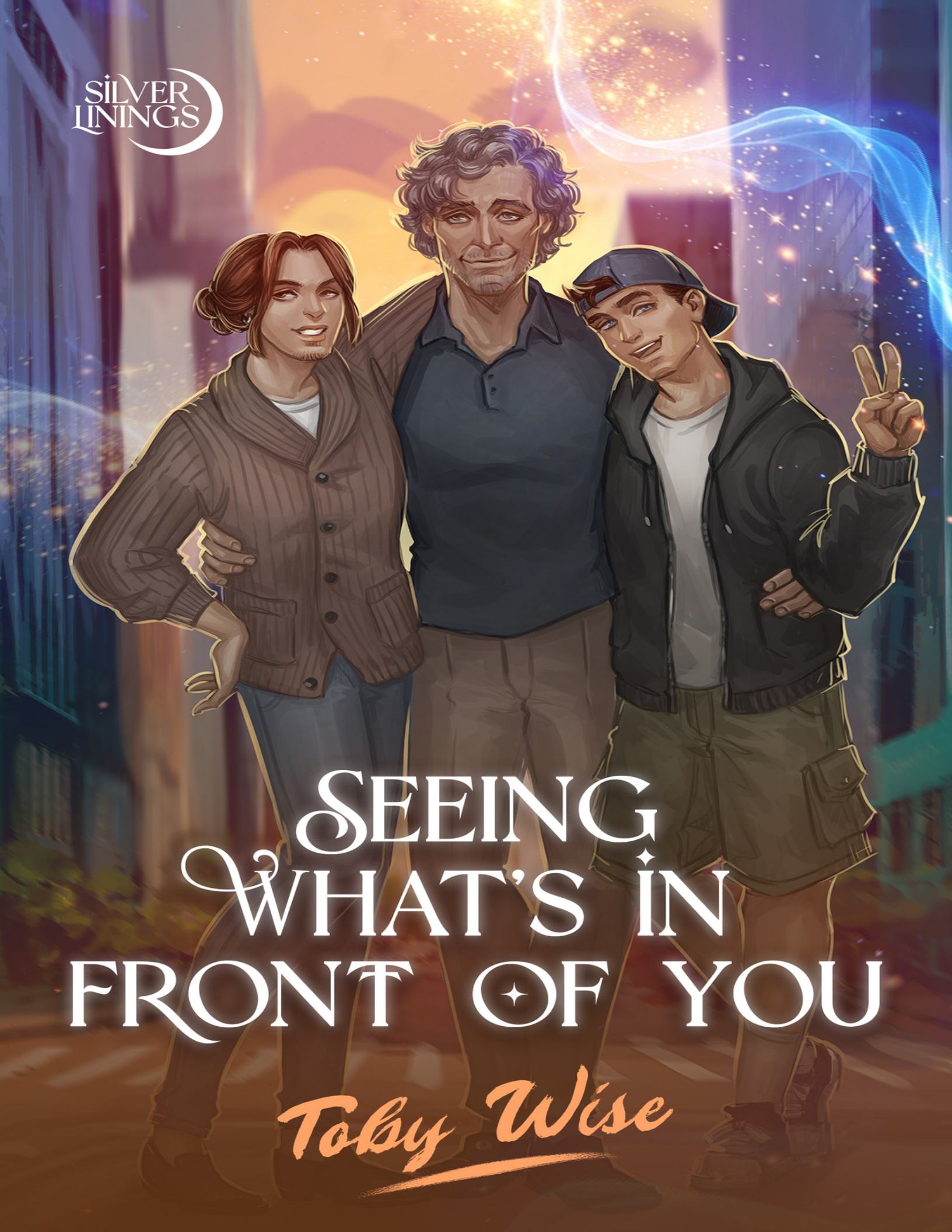




SILVER
LININGS

SEEING WHAT'S IN FRONT OF YOU

Toby Wise

Seeing What's in Front of You

TOBY WISE

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Blurb

Welcome to the world of Silver Linings, where old age doesn't have to mean bad backs and regrets. Silver Linings is a shared concept collaboration about older silver foxes and their magical midlife awakenings. Grab your tea, light a candle, and dive into six magical cozy worlds full of whimsy, warmth and happily-ever-afters.

Dean lives a very average life, some people would go so far as to say he's boring but he doesn't mind. At his age, boring isn't such a bad thing. All of that changes when his daughter drags him to a coffee shop to meet two men who specialize in helping people discover their magical abilities. Dean always assumed he didn't have magic, but it turns out, he just needed Nix and Kassian around to awaken it.

Kassian has the ability to use other people's magic in order to explain how they work. When he gets a glimpse at Nix and Dean's soul lines, he realizes they're meant to be together. He should be happy that his best friend has found his soul mate, so why the hell is he so jealous?

Nix has been pining for Kassian since Kindergarten but assumes there's no way that Kassian could feel the same way. When the two meet Dean, something between them changes and suddenly, with Dean's help, they can finally see what's been right in front of them the whole time.

Seeing What's in Front of You is an MMM urban fantasy story in the Silver Linings series. Inside you'll find a silver fox who's learning he's a seer, a trans MC, bros who're too busy pining to realize their feelings are

returned, homoerotic T shot scenes, shwoopy fluff, an older demi MC, a silly mystery to solve, and of course a Toby Approved Happily Ever After!

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Chapter One

DEAN

I WAKE UP SLOWLY, the dream I was just having faded away. The sound of my alarm going off beside me forces me to shake the sleep out. I turn on my side, grabbing my phone and turning my alarm off. Then I lay on my back, staring up at the ceiling for a long time, trying to remember even just a fragment of the dream I was just having.

This is how it always goes. When I'm in the dream, everything feels so lively, so vivid, so real. The moment I open my eyes, all of that just drifts too far for me to reach. I don't remember a damn thing no matter how hard I seem to try. Yet at the same time, I just *know* it was the most lifelike dream.

It's so frustrating.

I let out a deep sigh, rubbing tiredly at my eyes before finally rolling out of bed and onto my feet. I make my way into the bathroom, getting the shower going.

Today is Saturday and normally, I would be sleeping in a bit, but Hazel has different plans. Apparently, there's a magical duo coming into town today and she's planning on meeting them. I've never heard of them before but she assures me that they're something special.

They work for the National Magical Education Department, going from city to city and helping people realize their own magical abilities. One of them has the gift of sensing other people's magic and the other has the ability to draw those powers out.

That sounds like quite the handy duo to me!

Hazel has been excited about meeting them since she saw they were coming into our town. They're doing a little meet and greet at the back of Hazel's favorite coffee shop; The Screaming Owl. When she asked me to come along, I agreed without even having to think it over because one, I love spending time with my daughter, and two, I want to be there when and if they help her realize she has a magical ability.

Not everyone is born with magic but if I'm being honest, it seems like the majority of people at least have a little bit of magic running through them. The same cannot be said for me. When I was a teenager, I was so *desperate* to be magical yet throughout the years, nothing ever manifested. Now I'm in my fifties and have come to be content with who I am.

How could I not be? I'm successful, I have an amazing daughter, I have friends around me. I have a good and happy life here. Peaceful.

Is it lonely now that Hazel has moved out? Sure. But I'm *fine*. Like I said, things are peaceful.

After my shower, I take care to get myself dressed in a nice blue polo and some tan pants. I make use of the hair products Hazel got me, telling me I have to take better care of my curly hair. Then I spritz myself with some cologne.

