coach him through the process, Storm apparently decided a distraction was in order. Kissing a wet path down his quivering stomach, his mate nuzzled and teased the crease of his thighs, sending electric currents rippling through him.

When the silky heat of Storm’s mouth closed around the head of his cock, he nearly lost his fucking mind. He whipped his head back and forth against the comforter as sounds he was sure he’d never made before echoed around the room. His stomach clenched, the pressure in his balls built to unbearable levels, and the flames of impending release licked at his skin.

Screwing his eyes closed and gritting his teeth, he summoned every scrap of self-control he possessed so he didn’t go off like a bottle rocket. As such, he barely noticed when Storm breached him with a third finger, but when his mate eventually eased out of him, he felt oddly empty and bereft.

Storm released his cock with a naughty slurp and positioned himself between King’s spread legs once more. Capturing his mouth in a branding kiss, he rocked forward, nudging the crown of his erection against King’s entrance. The cool gel that coated the length felt like a balm to his overheated skin, and he was too overwhelmed to be anxious any longer.

Storm took his time, invading his depths in increments that stretched and filled him, causing an unfamiliar ache in his lower belly. He clung to the shifter's broad shoulders, trying to anchor himself as Storm flexed his hips in a slow, gentle rhythm.

His skin flushed and burned. Every breath seared his lungs. His cock throbbed with the erratic pounding of his pulse. He was lost, drowning in a sea of new sensations that he never wanted to emerge from.

When the need became too much, when neither of them could leash their control any longer, Storm increased his pace, driving into him faster and more forcefully. King panted, struggling to draw in breath, and his muscles clenched, his inner walls gripping, squeezing.

They moved as one, bodies writhing together, and they raced toward a crescendo that King knew would likely shatter him. When Storm buried his face against the side of his neck, he wasn't sure what to make of it at first. Then soft lips closed over a sensitive spot right below his ear, and sharp canines pierced the skin.

The sting of pain lasted for less than a heartbeat before it was replaced with the most indescribable pleasure. Just as he'd predicted, King shattered into thousands of shiny, sparkling pieces, calling Storm's name again and again in hushed tones as he erupted to fill the space between them with volleys of pearly cream.

Then Storm claimed his mouth again, thrusting his tongue between King's panting lips. The taste of copper was subtle but unmistakable, and he groaned as radiant sunlight filled the deepest recesses of his soul.

Above him, Storm shuddered and growled, a deep, resonating sound that vibrated through his entire being. One last hard plunge, and he stilled, the cords in his neck straining as he emptied himself into King's convulsing channel.

“Are you okay, darlin’?” he asked long moments later as he gently eased from King’s sated body.

A contented smile curved the corner of his lips at the sound of his mate’s voice inside his head. Some humans were freaked out by the thought of telepathic communication, but King had been looking forward to it since the day they’d met.

“Sleepy.” Fuck, he felt like he’d been run over by an armored tank.

“Rest. I’ll get you cleaned up.”

King hummed his gratitude, but he was too tired to open his eyes. In his daze, he heard water running in the en suite, and he felt the mattress dip when Storm returned. The warm, wet cloth that caressed his skin felt nice, but even that couldn’t pull him from the edge of sleep.

“King?”

It took an extraordinary amount of effort, but he finally managed to pry his eyes open. “Yeah?”

“My sisters’ names are Bridget and Bailey.”

His heart skipped a beat, but he still couldn’t do more than widen his eyes slightly. “You remember?”

The smile that lit the shifter’s face could have charmed the stars right from the sky. “I do, and guess what.”

“What?” he asked, sleep already beckoning him back into its embrace.

“I still love you.”

“Good. That’s good,” he slurred. “Love you, too.”

“Sleep now, darlin’.”

King sighed when strong arms gathered him up, and his mate’s warm body molded down his back. And that was the last thing he registered before the darkness finally claimed him.

Chapter twelve

Storm's overreaction the previous evening had turned out to be the best thing he'd ever done.

As a result, he had his memories back. He and King had confirmed their bond and cemented their relationship. Just as importantly, his mate was coming around to the idea that just because his parents sucked didn't mean his siblings were cut from the same cloth.

It would take time to undo years of miscommunication and let go of old resentments, but Storm had confidence that things would work themselves out in due course. King had been on his phone all morning, going back and forth with his sisters and brother in their group chat.

So far, he seemed receptive, if maybe a little wary.

They had apparently been invited to another family dinner the following weekend. Only this time, it would be hosted at Reina's house, and their parents had been purposely excluded. King had promised to consider the offer, but he hadn't committed, using the excuse of Storm's filming schedule.

Storm had promised to let King repair his relationship with his siblings at his own pace. That didn't mean he couldn't offer a little encouragement, though, and he had seven whole days to convince his mate that the gathering was a good idea.

In the meantime, they had more pressing matters that required their attention. Like

discovering who had hexed him. Since Cyrus had also been a victim, he had been particularly motivated to find answers.

For starters, the hellhound had learned that the guy claiming to be Nita's boyfriend had, indeed, been her boyfriend. Storm could only imagine the guy's frustration and confusion when the female had asserted that she didn't know him.