Looking in the mirror, I let my eyes wander over my face. I look... well, I look fine. Anyone who looks at me can tell I'm old. I have wrinkles and white hair. Some might joke that I'm distinguished and I know, objectively, I'm handsome, but really, what they mean is that I'm no longer a spring chicken. Gods, I have a daughter who's in her twenties. I've been at the same job for thirty years. I'm almost at the age where I can think about retiring, but what the hell would I do then? Sit at home wasting away?

With one last look, I turn away, going into the living room so I can get ready to leave. It doesn't take me long to drive over to Hazel's apartment. She's already outside waiting for me, a grin on her face. She's bouncing from foot to foot, excitement clear in the way she moves.

Affection strikes me straight in the chest. My love for her has only deepened over the years, morphing with every passing milestone. I don't

have to take care of her anymore. She's a grown woman, yet I can't stop wondering if she needs anything, if there's anything I can do to help her.

When Hazel was born, her mother passed away due to complications. I've been a single father her entire life. At times, it was *hard*, but I wouldn't trade it for anything. I love her so freaking much it leaves me breathless at times.

"Dad!"

"Hey, baby girl," I say, opening my arms for her. She rushes over, hugging me tight and making me groan as my back cracks.

When she pulls back, she tugs on my hair. "I told you that pomade would make your curls look good! See, you have to trust me more."

"Okay, okay," I say, holding up my hands in surrender. "You were right about this, but don't forget about the blue hair debacle."

"Dad," Hazel says with a whine, shaking her head at me. "That was when I was *twelve*! You can't keep holding that over me."

"I can and I will," I tell her with a chuckle. "It's what dads do."

Hazel grumbles under her breath as we start walking down the street. The Screaming Owl isn't too far from her apartment so we decided to walk. It's a gorgeous day outside. Fall has officially started to settle in so the air is crisp instead of hot. I love this time of the year. It's full of sweaters and warm coffee and walks outside where we're not sweating our butts off.

Fall is special to me because it's when I met Hazel's mother, Helen. Helen was a whirlwind of a woman. We met during the first day of college. There was a connection between us like I'd never felt before, like the universe knew we were destined to cross paths and be in each other's lives.

Helen wasn't the love of my life, she was the bestest friend a guy could ask for. The love we shared was deep and profound but it wasn't romantic. She was my platonic soulmate. After we graduated, we moved into a rented house together. When she said she wanted a baby, I immediately agreed to co-parent with her.

Helen was in my life for too short of a time, but the impact she had on me changed me as a person. Maybe I've slipped back into that shy, timid guy who was too afraid to make waves or take a chance, the same guy I was before I met Helen.

I'll always be thankful for Helen. She brought me Hazel. She made me a better man. I miss her all the time.

A finger poking my cheek brings me back to the present. I startle a bit, looking over at Hazel with a raised brow.

“Whatcha thinking about so hard? Huh?”

“Your mom.”

Hazel sputters, almost tripping over her own feet. She straightens, looking at me in wonder. “Did you just make a joke? And a ‘your mom’ joke, no less? Who are you and what have you done with my father?”

“What? I don’t understand that reference,” I admit. “I was literally thinking about your mother, Helen.”

Hazel seems to deflate. “Oh,” she says softly. Then she adds, “well knock it off. You look super serious right now. We’re about to embark on a life changing experience and I will not have you harshing the vibe.”

“Harshing the vibe,” I whisper to myself.

Nothing quite makes me feel as old as listening to my kid’s lingo and trying to understand it.

“I’m so excited,” Hazel says, doing a little skip as she walks. “I know you don’t have any magical abilities but what if I inherited something from my mother? Maybe I can see soul ties just like her.”

Emotion makes my chest tight. I put my hand on Hazel’s arm, sliding it down until we’re holding hands. I give it a little squeeze. “That would be wonderful, baby girl,” I tell her, trying to keep emotions out of my voice. “Helen used to say it was something she had to actively work at to keep it manifested. Maybe you just haven’t learned how to practice yet and these people we’re seeing will help with that.”

“I hope so. I’m trying to keep my expectations in check though. I don’t want to leave super disappointed.”

I give her another squeeze. “No matter what happens, we’ll go get ice cream.”

“For breakfast?”

I nod my head. “For breakfast.”

“Hell yeah!”

The two of us start to plan what kind of ice cream sundae we’ll get when we’re done with this meeting. We round a corner, catching a glimpse of the line that’s already outside the building up ahead. We’re less than a block away from The Screaming Owl.

The wind picks up for a moment and a shiver runs through me.

A bird startles from where it's perched on a ledge. It flies right in front of us and we have to take a step back to get out of the way. Hazel's hand is warm in my own but after being startled like this, she lets go in order to clutch at her chest.

I don't understand the memory that's just flashed inside my head. Was that a dream? Is my imagination running wild? What's going on?

The sound of a bird squawking hits my ears and a moment later, to our right, a bird jumps up off the ledge of a building. It flies right in front of us, forcing the two of us to take a step back in order to dodge its wings. Hazel lets go of my hand, touching her chest and letting out a deep sigh.

"Holy shit! That was a close one!" She turns to where the bird has flown away. "What's the rush?"

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I stand there, my mouth open in shock.

What the hell was that? I get a deep sense of déjà vu, like somehow I knew that was going to happen, like I'd seen it all before. Was that what my dream was about this morning before I forgot it? What this something else entirely, like I had a moment similar to this happen in the past and now I'm tricking myself into believing I'm reliving the moment?

I shake my head, trying to get this weird sensation out of my chest.

"Come on, Dad," Hazel says, grabbing my wrist and dragging me forward. "I can't believe the line is so long already!"

I do my best to stay present but I can't stop thinking about what just happened. How the hell did I know the bird was going to fly past like that? Why does all of this feel vaguely familiar?

While we wait, one of the workers comes outside, taking people's orders on a little handheld device.

"Can I please have a pumpkin spiced latte?" Hazel orders.

"I'll just take a hot chocolate," I tell the worker, pulling out my wallet.

“Sorry, card only,” the worker explains, holding up the little handheld device.

For some weird reason, I think I knew that. I pull out my debit card, paying for our drinks. Today is such a strange day.

We move up in line. After about ten minutes, someone comes out with a tray of drinks, handing them out to everyone who ordered one. I sip on my hot chocolate, warming my insides pleasantly.

“Does today feel strange to you?”

Hazel looks up at me with a frown. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure how to describe it, only that things feel strange.”

“There’s magic in the air,” she says with a grin. “Maybe you’re just feeling anxious about meeting Nix and Kassian.”

“Why would I be anxious about that?”

“You tell me! Maybe you saw the flyer with their faces on it and got all flustered.”

“Excuse me?”

“They’re very handsome, Dad,” she says with a giggle.

My mouth hangs open before I let out a huff. “Young lady,” I start to say but her laughter cuts off my lecture.

I did not in fact see a flyer with their faces on it. And even so, why would I get flustered over a handsome pair of men? It’s been so long since I’ve even had thoughts like that! At this point, maybe that part of my life has passed me by.

I don’t date. I don’t sleep around. I don’t really go out to meet people unless it’s genuinely just meeting friends. I’ve never really had an interest in that type of thing like other people seem to have.

Sure, I can appreciate when someone is beautiful or handsome, but it’s never really gone further than that in my head.

We finally make our way inside the coffee shop. There’s a line towards a side room, two bouncers standing at the door and ushering people in and out. It’s crowded but not so much that I feel claustrophobic. The smell of coffee fills the air, a comforting scent.

“It’s almost time,” Hazel says, grabbing my sleeve and shaking my arm. “I’m so excited I could pee.”

“Please don’t.”

“I wouldn’t *really*, Dad.”

“I know but it’s still a good reminder.”

Hazel snorts, practically shaking as we step up in front of the bouncers. One of them holds a box in his hands. Apparently, Nix and Kassian offer their services for free but ask for donations if people are able in order to pay for their travel and hotel fees. I pull out my wallet, sticking a fifty into the box. The bouncer gives me a look but doesn't say anything.

Two people step out of the room, both of them grinning wide. It's hard not to smile at them, their excitement and joy infectious. That's when the bouncer nods at us, letting us know we can go inside.

I'm not sure what I was expecting but it wasn't this. In front of me is a long table with two chairs behind it. Right now, there's a man sitting in the chair while the other man is violently spinning the chair in a circle. They're both laughing so loud I'm surprised I didn't hear it while waiting outside.

"Stop! Stop! I'm gonna throw up!" the one on the chair is screaming between giggles.

The other man continues to spin him. "That's what you always say!"

"Bro!"

I start to move before I even realize what's happening. For some reason, I know I need to move. I need to put myself between the guy in the chair and the wall.

"Dad?"

The man doing the spinning abruptly stops. The guy in the chair goes *flying*. He tries to stop himself but he stumbles forward and would have flown straight into the wall if I hadn't been there to catch him in my arms.

We both let out an umph as I catch him. He's shorter than me, lithe and thin yet even so, I can feel that he's strong. His hair is long, braided back and flung over his shoulder. He looks up at me, his eyes wide with surprise. They're the prettiest golden color, like sunshine.

My eyes dart around his face, taking all of it in. He's so pretty, with freckles dotting across his cheeks and the bridge of his nose. My entire body goes warm and I'm pretty sure I'm blushing.

His mouth opens, like he's about to say something but a shout behind him makes his lips snap closed again.

"Shit! Bro!"

The other guy runs over, grabbing the guy in my arms and pulling him away, checking him over. I let out a breath, not realizing that I'd been holding it. I awkwardly shuffle back over to Hazel, watching the two guys interact.

The other guy, the one who was doing the spinning, is about the same height as the first guy. He's wearing a backward cap on his head, a tank top, and some loose cargo shorts. His shoulders are broad and strong, yet, as he touches the first guy, he's so tender.

Hazel was right, they're both incredibly handsome.

They seem so opposite yet I can't help but suddenly feel like an intruder as they check on each other.

"I'm so sorry, Kassian! I didn't think you'd go flying like that. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Nix," Kassian murmurs, a pretty blush across his freckled cheeks. "Someone caught me."

Nix and Kassian. That's their names. Why the fuck does my stomach feel all weird all of a sudden? They both look over at me and smile.

Nix gives the two of us a wave. "Well, having a seer show up is always handy," he says with a grin.

Something inside of me ignites. "Sorry, a *what?*"

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Chapter Two

KASSIAN

I CAN FEEL THAT my face is on fire. I touch my own chest, willing my heart to stop racing. First, I was thrown from a chair which was incredibly exciting but also stupid and dangerous. Then a handsome older man had caught me in his strong arms.

I'm not one to allow myself to be a damsel in distress but if it allows me to be held by handsome strangers then maybe I should think about doing stupid shit like this more often!

I can't help but glance over at him again, taking him in. He's taller than me with curly white hair, an incredibly handsome smile that makes his eyes crinkle, and big, gentle hands that are strong enough to catch a grown man.

When our eyes met, I swear, I could have swooned.

Now I'm being touched by Nix. His hands are gentle yet insistent, checking me over, making sure I'm okay. His face is so close and I can smell his deodorant. My knees feel weak and I'm glad he's holding me, otherwise I would *actually* faint right now.

The problem with working with your best friend is that it makes hiding your giant crush on him near impossible. Thank Christ that Nix is so oblivious to stuff like this.

“Well,” Nix says, finally letting me go and taking a step away from me. I immediately miss the touch. It feels like a piece of my heart steps away right along with him. “Having a seer show up is always handy.”

I turn towards the man across the table from us. His face turns to one of shock. He stares at us with wide eyes before he blurts out, “sorry, a *what?*”

Nix and I look at each other before turning back towards him. I lean my hip against the table, crossing my arms over my chest. “A seer,” I say gently. “Someone who can catch glimpses of things before they happen.”

“I’m not. Sorry, no. You must be mistaken. We’re here for my daughter.”

I look to the man’s right, seeing a woman standing beside him. She’s tall and thin with a head of dark, thick hair. She smiles and it’s identical to the man’s.

“Hi,” she says, waving a hand at us. “I’m Hazel. It’s nice to meet you two! I dragged my dad along for moral support. This is Dean.”

“It’s nice to meet you as well,” I say, bowing my head slightly.

Nix rubs the back of his neck. “Sorry for assuming. I swear I saw you moving over there, like you knew exactly where Kassian was going to be thrown.”

“That’s true,” Hazel says, looking over at her dad. “You knew, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” Dean admits, rubbing at his face. “But I don’t know how I knew! I’m having such a strange day,” he murmurs to himself.

I look over at Nix. Nix looks at me. Then we both look over at Dean and Hazel, silently in agreement.

“Which of you wants to go first?”

“First?” Dean blanches. “We’re here for *Hazel*. Not for me. I’ve known I’m without any sort of magic since I was a kid.”

I can’t help but smile, already having a feeling what we’re going to find. “Like I said, which of you wants to go first?”

Hazel giggles, stepping forward. “I’ll go first. Give him a moment to process what’s happening.”

“Okay,” I say, rubbing my hands together. “Nix is going to lay a hand on your arm and then I’m going to touch your other arm. Nix has the ability to strengthen someone’s abilities, draw them out, while my ability is being able to see what that ability is. Okay?”

“Sounds good,” she says, offering both of us an arm.

Dean pulls out a chair and sits down, watching us but his eyes are glassy and far off. I do my best to focus on Hazel.

As soon as Nix puts his hand on Hazel, I can feel his magic light up beside me. It's an incredibly familiar warmth, like stepping outside for the first time in the morning. I touch Hazel's other arm, allowing my own magic to thread through hers. Then I open my eyes again, sucking in a sharp breath.

As part of my ability, that moment my magic latches onto another's, I get to see what they see. I get to not only feel what their magic entails but for a split second, I get to experience it as well.

Some would say my magic is a type of seer magic. It would seem that Hazel's magic is yet another type of seer. She can see people's soul ties.

Without my permission, my eyes dart over to Nix. He's got so many soul ties running through him, which isn't surprising to me. He's a loveable person. I don't think I've ever met someone who didn't like Nix. The thing that makes me freeze up is the gorgeous golden string that seems to go from the center of Nix's chest over to Dean's chest.

No. Fucking. Way.

Before I can look more closely, it's gone. Just like that.

Hazel is staring, her eyes wide. She looks over at her dad, then at the two of us, then down at her own chest. She looks at her hands, probably seeing even more soul ties there. It must be overwhelming.

"Dad," she breathes out, letting out a broken noise. "There's so many strings. Oh my gods."

"Hazel," I say gently, ignoring the way my own heart is shattering right now. "Don't say too much, yet. Not until you understand your own magic more. Not everyone would like to know what you can see, okay?"

"I understand," she says, her voice shaky. "Did you see it too?"

It takes all my self control not to wince. Instead, I nod my head. "I saw."

"Then you'll understand why I'm about to hug you," she says before running around the table and throwing her arms around Nix and I. My heart is hammering inside my chest so forcibly it's making my body ache. How can she be hugging *me* when her father is connected to *Nix*?