According to Nita's beau, they had been dating for almost a year, but they weren't true, fated mates. This had led King to hypothesize that was why Nita had forgotten her partner, but not her family or friends.

There was some credence to this since the opposite had happened to Cyrus and Storm. They had forgotten everything except their mates. Another difference was that Nita hadn't experienced cognitive issues in recalling the names of everyday objects or performing her duties at the hotel. She also hadn't attacked a television or threatened her mate's mother. So, there was that.

Arguably, of the three of them, she seemed to have been the least affected, while Storm had taken the brunt of the curse. On the other hand, unlike Cyrus, he remembered everything that had happened while he'd been under the influence. Which had led him to wonder if it was even the same curse. It had to be, but nothing about it added up.

Of course, what everyone really wanted to know was who they had to blame for the clusterfuck that had haunted them for the past several days. Thankfully, Cyrus had answers for them.

He'd called them earlier to give them the news, and now they were all gathered around one of the monitors in the security office. It had taken him a few days to review the footage and analyze everyone's movements, but he had three separate clips queued up for them to see.

“So, I found a couple dozen people who interacted with all three of us,” the hellhound told them as he settled into the chair in front of the screen. “I was able to narrow it down significantly by the order in which we came into contact with them. Nita first, me—” He glanced up at Storm. “—and you.”

Storm nodded that he understood and was following so far.

“Once I reviewed which ones we had physical contact with, that brought the number down to two. So, then I analyzed how much time passed between interactions, since Nita and I started showing symptoms fairly close together.”

Storm nodded, impressed. Given several uninterrupted weeks, he might have eventually figured it out, but Cyrus had accomplished it in a matter of days. He also appreciated that the hellhound had taken the time to break down his process in simple terms, especially since he was under no obligation to do so. He could have just pointed out the culprit and left it at that.

“I’m pretty confident this is our guy.” He clicked the mouse and began playing a recording of Nita speaking to a young male with horn-rimmed glasses and a vibrant pink mohawk.

“Owen?” Storm couldn’t believe it. “You’re sure?”

Cyrus arched both eyebrows at him. “You know him?”

He could only nod. Of all the possible suspects, Owen wouldn’t have even made his top twenty.

The clip continued to play, showing Nita smiling and laughing before gently patting Owen on the shoulder. Going by the timestamp in the top right corner, this would have been sometime during the transition between the Q&A and the signing.

Then Cyrus switched to a recording of him and Owen in what appeared to be a friendly conversation. There was no audio, so Storm couldn't be sure what they were talking about, but both of them were smiling. At the end of the conversation, they shook hands.

The time stamp showed only fifteen minutes had passed since the first clip.

Finally, the hellhound brought up the footage of Owen making his way onto the stage to shake Storm's hand. That had happened nearly an hour after Owen and Cyrus' interaction.

The evidence was irrefutable, and the timeline made sense, but Storm couldn't wrap his head around it. Why would Owen want to curse him, let alone two strangers, that by all appearances, he had been amiable with during the evening?

"He'll be at the fan meeting tonight," King announced, speaking for the first time since they had entered the room. "I think we should plan to talk to him before the event starts to avoid any disruptions." His tongue darted out to wet his bottom lip. "Taking him to the side during registration would probably be better than dragging him into the security office. We don't want to scare him."

There was no accusation or anger in his voice, though no one would have blamed him if there had been. Instead, he spoke matter-of-factly with clear action steps, the way he might approach a broken pipe in one of the guest rooms.

"I agree," Cyrus said. "We don't want to spook him and risk being hexed again."

"Or piss him off," King countered. "We still need his help with Nita."

As a human, now that they were bonded, it was assumed King would receive what many referred to as a paranormal upgrade. Things like heightened senses, immunity

to diseases, and faster healing were some of the first and most common of these enhancements. In King, however, the most notable changes—so far—had been cerebral.

There was a calmness about him now. He seemed clearer minded and less anxious, less indecisive. When choosing what to eat for breakfast, he hadn't spent ten minutes fretting over what he wanted to eat versus what he thought he should eat. Instead, he'd compromised by simply adding Greek yogurt and fresh fruit to his waffle.

When it came to selecting an outfit, he had chosen comfort over style, recognizing it would be a long, exhausting day that required him to be on his feet for hours at a time. Storm still thought he looked stunning in his dark-washed jeans and lavender V-neck, but he acknowledged that it wasn't something Daniella would have approved of.

Given King's previous jealousy and dislike of Owen, he had expected more of an aggressive reaction to learning the male had caused this mess. He'd even anticipated an I-told-you-so. Or two.

Maybe it was his infusion of supernatural blood, or maybe because he simply felt more secure in his and Storm's relationship. Whatever the reason, he now possessed an air of confidence that hadn't been there before.

While Storm would never want to change anything about his mate, he did like this more assured version of him. Not because he thought there had been anything wrong with King before, but because the guy seemed happy. Content and comfortable in his own skin.

"He might already be here," Storm offered, referring to his troublesome fan. "Fifty or so people have been lined up outside since sunrise."

Damien had once told him they did that so they could be the first through the doors to get a front-row seat, but it still sounded extreme and unnecessary to him. After five years of this fame gig, he probably should have been used to it. Yet, he doubted it would ever be normal to him.

Cyrus immediately turned to the collection of monitors on the back wall and began clacking away at the keyboard. Within seconds, the center screen showed an enlarged view of the portico in front of the hotel. Unlike the crowd gathered beyond the police line in the parking lot, the fans waiting to enter sat in a neat row, chattering amongst themselves.

Which made it pretty easy to spot Owen's colorful mohawk in the lineup. Alone, and apparently uninterested in engaging his fellow partygoers, he leaned against one of the stone lions with his legs outstretched and crossed at the ankles. Wearing a pair of oversized headphones, he had his head tilted back and his eyes closed.

The picture of ease, he didn't look like he had a care in the world. He sure as hell didn't give off the appearance of someone returning to the scene of the crime after cursing three people.

Storm couldn't decide if it was cockiness, indifference, or something else, but the whole vibe felt strange. "Are you sure it's him?"

"I think he's someone worth talking to," Cyrus responded.

When he swirled around in his seat and started to stand, however, King stopped him with a hand to his shoulder.

"I think someone else should go get him." He glanced up at Storm with an apologetic smile. "If either of us step outside, it's going to be chaos." Then he returned his attention to the hellhound. "And no offense, but you're kind of scary on your best

day.”

The guard smiled at this. “Thanks.”

Somehow, Storm didn’t think his mate had meant it as a compliment. “So, who do we send?”

“Arlo,” King answered without hesitation. “He’s charming and non-threatening. Plus, he’ll love the chance to put on a performance.”

Storm admitted to being slightly biased since the guy happened to be his mate’s best friend, but Arlo did seem perfect for the task. There wasn’t an intimidating bone in his body, and just a few minutes in his presence could brighten anyone’s day.

“Alright,” Cyrus announced, pushing out of his chair...and actually making it to his feet this time. “Go get him.”

“Should we meet at the café?” Storm suggested.

King shook his head. “Too many windows. We don’t want to start unnecessary rumors.”

Ah, good point. Priya was still seething over the lake incident. Probably best not to test the limits of her patience.

“How about my dressing room?” he offered instead.

Technically, it was one of the Manor’s many conference rooms, but for the duration of filming, it had been transformed into his respite while on set. It was private, as well as non-confrontational, and it wouldn’t set off any alarm bells when they brought Owen in.

“That could work.” King gave him one of those dazzling smiles before turning to Cyrus. “What do you think?”

“I like it. I’ll head there with Storm and clear out anyone in the vicinity.”

“I’ll send Arlo out and wait for him and Owen in the lobby,” King added. “We’ll meet you guys in a few.”

As they all started to leave, Storm caught his mate by the elbow and spun him around. “Be careful and don’t touch him.”

With a sweet, indulgent smile, King pushed up on his toes for a quick, chaste kiss. “Don’t worry. I’ve got this.” He stole another kiss, then pulled free of Storm’s grasp. “See you in a minute.”

By the time Storm caught up with Cyrus, the hellhound had already sent any lingering staff on their way with strict instructions not to return until notified. Then they entered the modified conference room and waited.

Storm settled down on the emerald-green loveseat and tried to appear casual. For an actor, it should have been easy, but thinking about King being near Owen without even a sliver of protection made it hard to relax.

His companion, however, didn’t even attempt neutrality. He stood just a few feet from the door, arms crossed over his chest, and a perma-scowl etched into the lines of his face.

“Dude, chill. We’re supposed to be making him feel comfortable.” He waved a hand, indicating the hellhound’s tense posture. “You look like you’re going to bite his face off as soon as he walks through the door.”

Cyrus growled, but he moved over to the table that had been pushed against the wall, dragged out one of the chairs, and flopped down on it. It didn't help. The guy looked no less brutal.

Thankfully, Storm didn't have to worry about it for long. No more than five minutes had passed when there was a soft, perfunctory rap at the door, and King stepped into the room. Owen followed behind him with Arlo bringing up the rear. They all appeared calm, and Owen even wore a slanted smile. He clearly had no idea why he'd been summoned, but he seemed pleased by the invitation.

"Come on in," Arlo said, his tone light and pleasant as he directed Owen to one of the two armchairs. "Have a seat."

While Owen followed the instructions, Arlo sashayed over to Cyrus and hopped up on the table to sit. He leaned back on his palms and swung his feet, looking for all the world like a kid waiting for the bus. King, on the other hand, moved to sit beside Storm on the loveseat with a much more stoic expression.

"How do we start?" Storm asked, using his telepathic link to his mate. "Do we just ask him why he cursed us?"

"I don't really know. I was hoping Cyrus would take it from here."

Storm glanced at the hellhound. "Maybe that's not such a good idea."

Before either of them could decide how to proceed, Arlo took the burden from them.

"So, you're a witch?"

Owen's eyes widen, and the blood drained from his face, leaving him sickly pale.

"What did I do?"

Storm didn't know what the hell to think. That certainly hadn't been the reaction he'd expected. "You're not in trouble." Yet. "We just have some questions for you."

"Yeah," Arlo interjected. "Like, why did you hex my friends? Not cool, bro."