"Whoa," Nix says, hugging her back. "People don't usually get this excited when we help."

"People don't usually get a bigger family when they come here either," Hazel says, giving me a knowing smile that does nothing for my breaking

heart.

"I don't know what that means but I trust it's rad," Nix says with a grin. "I'm happy for you, Hazel."

"I'm really happy too. My mother had this same ability when she was alive."

"Oh, what ability does she have now?" I bonk Nix on the top of his head. He winces, rubbing at it before his eyes go wide. "Shit! Sorry! Sometimes I say things before I think."

Thankfully, Hazel and Dean just seem to laugh it off. Dean still looks like he's in shock but that's okay. Sometimes these things take a bit to fully sink in.

"Are you ready, Dean?"

Dean's blue eyes snap up to me. I do my best to give him a soft, inviting smile. His shoulders seem to fall away from his ears and he nods, standing up and walking over.

He holds out his hand and Nix immediately takes it. I watch them for a moment. That familiar warmth of Nix's magic makes me feel sick to my stomach instead of comfort now. Things will change after today and I don't think I'm ready.

It's been me and Nix for as long as I can remember. We met in kindergarten and have been together ever since. He's my best friend. He's my other half. Now I'll have to figure out how to live with him being 'Nix and Dean' instead of 'Nix and Kassian'.

Fuck, I'm being such a depressed asshole right now! I need to *focus*!

I toss my braid over my shoulder and take Dean's other hand. Sparks dance across my skin. I close my eyes, getting a feel for Dean's magic. It's exactly as I suspected, he *is* a seer but he only sees during his dreams.

I open my eyes once more, smiling up at Dean. "I was right, you're a seer. Do you ever have random moments of *deja vu* that you can't seem to explain?"

"Yes," he says slowly, letting go of our hands. "Doesn't everyone?"

"Do you ever remember your dreams?"

"No. Never."

"That's your ability. You can see the future when you're dreaming. If you got yourself an enchanted enhancer, you'd be able to remember your dreams when you woke up," I explain.

“Or you can just hang out with me more,” Nix says excitedly. “I can be your personal enhancer. Well, maybe if I wasn’t so busy traveling.”

The comment stings more than I have words to explain. Is he just making a joke or does Nix actually feel a connection to Dean already? Does he want to give up traveling the country with me? Does he want to immediately settle down with Dean?

Oh fuck, they’re both staring at me. What the fuck did I miss?

“Huh?”

Hazel giggles. “I asked if you guys have dinner plans. I could cook for you, to say thank you for your services?”

I look at Nix with wide eyes, trying to convey how much I *don’t* want to do that. Thankfully, he’s always been able to read me.

“I’m so sorry, but we already have plans tonight.”

“That’s a shame,” Hazel says, looking really disappointed.

“I have magic,” Dean breathes out, barely loud enough for us to hear. “All this time, I told myself I didn’t have anything and I was okay with that, but now you’re telling me I actually have magic?”

Nix gently pats Dean’s shoulder. “You have magic, man. It’s really cool magic, too.”

Dean gives Nix a small, soft smile. “Thank you.”

Well fuck me sideways. Of course they look so soft and perfect together. I feel like I could scream.

Nix is my best friend and I love him so deeply it makes it hard to breathe. It would be wrong of me to stand in the way of true love. I can’t just keep him to myself, no matter how much I want to.

No, I’ll make this happen. I’ll make sure Nix gets his perfect love story even if it kills me inside.

I take out a business card and quickly write my phone number down on it. Then I slide it over to Hazel. She takes it wordlessly, throwing a wink my way.

“It was really nice to meet you,” I say, sitting down in my chair. I rub at my temples, trying to will the headache forming behind my eyes away.

Nix leads the two out of the room and then stops at our security, letting them know we need a quick break without me even having to tell him. He closes the door and then sits down next to me. He turns my head gently with his hands and then starts to undo my braid.

“Headache?”

“Mhmm,” I hum, letting my head fall back as he rubs at my temples. I’m going to miss this. I’m going to miss the soft touches, the simple way we exist together. I’m going to miss my best friend when he runs off with his one true love. Tears prickle at my eyes but I blink them away, forcing myself to keep it together until we can get back to our hotel room. Then I can hide in the shower and allow myself to fully shatter where Nix can’t see.

“Do you want to stop for the day? We could come back tomorrow?”

“I just need a moment. I’ll be okay.”

“If you say so,” Nix says softly. He runs his fingers through my hair before tying it in a loose ponytail at the base of my skull. “Hey, what did you think of Hazel and Dean? They seemed really nice, right?”

“Yeah,” I force myself to say, the words tasting like bile. “Dean seemed really, really nice.”

“I thought so too,” Nix says with a grin. Then he stands up and lets Mars and Finn know they can send in the next person.

Chapter Three

Nix

KASSIAN HAS BEEN ACTING strange.

It started yesterday. First, he got a headache. That part isn't strange. Sometimes when we work all day, we use our magical abilities too much and then feel like we're having a hangover. Our heads will hurt, our bodies ache, and if we really overdo it, we can get ourselves sick or give ourselves bloody noses.

No, that part wasn't too weird. It was what happened after. Usually, Kassian will let me play with his hair, rub his head, and take care of him when he's not feeling well. It's what bros do for their bros, right? But Kassian is suddenly telling me he doesn't need my help. It feels like he's trying to put distance between the two of us.

It hurts. It hurts so bad I can't even form words. It's almost like something changed yesterday but I have no idea what.

No matter how many times I play yesterday over in my head, I have no idea what's gone wrong. We met so many people, helping to awaken any dormant magical abilities or helping them understand it better. There was even a handful of people we really got along with.

As I think about the people we met, there's two in particular that come to mind; Dean and Hazel.

They were both so nice! I can't help but smile, thinking about how *happy* Hazel was to have her abilities awakened with our help. Dean on the other hand, was in quite the shock. I'm sure he'll come around to understanding his own powers in no time.

That's one of the things I love about traveling with Kassian. The two of us were made to be a team. Our abilities synchronize perfectly and we're able to help so many people.

In some ways, it feels like we were literally made to be together. It's one of the reasons this weird wedge between us hurts so badly. For as long as I can remember, it's always been the two of us against the world. He's my best friend, the one that I always go to when I need something, the one I want to spend all my time with. I want to work with him, goof around with him, live with him. If it were possible, I'd want to live inside his pocket so he could never get away from me.

I am so in love with this man it makes me look stupid at times.

Letting out a long sigh, I pick up the pace of my run. I stare at myself in the floor length mirror in front of me, wishing I didn't look so *upset*. Can't I outrun my feelings? Can't I just get *over* all this pining once and for all? It's not like Kassian could ever love me back.

Sweat drips down my face, my lungs start to hurt, but I keep running.

Whatever's going on with Kassian, I'm sure I can fix it. I've done it before and I'm sure I'll do it again. A little part at the back of my head worries that one of these times, he's going to pull away for real. He'll find someone he loves, leaving my sorry pining ass behind. I want nothing more than for my best friend to be happy but I can't stop wondering why that can't be with me.

I hit the stop button on the treadmill before hopping off. I put my hands on my knees, sucking in breath after breath. I don't think it's the run that's left my chest aching like this but it's a good excuse nonetheless.

After my workout, I head back up to our shared hotel room. I find Kassian on the bed, lying on his stomach, his phone in hand. He looks up at me with wide, golden eyes. I swear his eyes sweep over me but honestly, that's probably just my hopeful mind playing tricks on me.

"Hey," I say in greeting. "Whatcha doing?"