"I-I hexed someone?" A mortified groan rolled from Owen's chest, and he dropped his face into his hands briefly before looking up at them again. "Are they okay? Did I hurt someone?"

Okay, this was getting weird. Storm had come into the room expecting to confront an asshole with a chip on his shoulder. The poor kid sure as hell didn't fit that description. In fact, he looked like one wrong word would eviscerate him.

"No, you didn't hurt anyone," King said kindly. Inching to the edge of the cushion, he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and linking his fingers together. "Maybe we should back up a little. You are a mage, right?"

Owen nodded. "Yes."

"And you did curse someone at the last event?"

He chewed his bottom lip as tears welled along his red-rimmed lids. "I don't know. If I did, I swear I didn't do it on purpose."

Storm glanced around the room, recognizing the same confusion on the other's faces that he felt. "Were you born a witch?"

While rare, there were other ways to obtain magic. Although, those means were highly frowned upon.

"Yes." Owen bobbed his head again. "Sort of."

Storm frowned. What the fuck did that mean?

“What the fuck does that mean?” Arlo blurted. Leave it to him to say the inside parts out loud.

“I’m an accipere .” At their clueless looks, Owen elaborated. “A syphon. I wasn’t born with magic of my own. I can only absorb it from others.” He dragged both hands over his face and sighed. “If there’s a way to control it, I haven’t figured it out yet, and I definitely don’t know how to use the magic I take.”

Well, fuck him sideways. At no point in their planning had Storm expected to walk away feeling sorry for the kid.

“What did I do?” Owen asked again. “Someone, please tell me.”

“You erased Storm’s memory,” King answered. “As well as Cyrus—” He pointed to the hellhound. “—and a female named Nita.”

“Fuck,” Owen cursed, but it came out as little more than a breath. “I’m so sorry. I don’t even know how I did it.”

“We think it was through touch,” King explained. “Has something like this happened before?”

The witch nodded sadly and repeated, “I’m so sorry.”

Feeling the urge to comfort him, Storm offered a bit of good news. “Cyrus and I are fine now. Our memories have returned.”

“Oh, thank the goddess.”

“Nita is okay, too, but the spell affected her differently. She can remember everything about her life except her boyfriend.”

“Do you know why that might be?” King asked. “You said you don’t know how to use the magic you absorb, so I’m thinking it probably manifests from your emotions.”

Owen’s cheeks pinkened, and his gaze flickered to Storm before lowering again. “I was jealous,” he admitted. “After I found out you two were mated, I kept thinking I just wished he would forget you.” He rounded his shoulders and lifted his head to look at King. “Sorry.”

But King just chuckled. “Don’t worry. I get it. I’d probably feel the same way in your shoes.”

“Really?” Storm sent to his mate.

“No, but just look at him. There’s no reason to make him feel worse.”

“So, you wouldn’t be jealous if I was mated to someone else?” he teased.

“Keep talking, and you’ll be sleeping alone tonight.”

Storm barked out a sharp laugh, not even caring when everyone in the room turned to look at him like he’d lost his mind. He was blessed to have remembered the time he and King had spent together while he was hexed. He could even recall how obsessed he’d been with his mate during that time.

Honestly, that part hadn’t changed, and he still thought the guy was too fucking adorable for his own good. Even when he was mad. Especially when he was mad.

“So,” Arlo said, dragging the word out. “You wanted Storm to forget King, but wires

got crossed, and instead, he ended up forgetting everything else. And Cyrus and Nita were just...accidents?"

"That sounds about right. Like I said, I have no idea how it works. I really am sorry." Then, after a long tense silence, Owen asked, "How much trouble am I in?"

They all looked to Cyrus. As head of security, it was technically his call, but Storm couldn't even guess what the charges would be, let alone the punishment. It had been a tough week, but there hadn't been any permanent damage.

Well, apart from Cyrus' television.

Oh, and the irreparable chasm Storm had created between himself and King's mother. Although, to be fair, he would have likely done that all on his own, curse or not.

That just left Nita. Yes, the female would probably be happy to remember her partner, but no other part of her life had changed. While a shitty thing to do, being a homewrecker wasn't exactly a capital offense.

"Will you fix Nita?" Cyrus asked, echoing his thoughts.

"If I can, but I'm telling you, I honestly don't know how." Owen tensed, his eyes widened, and he looked on the verge of panic. "I don't even know how I cursed any of you in the first place."

"Well, let's think about this logically," King said, the voice of reason. "Cyrus said there were quite a few magic users at the last event." He looked to the hellhound for confirmation and smiled when Cyrus nodded. "I think it's safe to say that you absorbed magic from them without meaning to."

"Do you have to touch them to do that?" Arlo asked from his perch.

“Yes, but it doesn’t always happen.”

“I’d guess the more powerful the Otherling, the more practiced they’d be at blocking you,” King offered.

Everyone nodded thoughtfully, agreeing that it made perfect sense.

“Oh, I get it!” Arlo shouted as he practically flung himself off the table. “You’re an ass-pear.”

“Accipere,” Owen corrected, but he looked to be having a hard time not laughing about the mispronunciation.