Kassian bites his bottom lip for a moment before saying, “planning a meet-cute.”

My brain stutters. Emotions flash through me rapid fire. Amusement. Fondness. Confusion. Finally, I land on feeling hurt.

Fuck. Has he found someone? Why is he planning a meet-cute? What the fuck does that even mean?

“Okay, first of all, I thought you said you were cutting down on the fanfiction, Kassian.”

“Fuck you,” he says with a chuckle, his cheeks pinkening. “What else am I supposed to do whenever we’re on the road!”

“Second of all,” I say, cutting him off. “A meet-cute isn’t something you can *plan*! It’s something that happens naturally! Like how you and I met in kindergarten, bro.”

Something flashes across Kassian’s features. He nods his head. “That was pretty cute.”

I hum. “And you’ve been stuck with me ever since.”

“No place else I’d rather be, bro.”

“Bro!” I say dramatically, coming over in order to flop onto the bed beside Kassian.

“Absolutely not,” he says, pointing at me. “Go take a shower first. You’re all sweaty and stinky!”

I groan before turning around but before I get into the bathroom I stop. “What were you really doing on your phone? Are you really writing fanfiction?”

“In a way,” he murmurs. “Don’t worry about it. You’ll find out soon enough.”

“That’s not cryptic at all.”

Just then, Kassian’s phone alarm goes off. A weird thrill goes through my stomach.

I have the most awful memory so Kassian has taken it upon himself to be my testosterone keeper. He makes sure to set an alarm and make sure I take my shot every week. When he learned I was terrified of needles, he took over doing my shot for me.

It’s one of my favorite times of the week.

Kassian turns his alarm off and tosses his phone onto the bed before standing up. “You want your shot before or after your shower?”

“We can do it now quickly.”

Kassian nods his head before digging through my luggage to grab the little zipbag I keep all my supplies in. We make our way into the bathroom. I sit on the side of the tub, watching him take everything out, lining them along the counter. He carefully opens the needle packs and tears open an alcohol wipe.

“Okay,” he says, turning towards me and waving me over. “Let’s see your fuzzy butt.”

“It’s not fuzzy,” I grumble, making Kassian giggle.

“It’s fuzzy and you know it,” he says with a grin. All of the worries from this morning seem to fade away now that we’re here. Kassian is still here. He’s still beside me. He’s not going anywhere.

“Whatever,” I say with a pout. “Just admit you think it’s cute.”

“You got me, bro. You’ve got a cute little fuzzy butt.”

I know he’s just teasing me but heat pools at the cheeks of my face. I like it when he compliments me. I like it when he calls me cute or handsome. I’ve always been a sucker for his praise.

I pull my shorts down enough to expose the meat of my right ass cheek. With gentle hands, Kassian rubs the alcohol wipe over the area he plans on poking me. Against my permission, a shudder runs through me.

The feeling of Kassian’s hands on me always makes my stomach flutter with excitement. We’ve always been kind of touchy-feely with each other, but moments like this feel different. We’re not roughhousing or goofing around. It’s gentle and *sincere*. It’s overwhelming because I want so desperately to feel him like this all the time.

“There we go,” Kassian murmurs to himself, turning around getting the needle ready. Once the syringe is filled with the T, he turns back to me. “Ready?”

I quickly look away, not wanting to see the actual needle. Instead of using my words, I nod my head.

Kassian pinches my ass. A moment later, I feel a poke of pain. My skin breaks out into goosebumps. I bite my bottom lip to keep myself from making a noise. Kassian is so close that I can smell the perfume he uses. His hair falls away from his shoulder, some of it touching the back of my arm.

Gods, I want him so desperately it makes me ache all over. The heat between my thighs throbs with want. Not even my fear of needles could dampen it.

“All done,” Kassian says, patting my butt, like he does every time he gives me my shot. I slide my shorts back up quickly, not wanting my ass just hanging out while Kassian throws everything away.

“Thank you.”

Kassian gives me a smile. “Anything for you, bro.”

He picks up all the supplies and leaves the bathroom. I quickly get naked and jump into the shower. The hot water runs over my body and I groan into my palm, frustrated with my body, my head, and my heart.

A hand finds its way between my legs and I stroke my hard dick, running my fingers over it quickly. I can’t stop thinking about how good it felt to have Kassian touching me, how good his hands always feel against my skin. He’s so gentle, so soft with me. I wish he’d put his hands on other parts of me. I wish he’d put a hand between my legs properly. I wish I could kiss his lips and tug on his hair.

I gasp out as pleasure surges through me, pooling between my legs. I imagine what it would feel like to have Kassian inside of me while allowing one of my fingers to dip back past my dick into my front hole. I rarely touch this part of myself but thinking about *Kassian* touching me there, leaves my head spinning with pleasure. That’s all it takes for my orgasm to rush through me. I cup my dick, pressing the heel of my hand against the throbbing. I whimper softly, hoping that Kassian can’t hear me.

Slumping against the shower wall, I let the water run over me for a long time. I sit there until Kassian is knocking on the door, asking if I’ve fallen and hit my head. I chuckle as I let him know I’m okay.

My mind is still racing but at least the throbbing between my legs has been satisfied. For now, at least.

“Gods, I thought I was gonna have to call the fire department to drag you out of there,” Kassian tells me when I finally leave the bathroom. I can feel myself blushing but hopefully, Kassian assumes it’s from the hot shower I just took.

“Whatever,” I grumble. “Can’t a dude just enjoy the hot water for a while?”

“Can’t a bro worry about his bro?”

I roll my eyes as I jump onto my bed, burying my face in the pillows. “Do you have plans tonight?”

Kassian makes a humming noise but it sounds different than usual. He almost sounds nervous.

“Do you want to go out for ice cream?”

“Dude. *Of course* I want to go get ice cream with you. You don’t even have to ask.”

I turn on my side, looking over at Kassian. He’s looking anywhere but at me.

“Cool,” he finally says. “Get dressed and we’ll head out.”

Kassian dresses in a pair of skinny jeans and a cute, light purple cardigan. He’s put his hair up into a half-do, some of the long hair down against his back. It’s really pretty like that. It makes me wanna run my fingers through it.

I throw on a pair of jeans and a black shirt that says ‘what’s up dude’ on the front. Before we leave, I grab my hat, sliding it on my head backwards. We make our way out of the hotel and through the streets of the city.

The two of us chat about everything and nothing. The weather is gorgeous with a light breeze that keeps us cool. Just as we’re about to head into the ice cream shop, Kassian pauses.

“What’s up?”

“Nothing,” he says right away. “Just umm, have to tie my shoe. You go inside. I’ll wait for you out here.”

I look down at his shoes with a frown. “Kassian,” I say slowly, pointing down. “Your shoes don’t have laces.”

“Fuck,” he hisses out, covering his face. “Right. I just need a moment. Go on.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “If you’re upset about something, I’m not going to just *leave* you. What the fuck, bro?”

“It’s nothing! I promise!”

“Then tell me what’s going on.”

Kassian looks over my shoulder into the ice cream shop. I turn around and follow his gaze, seeing the guy we met yesterday inside, Dean. Then I look back at Kassian.

“Oh my gods,” I say slowly. “You’re trying to plan a meet-cute with *Dean*?”

Chapter Four

DEAN

I STARE UP AT the ceiling of my bedroom with wide eyes.

Images flash in my mind, replaying all the dreams I had last night. There was flashes of me answering the phone and talking to Hazel about getting ice cream with her tonight. There was the actual ice cream shop. I also saw myself catching a man in my arms who looked suspiciously like Nix from the coffee shop yesterday.