“Right, whatever. Spells are magic.” When no one seemed to be following his train of thought, he threw his hands in the air and huffed. “Take back the hex! Just absorb it. That could work, right?”

Owen thought about it for a moment, then shrugged. “Theoretically?” His tone didn’t hold a lot of confidence. “Yeah, I could try. I can’t promise it’ll work, though.”

“What do you think, darlin’?”

King leaned to the side to rest against his shoulder. “I think it’s worth a shot.”

“Agreed.” Now that they had that out of the way, he had another piece of news he’d been keeping close to the vest all day. “We’re going to have a few extra guests at the fan meet tonight.”

“Oh?” King sounded more distracted than curious. “Who?”

“My family.”

It took a couple of seconds for the information to penetrate, but when it did, King bolted upright, his eyes as big around as dinner plates. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“What?” Arlo demanded. “What did I miss? This telepath stuff sucks balls.”

“Calm down, darlin’. It’s just my parents and my sisters. I promise they’re not that scary.”

“How long have you known?”

“I called them first thing this morning.”

“This morning!” King screeched. “And you’re just now telling me? What the hell, Storm?”

“Tell me,” Arlo whined. “I want to know!”

“Oh, my god, I hate you.” With that, King launched himself off the loveseat and marched out of the room without so much as a see-you-later.

“I love you, too!” Storm called after him.

Clearly, no one knew how to respond to the outburst, and the resulting tension in the room turned thick and cloying. Until Owen finally broke the uneasy silence.

“Uh, so can I go now?”

Chapter thirteen

King was going to throw up.

Not just a little. Not only in his mouth. He was going to full-on The Exorcist everything he'd ever eaten in his entire life.

After that, he was going to pitilessly murder his mate.

Yeah, fine, he got it. After nearly a week of believing he didn't even have a family, Storm now remembered them and wanted to see them. Awesome. Fantastic. A twenty-four-hour notice might have been nice.

And what the hell was wrong with his family? Who just woke up and decided to travel across state lines without any planning or preparation?

Hey, honey, what do you want to do today?

Let's drive four hours to another state. Sound good?

Hell yeah. I'll pack snacks.

Sweet baby angels, he was going to have a proper mental breakdown.

While he knew Storm's real name was Steven, he had become accustomed to calling him Storm. Would his parents take offense to that? Did he call them Mr. and Mrs. Blackburn? Fuck, he didn't even know their names. And what about the twins?

Well, according to his mate, the girls thought he was cute. So, at least that was something.

“Darlin’, you need to breathe.”

“I’m breathing!” Hell, he was practically hyperventilating. How much more breathing did the guy want from him? “When are they going to be here?”

“Probably half an hour or so.”

“Oh, god.” The cramping in his stomach intensified, and his pulse rocketed as his heart made a valiant attempt to explode out of his chest.

“Please calm down.” Uncaring that they stood in the middle of the hotel lobby, Storm took his hand and pulled him into his arms, surrounding him with warmth and strength. “My family is going to adore you, and if they don’t, I’ll eat them.”

Despite the tsunami of nerves crashing inside him, he couldn’t help but chuckle. “I will never forget the look on my mom’s face.”

“I do feel bad about that.”

King rolled his eyes. “No, you don’t, but it’s okay. She deserved it.”

The shifter didn’t agree with him outright, but his lack of comment spoke volumes.

He had spent his entire life trying to live up to his mother’s unreasonable expectations. Of course, he still loved her, but the previous evening had been the wake-up call he’d needed.

Just because he didn’t want the life his mother pushed on him didn’t make him

flawed or broken. Beating himself up over ever perceived infraction didn't serve any purpose, other than to make him miserable. He loved his job, his apartment, and everything about his life. Hell, he was even happy with the way he looked, and frankly, he fucking hated green tea.

While Storm's eruption had been the catalyst, his siblings had played a big role in helping him see the truth. They'd stood by him, and they had taken his side against their mother. That wasn't something easily brushed aside.

After he'd awoken from his mini coma, he'd spent a lot of time during the night replaying old conversations from a new perspective. Instead of scorn and disdain, he tried to view them through a less resentful lense. One that came from a place of love and gentle teasing.

There had also been a constant flow of messages coming into the group chat since early that morning, and he had to give his brother and sisters credit. They were trying, and the least he could do was to meet them halfway. It wouldn't happen all at once, but he had hope that they could repair the broken parts of their relationship.

As for his parents, well, that depended on them. He didn't want to cut them out of his life completely, but he was done being either an afterthought or a punching bag. Besides, he had a feeling Storm wouldn't be welcomed at family dinners again, which was a deal breaker as far as he was concerned.

"I found her!" Arlo came rushing down the grand staircase, dragging Nita behind him.

"Damn it, Arlo! Let go of me. What is wrong with you? Aren't you supposed to be babysitting the wolf boy?"

Clearing the last step, he rushed over to join their group, where they stood out of sight

from the windows that looked out onto the front portico. “He’s in a meeting. Just trust me.”

“I definitely don’t.”

“That’s fair.” Even as he spoke, he grabbed Nita by the elbow and shoved her toward Owen. “Get with the fixing.”