This is so baffling. I've grown so used to not remembering my dreams. Now that I can remember them, I feel strange. Like I've already lived today.

I turn onto my side and grab my phone just as it starts to ring. Even though I didn't know the exact time Hazel would be calling, somehow, my body did.

"Good morning, baby girl," I say, almost on autopilot.

"Dad! Hey, did I catch you at a good time?"

I hum into the phone. "Couldn't have been better. What's up?"

"Do you want to come with me to try a new ice cream place today?"

What would happen if I said no? Would I alter what I saw in the dreams? Are these things destined to always come true?

“Sure. Text me the place and time.”

“Awesome! I’ll see you later. Love you!”

“Love you too,” I say before hanging up the phone.

It’s late morning and I know I should get up but I find myself continuing to stare. After over fifty years of the same thing, today is especially jarring. Things are *changing*, I can feel it, but that doesn’t mean I like it. Maybe it’s cliché to say I’m stuck in my ways, but I’m so used to waking up, not remembering my dreams, and then going on with my day. Now I’m stuck *contemplating* my day. Will it go exactly like the dream? Will I be able to change how things go now that I’ve seen the future? Were these just *options* for how my day will go or are they set in stone?

“Fuck,” I whisper to myself, rubbing tiredly at my eyes. I don’t normally curse but today it feels rather justified.

With my head feeling like it’s full of cotton, I finally drag myself out of bed. I’m glad it’s a Sunday, otherwise I’d need to be at work already. I take my shower, get dressed, style my hair, brush my teeth, and then sit down at my kitchen table with a cup of coffee.

As I take a sip, another wave of déjà vu hits me straight in the chest. Right. I dreamed about having a cup of coffee first thing this morning.

The dream feels far off and fuzzy but at the same time, as things repeat themselves now that I’m awake, they feel fresh yet familiar at the same time. It’s so strange. It’s going to take me a bit to get used to this.

It’s frustrating to suddenly be plunged into something so new out of nowhere. At the same time, I can’t help but feel like this is an opportunity to shake things up. To try something new.

Maybe I’ve been stuck in a rut for a while.

This isn’t something I wanted or asked for, but maybe in the end, it’s something I need in my life. Maybe this is the thing that’ll finally change things up and bring a little bit of excitement to my life.

Either way, it’s something, at the very least, I need to learn to live with. The sooner I come to terms with that, the better.

I drift through my morning by having a cup of coffee, cleaning the house, and having a small lunch. I meander through everything, randomly getting struck with the feeling that I’ve done this before. Eventually, it’s time to head to the ice cream shop that Hazel wants to check out.

It’s almost a relief when I leave my house. The air is crisp again, the sun is out, and some of the tension I’ve been holding onto since waking up this

morning slowly fades away.

I remember in my dream, I drove down Pine Street to get to the ice cream shop. Wanting to test a theory, I pull my car down a different street, taking the back way through town. The only problem is apparently, there's road construction going on. They detour me back over to Pine Street.

Huh.

I'm not really sure how to feel about this.

By the time I park on the street in front of the ice cream shop, I'm feeling confused, frustrated, and slightly in wonder. Will it always be like this or will it fade now that I'm not around Nix and Kassian? I know their abilities enhanced mine, so maybe now that I'm not around them, my power will fade back to what it was before.

I walk into the ice cream shop, looking around. It's cold inside and I'm glad I put a sweater on before leaving the house. There's an entire display with different types of scoopable ice cream. They also offer soft serve with a variety of toppings to add on top. Everything looks really yummy.

I check my phone. There's no texts from Hazel and she told me to meet her at this time. That's so strange. It's not like her to run late without giving me a heads up. Maybe the detour messed up her timing.

Putting my phone away, I step closer to the door, wanting to stay out of the way for anyone who's ready to place their order. The door opens with a ding and I instinctively turn, my arms ready to catch the person who's about to trip.

Because I knew it was coming, I take in the whole scene, bracing myself. I knew Nix was going to come flying in through the door. I knew I was going to be there to catch him. What I didn't see in my dream was the reason he's gone flying; Kassian tripped him right into my arms.

Nix lets out a startled noise as he hits my chest. I take a step back, needing to brace myself. His body is all tense lines and toned muscles. His arms are so jacked, his chest hard. Against my permission, something flutters in the pit of my stomach at having him in my arms. It's the same sensation I got yesterday after I caught Kassian.

Despite the sensation being the same, these two couldn't be more different. They're the same height but their builds are opposite. Kassian is lithe and slim while Nix is thick and strong. One of them is pretty, the other is handsome in a more masculine way.

I clear my throat, hoping my face doesn't show all the racing thoughts inside my head. I help Nix straighten and get his feet under himself before taking a step back and shoving my hands in my pockets.

"Hello," I say with a little nod. "Fancy meeting the two of you here."

Nix takes a step back, shoving his elbow into Kassian's side. "Yeah," he says with a glare, crossing his arms over his chest. "What a weird coincidence. However could this randomly happen. Right, Kassian?"

Kassian covers his face with his hands, his cheeks turning bright red. "Nix. Stop it."

Hazel would never accuse me of being someone who could read people. Normally, I'm pretty oblivious to most things, but even *I* can see that something's happened with these two. Yesterday, they were 'bros' and today, there seems to be some sort of rift between them.

Right, I'm getting too old for shit like this. Grabbing my phone from my pocket, I send a quick text to Hazel, asking her where she is. A moment later, it vibrates in my hand.

"Unbelievable," I breathe out.

"What?" Kassian asks though he's not slick, I can see that he's trying to hold back a smile, like somehow he already knows.

"Hazel said she's not coming."

"Oh no!" Kassian says. I narrow my eyes at him, watching in fascination as his golden eyes dart away and his cheeks turn red once more. He puts a hand on Nix's shoulder. "This is perfect. You two can grab a table and enjoy some ice cream together!"

Nix narrows his eyes at his friend. "I am *not* staying unless you stay too."

"That's not how these things *work*, Nix."

"Kassian," Nix says slowly. "I am not staying unless you stay. That's my final answer."

"You are too stubborn for your own good."

"And you aren't making any fucking sense."

"Don't fucking swear at me."

"Then stop being so fucking cryptic."

"Gentlemen," I say, clearing my throat. They pull apart, not realizing they were practically nose to nose just a moment ago. They breathe out, suddenly much more calm than they were before. "Would either of you like to fill me in on what's going on right now?"

Nix looks at Kassian. Kassian looks at me, giving me a bright smile. “Nothing,” he says right away. “Just a little disagreement on what flavor of ice cream we want. Have you looked at their selection yet?”

To say I’m baffled would be an understatement. I text Hazel, asking her if she set me up. I get a message back with two emojis, a winky face and the little smile that’s doing the shush with his finger. I blink down at my phone before huffing and tucking it back into my pocket.

“Oh look, bro, they have caramel swirl,” Nix says, pointing into the display. “Your favorite.”

Kassian looks over at him with a soft smile. It’s an achingly gentle smile, one filled with affection and fondness. Does Nix even notice? Does he know how Kassian looks at him when he’s not paying attention? “I think I’ll get a scoop of that.”

“What about you, Dean? What’s your favorite ice cream?”

“Vanilla bean,” I say, looking into the display. They don’t have any plain vanilla. I hum to myself. “I guess I’ll try a scoop of the apple pie.”

“Oh, that sounds good,” Nix says, looking at all the options. “I think I’ll have the berry explosion.”

We all order our ice cream. Kassian nudges Nix. “You should pay.”

I pull out my wallet. “You guys take donations to pay for your services. Let me pay.”

“Oh,” Kassian murmurs, tucking some of his long hair behind his ear. “Thank you, Dean.”

“Don’t worry about it. We’ll call it an extra thank you for yesterday. You made Hazel really happy by helping her.”

The three of us take our ice cream to a booth and sit down. I wasn’t planning this, but I can’t deny that I’m interested in learning more about them. They’re interesting people who live very interesting lives. Far more than I do.

“I’m glad Hazel was happy,” Nix says with a grin, sliding into a seat beside Kassian. Kassian makes a frustrated noise but doesn’t comment on anything. He scoots into his seat across from me, blocked into the corner by Nix’s body.

“Are you happy as well?” Kassian asks, taking a bite of his ice cream and humming softly to himself.

I rub the back of my neck. “I’m not sure how I’m feeling.”

“That’s understandable,” Kassian says softly. “This has been a big change, especially since you’ve gone from thinking you have no magic to suddenly having it. We have the number of a counselor in the area. She’s an empath and works with others like you. Whenever we do our meet and greets, we like to make sure there’s someone local that can help out when we leave.”

“I’d like that. Thank you,” I say with a little nod.

“No worries, Dean.” Kassian pulls out his phone, giving me the number. I save it into my phone.

“So,” Nix says slowly, “what do you do, Dean?”

“I’m a librarian at the local university.”

“Oh, so you’re like super smart,” Nix says. It’s not a question but a statement. For some weird reason, I feel my heart do a little jolt of joy at the praise.

“I wouldn’t say that,” I tell him with a chuckle. “I just like to be around books. I find it really soothing to keep things organized and kept track of. Plus, it’s always been a joy to have a hand in other people’s learning.”

“Shit,” Nix breathes out, his eyes wide. “So you’re like a proper adult.”

Kassian and I both laugh at that. “And you’re not?”

Nix shakes his head. “I mean sure, I’m an adult but not like a *real* adult, you know?”

“I don’t know,” I tell him seriously. “Tell me about it?”

“Okay so like, Kassian and I don’t have like a *real* job.”

I tilt my head to the side, looking at both men. I can’t help that my lips tick up slightly in amusement. “Your jobs are fake?”

“No, that’s not what I mean,” Nix says right away, laughing.

“It’s a very unconventional job,” Kassian says in explanation. “We travel a lot so we’ve never really learned how to cook for ourselves. We eat out more days or eat on the road. I can’t remember the last time we spent a large amount of time in one place. We’re constantly on the move, meeting new people, and visiting new cities. It’s exciting but it’s also very consuming most of the time.”

I hum softly. “Sounds like it gets hard sometimes.”

Nix shrugs. “I mean, I guess? But we don’t mind. We have each other,” he says brightly, turning towards Kassian. Kassian suddenly looks anywhere but at Nix. When his golden eyes meet mine, there’s a layer of pain he’s trying to hide.

Damn, I can't wait to tell Hazel how well I'm reading these guys next time I talk to her.

"That sounds really lovely," I say honestly. It makes a small amount of pain go through me as I think about my own platonic partner who's no longer here. I miss her.

I wonder if I'll ever have someone like that again.

"It's okay," Kassian says, rolling his eyes. "That's what bros are for."

"Bro," Nix says dramatically, leaning his head against Kassian's shoulder.

"When are you leaving town?"

Kassian straightens at that. "Weirdly enough, we're in the middle of a break. Because most schools are starting, we're on a hiatus until our next official meet and greet next month."

"Oh, that's exciting. An entire month off?"

Nix hums, nodding his head. "We haven't decided what we want to do exactly. I thought it would be fun to hit up a beach before the cold air comes in, but Kassian thought we should go back home for the month."

"Where is home?"

"We come from a little town down South," Kassian explains. "I don't think I'm feeling that anymore. I changed my mind. Maybe we should stay around here. Check out the sights a bit."

"What sights?" Nix turns towards me. "What sort of things are around here?"

I scratch my cheek, thinking. "There's a wonderful museum that specializes in dinosaur exhibits. There's a beach in the next town over that a lot of people rave about. In all honesty, I spend the majority of my time either in the library or at home."

"Can we check out your library?" Nix asks. It's the way he asks, so full of innocent earnestness that makes my smile.

"I could arrange for that to be possible."

"Oh my gods," Nix says excitedly, practically bouncing in his seat. It's really cute, his excitement, his smiles, the way his cheeks pink when he's like this. Wait, cute? Why'd I think that? "This will be perfect, bro! I know how much you love reading."

"You do?" I ask Kassian. He nods. "What's one of your favorite books?"

"That's like asking a parent to choose their favorite child," Kassian says right away, shaking his head and looking down at the table. "I've always

loved romance. There's one I read when I was a teenager that's stuck with me ever since. I'm sure you've never heard of it but it's called 'Through Winding Doors'."

I can't help but light up with excitement. "I love that book! I haven't read it in such a long time but I remember being incredibly captivated by the main character, Lazar."

Kassian brightens, leaning forward in his seat. "Yes! He was my favorite as well. The way he pined and longed for his love through all those years, through every new challenge put before him? It was so incredibly romantic."

"Very much so," I say with a grin. "Each door was a new horror and yet at the end, he was always so strong for his love. It was such an exciting read."

Nix is once again staring at Kassian, a small smile on his face as we talk about this book. I turn to him. "What about you, Nix? What's your favorite book?"

He looks a bit embarrassed. "I'm not as much of a reader as Kassian."

"Maybe you just haven't found the right book."

"Do you have recommendations?"

"More than I can even tell you in this one sitting," I tell him. "What sorts of things do you like?"

Nix seems to think about that for a moment, rubbing his thumb over his chin.

"He likes found families," Kassian says with a little smile. "Any time there's a found family, you get super excited. And you love it when the main characters are some shade of queer or fuck around with gender."

"That's true," Nix says with a nod. "But I get way less excited about romance. Sure, I like it when it's there but I get more excited when someone takes on the government or when there's really fun action scenes."

"The Space Adventures of Captain Tag and Company", I tell him. "That's the series I would recommend. It sounds like it would be perfect for you."

Nix's face lights up. "Do you think we can borrow it from the library?"

"I'm fairly certain we have a copy. I'll look tomorrow when I'm at work."

"That would be awesome. Thank you, Dean."

I finish my ice cream and stand up. “It was really nice bumping into you,” I tell them both. They stand up as well, following me outside. The wind blows, making my hair ruffle and a shiver go down my spine.

“Thanks again for catching me,” Nix says with a grin. “Hopefully, we can come see you at the library sometime this week.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

Kassian gives me a little wave before they both turn in the opposite direction, walking down the street towards the hotel they’re staying at. I get into my car and make the drive back to my home.

It’s not until I’m at home and sitting on the couch do I call my daughter.

“Dad! Hey! How was the ice cream?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose and let out a long sigh. “Baby girl, you’ve got some explaining to do.”

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Chapter Five

KASSIAN

“I’M SO EXCITED,” NIX says beside me. “Do you think they really have a copy of that book? Maybe they’ll have something you will like too.”

“Maybe,” I say softly, feeling less excited than Nix.

The meet-cute was a success. At least, I think it was? I’ve read enough romance novels and written enough fanfiction to know the meet-cute is really important. It’s what starts the sparks. It’s the thing that gets two people to start interacting and once they’re hooked, they’ll continue to bump into each other until they fall in love.

Is that why Nix is so excited? Is he already feeling the sparks?