King loved his best friend, and he would do anything for him, but the guy had the subtlety of a nail gun to the face. “Nita, I apologize for Arlo’s...” He trailed off, trying to think how to word what he wanted to say, then gave up and shrugged. “I’m sorry for Arlo.”

“Still fair.”

Apart from the twitching at the corner of his lips, King ignored him. “My friend here wanted to thank you for helping him at the last fan meet. Do you remember Owen?”

Nita’s expression slowly morphed from irritation to recognition. “Of course! I didn’t know you were coming back. How are you?”

The witch looked a little pale, but he pasted on a smile. “I’m great. How are you?”

“Can’t complain. So, you wanted to thank me for something?”

“Yeah, I was really struggling with deciding on my major, but you said I should do what I love. So, I’ve decided to major in graphic design.”

Ah, so that’s what they’d been talking about in the security footage. Damn, how young was this kid?

“That’s fantastic! I know you’re going to be great at it, and when you graduate, I expect a discount on your services.”

Owen laughed, and some of the tension drained from his shoulders. “That goes without saying.” He took a deep breath and extended his right hand. “So, thank you for listening.”

“It was my pleasure.” Batting his hand away, Nita pulled him into a tight hug. “I’m so proud of you.”

While still technically physical contact, maintaining it for any length of time without coming off as creepy was going to be a problem. Not knowing what else to do, King flung his arms around both of them.

“We’re all proud of you! Group hug!”

Thankfully, Arlo had no reservations, but Storm still held back.

“Uh, King? Should you be touching him?”

“I’ll explain later. Just get in here.”

After another second of hesitation, Storm wrapped his arms around all four of them. King just prayed it worked.

When they finally broke apart, everyone stood in a loose circle around Nita, watching her for any signs that the hex had been lifted. At first, nothing happened. Her face was scrunched, and her eyes kept darting around the group, but that was probably because they were all staring at her like a bunch of psychos.

Slowly, however, her expression changed, fell, and her gaze turned soft and

unfocused. “Oh, no,” she whispered. “Kief.” Then her head popped up, her eyes rounded, and she began digging furiously into her pocket for her phone. “I have to go.”

“Kief?” Arlo asked as they watched her dart off toward the registration desks. “That’s rough. Can you imagine introducing yourself, and everyone thinking you have a lisp?”

“There’s nothing wrong with having a lisp,” King argued.

“Yeah, but an accidental one because your parents named you Kief? Come on!”

“It’s probably short for Kiefer,” Owen said. “You know, like the actor.”

“Oh, right. Or the yogurt.”

King rolled his eyes. “That’s Kefir.”

“Whatever. Tomato, tomato.” And he pronounced it the same both times.

Deciding Arlo had received enough attention for one day, King turned to Owen. “Thank you for helping Nita.”

“I’m sorry this happened in the first place.” He shoved his hands into the pockets of his ripped jeans and hung his head. “I guess thanks for not arresting me.”

“Out of curiosity, how old are you?”

“I just turned eighteen last month.”

Poor fucking kid. “Well, good luck with college. I’m sure you’re going to make a hell

of a graphic designer.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that.” He looked up when the front doors opened, and people began filing into the lobby. “I guess I better go register. Forgive me if I don’t shake hands.”

Probably for the best, but King didn’t want to rub salt into an open wound. “I’ll see you around.”

“I feel bad for him,” Storm said once he was out of earshot.

“Me, too. Isn’t there anything we can do for him?”

“He’ll figure it out,” Arlo said. “You can’t fix the world.”

“I know that, but he seems to really be struggling.”

“Captain Save a Beau, listen to me. You.” Clap. “Can’t.” Clap. “Fix.” Clap. “The.” Clap. “World.”

King chuckled at his antics, though he knew better than to encourage him. “Yeah, yeah, I’ve got it.”

Besides, he had bigger problems at the moment. Like the fact that he had just spotted a pair of identical blonde-haired, blue-eyed girls walk through the huge double doors. Right behind them was a man who looked exactly like his mate, holding hands with a beautiful woman who could have been another sister instead of Storm’s mom.

Good genes clearly ran in the family.

“I thought you said I had half an hour!”

“That was at least fifteen minutes ago,” Storm responded calmly. “They made good time.”

“Good time? Good time!”

“Let’s go say hello.”

Thankfully, training and common sense overrode whatever malfunction he was currently having. “Are you crazy? You’ll get mobbed before you make it halfway across the room.”

“Yeah, but—”

“No. Come on, we need to get you out of here.” They were still partially hidden in the alcove by the stairs, but they definitely needed to move. “Arlo, can you send them to the piano lounge?”

“I’m on it.” He didn’t move, though. “Uh, which ones belong to him?”

“The ones that look just like him!”

“Oh, right. Yep, I see it now.”

“And don’t tell them he was cursed!”

“Damn, there goes my opening line.” The sarcasm was thick enough to cut with a knife.

“Fine. Go.”

Leaving Arlo to deal with the Blackburns, he rushed Storm around the corner and

down the wide corridor. With the only guests being those associated in some way with the film, the typically noisy establishments were blessedly quiet and unassuming.

They passed a couple of restaurants and a small shop that sold travel essentials like toothbrushes and deodorant. Toward the end of the hallway, they finally came to All That Jazz, a dimly lit lounge filled with the sound of soft piano music.

Inside, he waved to the bartender, a pretty fae with ruby-red hair, then headed straight to the sitting area in the back corner. With two leather loveseats and matching armchairs, it was cozy, but with enough room so they wouldn't be right on top of each other.

"It's going to be okay," Storm said again, still trying to calm him. Grabbing him by the shoulders, he twisted him around and planted a searing kiss on his lips. "I love you, yeah?"

King sighed. "I love you, too, but I'm still nervous."

"Come on. Let's sit while we wait."

A good idea in theory, but his butt had barely touched the cushion of the loveseat when Storm's family filed into the lounge.

"Uh, are my sisters allowed to be in here?"

"It's fine. They just can't enter the bar area."

Satisfied with the answer, he hurried across the room to meet his family. He hugged his dad first, a big, crushing embrace that looked kind of painful. Then he welcomed his mother by lifting her off her feet and spinning her in a circle before giving her a

smacking kiss on the cheek. Finally, he turned to his sisters, threw one over each shoulder, and carried them to the sitting area.

It was the most insane reunion King had ever witnessed. Was this how normal families treated each other? He couldn't even remember the last time he'd hugged his mother.

"Everyone," Storm announced as he dropped the giggling twins to their feet. "I want you to meet my mate, Kingston. Darlin', this is the fam."

As if summoned to a roll call, they all lined up and introduced themselves one by one.

"I'm Robert." He stepped forward and grabbed King's hand in a firm grasp. "It's nice to meet you, son."

Son? "Likewise."

"And I'm Shelby." Storm's mother wasn't a hand-shaker. She was a hugger, and she held onto him like he might fall apart without her support. "Welcome to the family."

Okay, this wasn't so bad. A little overwhelming, but...nice.

"Bridget." The first twin gave him an exaggerated wave.

"And Bailey!" The second tucked one leg behind the other and lowered into a deep courtesy. "You are way too good—"

"For our brother. We saw you—"

"Online. OMG! It was a—"

“Total vibe!”

Heat rushed to King’s cheeks and crept up to the tips of his ears. “Are they always like this?”

Storm chuckled and kissed the top of his head. “Yeah, but you’ll get used to it.”

“Oh, oh, are you doing—”

“The telepathic thing? That is highkey—”

“So cute!”

“Okay, girls, let the boy breathe,” Robert admonished gently. “Let’s sit.”

King settled onto the back loveseat with Storm, while Robert and Shelby took the other, leaving the twins to curl up in the armchairs.

“So, Kingston, what is it you do?” Shelby asked.

“Please, call me King, and I work here at the hotel.” He held his breath and waited for the fallout.

“This is such an interesting place. I bet you’re never bored.”

“No ma’am. Never a dull moment.”

“Are you a concierge?” Bridget asked.

“Actually, I work in housekeeping.” Great. Way to make an impression. “I like cleaning,” he added lamely.

“It’s so relaxing, isn’t it?” Shelby laughed and snuggled close to her husband’s side. “I bet you’ve met a lot of interesting people.”

That was it? No judgment? No questions about when he was going to find a “real” job?

“I guess so. I tend to think everyone is interesting in their own way.”

“Some people are just jerks,” Bailey argued.

King shrugged. “Even jerks can be interesting.”

The way he saw it, everyone had a story. Owen had just proven that.

“That’s right.” Robert pointed a finger at his daughters. “You two listen up. You might just learn something.”

The girls rolled their eyes, but otherwise, didn’t comment.

“I’m going to get a drink,” Robert announced and pushed out of his seat. “You boys want anything?”

“Just water,” Storm said. “I have to be on stage in a couple of hours.”

“Yes, dear, and we don’t want a repeat of the lake.”

“Mom!”

Bridget and Bailey fell into a fit of giggles, and even King was having a hard time not laughing.

“What?” Shelby demanded.

“I can’t believe you watched that.”

“Oh, please, I was wiping that ass long before you even knew what to do with it.”

That did it. King couldn’t keep it together, and he fell against his mate, gasping for breath as tears streamed down his face.

“See?” Storm whispered into his mind. “I told you it would be fine.”

It was more than fine. It was perfect.

It was family.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:25 am

Six months later...

“ T his is a farm ?” Inching as far forward in the passenger seat as the safety belt would allow, King stared through the windshield with his mouth hanging open. “Are you kidding me?”

To Storm, it was just home, but he could understand his mate’s reaction. Cat’s Cradle was a working cattle ranch situated on one hundred and eighty thousand acres. In his defense, they did use a portion of the land for greenhouses and hydroponics. Mostly for his sisters to sell at the local Farmers Market, but it still counted.

They also owned horses, goats, chickens, and one very fat pig named Clarabelle. She and the twins had taken first prize at the last FFA Stock Show.

“Oh, look!” King pointed excitedly as they reached the end of the gravel drive. “The scarecrows are so cute!”

They were pretty cute. And the pumpkins and gourds that littered the lawn were a nice touch for Thanksgiving as well. His mom had always gone all-in for the holidays, decorating both inside and out.

It had been a while since he’d really appreciated it, though.

Post-production for Checking In was complete, and the first episode of the drama was scheduled to air on Christmas Day. Storm and Damien had been making the promotional rounds, and he was definitely ready for a little R&R.

Maybe permanently.

The past few months had been hectic, and his grueling schedule hadn't left much time for his mate. King hadn't complained, and he never held it against him, but to Storm, it was unacceptable.

Which was why he had turned down the role for the new paranormal action series.

With his promotional tour taking him all over the country, King had stayed in Colorado to continue working at Blackhaven Manor. There, he had Arlo, his other friends at the hotel, and his relationship with his siblings was growing stronger all the time.

Still, it wasn't exactly how Storm had pictured mated life.

Sleeping in hotel rooms—or not sleeping, as it were—had given him a lot of time for self-reflection. During those restless nights, he'd taken stock of what he most valued, with his mate and his family being right at the top of that list. So, he had a decision to make, and honestly, it wasn't even a hard one.

He couldn't live without his heart, and his heart wasn't in New York or the film industry.

Slowing to a stop in front of his parents' ranch-style home, he caught King by the elbow to stop him from exiting the SUV. "Hold up a minute. I wanted to ask you something."

Confused but accepting, his mate waited patiently for him to find the words.

There was no easy way to say it, though. He just had to rip the bandage off and hope for the best. "I turned down the new role."

“I know.”

Storm blinked. “How?”

“Damien told Arlo, and Arlo told...well, everybody.”

Yeah, that added up. Damien and Arlo had become fast friends, and they still kept in contact almost daily. It was a shame there wasn't a romantic attraction there because they'd make a hell of a couple.

“Why didn't you say anything?”

King shrugged. “I figured you'd tell me when you were ready to talk about it. I'm guessing you're ready now.”

There wasn't really anything to talk about since he'd already made up his mind, but he did want to know how King felt about it. “What do you think?”

“I think you should do what makes you happy. I told you in the beginning, I'll support whatever you want to do.”

“And if I wanted to quit acting altogether and take over the farm?”

“First, this is not a farm .” King reached across the console to take his hand and cradle it between both of his own. “Secondly, I always knew we'd end up here eventually. It's in your blood, Tex.”

It was a corny nickname, but like everything else about his mate, he adored it. “You'd be okay with living here?”

For the first time, King showed a hint of reluctance. “With your parents?”

Ah, now he understood. “Not in the same house. We could build our own place. Mom and Dad set aside ten acres for me and the girls, or if you don’t like that, we can look for property nearby.”

“I don’t have a problem living at Cat’s Cradle, but Storm, I don’t know the first thing about ranching.”

“That’s okay. I’ll teach you.” The twins would love the chance to show him the ropes around the barn. “Or you could help Mom in the greenhouses. Or, hell, if you don’t want anything to do with it, you can get a job in town.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell him that he didn’t have to work at all if he didn’t want to, but he knew King would never go for that.

“It’s not too far from Colorado,” he added. “Only a four-hour drive, so you can see your brother and sisters whenever you want. Of course, they’re always welcome here, too.”

“Storm, stop.” With a gentle smile, he lifted Storm’s hand and pressed a kiss to the knuckles. “You don’t have to convince me. You’re right. I’ll learn, and if I decide it’s not for me, there are plenty of hotels nearby.” Dropping his hand, he hopped up on the console and grabbed Storm’s face. “As long as we’re together, that’s enough for me.”

“You mean it? You’re just saying that because—”

“I mean it.”

Grasping the back of his mate’s neck, Storm slanted their mouths together, pouring every ounce of love and gratitude he could into the mating of their lips. Their tongues slid together in an intimate dance, twining and tangling as they lost themselves in exploration.

Storm groaned as the scent of dark chocolate and cinnamon filled his senses, and he shifted in his seat when his cock swelled to fill his Wranglers. Unfortunately, he was so lost in his mate, he had completely forgotten where they were.

The loud banging on the passenger window was like a deluge of icy water to his libido.

“Gross!” Bailey yelled through the glass. “Stop slobbering on each other and get in here.”

“I want to show King pictures from the homecoming dance,” Bridget added. “Stop hogging him.”

“What about me?” Storm teased. “Don’t I get to see the pictures?”

“No,” the twins chorused.

Tired of waiting, they opened the door and practically dragged King out of the cab. To be fair, he went willingly, laughing as he allowed himself to be led up the walkway by the two chattering hyenas. In fact, he looked to be enjoying the attention.

It really was a crime that he’d been born the youngest of his family. Patient, indulgent, and genuinely interested in what they had to say, the guy made one hell of a big brother.

Storm watched them go and sighed contentedly. He’d missed this. The bright lights and fancy parties had nothing on the blue skies and open plains of Texas.

This was where he belonged, and he’d known it all along. It had just taken a little while to figure it out.

Of course, if King had wanted to stay in Colorado, he would have done so gladly.

Home wasn't a place. It wasn't a house. It wasn't where he'd been born.

It was a feeling that couldn't be described with words but needed to be experienced. It was something many people searched for but never found because it couldn't be defined. It just...was. If you know, you know , as his sisters would say.

Home was people.

Home was family.

Home was King.