Gods, I have *got* to get over this jealousy. It’s best if I learn to live with Nix getting happy over Dean because very soon, this is going to be my life from now on. I’m gonna have to keep traveling with Nix while he’s dating Dean. The sooner I accept that, the better.

Why the hell does it hurt so terribly to think about them together? I should be *happy* for them!

Nix bumps his arm against mine, pulling me out of my inner turmoil. I look over at him, offering him a little smile. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I say right away, not wanting Nix to worry. “I’m just kinda tired.”

Nix hums softly. “Did you stay up reading too late again?”

“Maybe,” I say, giving him an actual genuine smile now. “There was this fic I couldn’t put down.”

“Tell me about it?”

I spend the rest of the walk to the university telling Nix about the fic I read. It’s not entirely a lie, I really did stay up too late but it wasn’t because I was reading, it’s because I was fretting. What if things between us change once they get together? What if Nix leaves me behind? Will I be able to handle that?

“So then,” I say, running my fingers over the end of my braid, “he offered to duel the demon king in order to win the guy’s hand in marriage. It was very intense but also really silly at the same time. I loved every second of it.”

“That sounds awesome,” Nix says excitedly, smiling over at me so wide it makes the dimple in his cheek pop. “I love it when you tell me about the stories you read. You get so excited to talk about them.”

I feel myself flush and I quickly look away. “I’m glad I’m not being too annoying.”

“What the fuck?” Nix grabs my arm while we walk. “You could never annoy me, Kassian. I love listening to you talk. It’s one of my favorite things.”

Gods, why the *fuck* does he has to say stuff like that? Why can’t he just reject me already so I can start to get over him?

Nix is looking at me so genuinely that it makes my heart leap up into my throat. I feel like I’m suffocating, or maybe choking on my own heart. Gods, I fucking hate this but what am I supposed to do? How does he expect me to react to these soft words other than fall helplessly more in love with him?

Thankfully, we’re walking up the steps to the university, saving myself from needing to come up with an answer.

“We’re here,” I say, looking up at the front doors of the library. The building is made of red bricks and looks super old, the architecture is grand with pointed roofs and swooping archways. It’s stunning.

“Wow, this place looks fucking rad,” Nix says beside me before running up the steps. My maxiskirt billows in the wind as I follow behind at a much

slower rate. My heart picks up speed as we walk through the door.

There's an entryway but as we walk into the next room, there are rows and rows of towering bookcases. Everywhere I look, there are books. The room smells like old pages and stale coffee.

I love this place immediately.

Looking over at Nix, I find his brown eyes wide with wonder. My stomach swoops with affection so strong it threatens to put me on my knees. I keep it together, but only just barely.

"Let's find Dean," Nix says, taking my wrist in his hands as he starts walking forward. My entire arm buzzes with energy, like there's a bunch of bees trapped under my skin. I clench my teeth before I do something ridiculous like try to lace our fingers together and hold his hand properly.

It's getting harder and harder to keep all these feelings at bay. I *have* to keep them hidden more than ever.

"Dean!" Nix says, probably far louder than he should be since we're in a library.

We find Dean sitting at a desk in the middle of an open area. He's got a stack of books on his desk and he's carefully stamping something inside of them. He's wearing a pair of glasses on his face that he wasn't wearing when we met him.

Dean looks up, his eyes finding the two of us. His face morphs into a soft smile that makes my insides warm up against my permission.

What the fuck is that? Why does his smile make me feel like this? The only other time I feel like this is when I'm looking at Nix.

"Oh," Dean says softly, "you guys made it. That's wonderful."

"We said we'd come," Nix says, finally letting go of my wrist and walking over to the desk. He leans his hands on it, looking down at what Dean was just working on.

Part of me wonders if I should just wander around the library so I can give the two of them a moment alone. The bigger part of me doesn't want to leave. Soon enough, they'll get all the alone time they want. I want to spend time with Nix as much as I can before that. Maybe I'm being selfish, but I can't find it in myself to actually care. I need this while I can still have it, while it's still allowed.

Dean's eyes scan both of us up and down, taking us in. Is he...is he checking us out? I'm not sure but his eyes are like a warm caress against my skin. I can't help but wonder if he likes what he sees. Surely, he likes

looking at Nix because honestly who wouldn't? But does he also think I'm cute?

Fuck, why am I worrying about that?

"I wasn't sure if you'd suddenly get busy or something," Dean says with a shrug. "You both live such adventurous lives, who's to say something wouldn't come up?"

"We wouldn't just leave you hanging after promising to come visit you!"

"That's very sweet of you," Dean tells us with a nod, his blue eyes darting between the two of us. "I'm glad you came. I found that book I was telling you about, Nix. Are you still interested in giving it a try?"

"Very much so!"

I lean my hip against the desk, watching the two of them talk. Dean stands up, motioning for him to follow us. We walk through the library and he points things out, showing us each section, excitedly explaining all the things the library is involved with.

I suddenly understand why Nix enjoys listening to me talk so much about the stories I read. He might not read it himself but there's something about watching someone be excited about something. Dean loves this place, loves his job, and loves that his library does so many outreach programs. He's passionate about it.

I can't decide if he looks adorable as he talks, or if he looks a bit sexy. Maybe a bit of both?

Shit, I shouldn't be thinking like that! Dean is *Nix's* soulmate.

Everything feels so confusing!

"Wait right here for a moment, please," Dean says before going through a door that's marked for employees only.

"This place is so cool," Nix says, turning towards me. "If we lived in this town, I feel like we'd be here all the time. We could bother Dean and then look through all the books. You'd never get bored, Kassian!"

"How could I be bored when I always have you around?"

Nix grins at me. "You make an excellent point."

I shove my hands into my jean jacket before I reach out to touch Nix. "I would miss you," I admit softly, "if you were suddenly gone."

"Kassian," Nix says, suddenly serious. "You *never* have to worry about that. *Never.*"

I open my mouth to respond but words fail me. My heart hammers inside my chest at the declaration, desperately latching on, desperately wishing

that it were true.

“Here we go,” Dean says, stepping back outside. I take a step back and look away for a moment, doing my best to calm my racing heart. Dean looks between us, raising his brow. “Did I interrupt something?”

“Nope! We were just waiting for you.”

“Right,” he says, unconvinced. Thankfully, he doesn’t press for more. He holds out a book for Nix who takes it, staring at it almost in reverence.

“Wow,” Nix breathes out. “Thank you so much, Dean! It means a lot that you picked out something you thought I would like.”

“It’s my pleasure,” he says with a small grin. “This one is that space adventure book I was telling you about. I think you’ll love it. If you get through it quickly, I have more in the series you can read.”

Nix is already opening the book and paging through it. I cover my mouth with my hand, hiding my smile. Dean turns towards me.

“I brought you two books, Kassian.”

“What?” I ask in surprise. I assumed this was all for Nix, since the two of them have this soul connection. Why is Dean including me?

“I found a copy of ‘Through Winding Doors’. I thought maybe you’d enjoy a reread?”

“Oh,” I say, taking the book from him. Our fingers touch and sparks run through my hand. “This was really kind of you, Dean.”

“But I wanted to find something new for you as well,” he says, handing me a second book. “This one is called ‘A Vampire’s (extraordinary) Story’. It’s the story of a young adult who’s turned into a vampire without his permission. It explores what it means to change in a society that focuses more on your actions than what you are. I loved it because it was this beautiful allegory for being queer. There’s a romance as well, though the main focus is more societal expectations, found family, and a bit of political intrigue.”

I stare down at the book in my hands, trying to process everything I’m feeling. Dean took the time to pick out a book he thought I would like. As he describes it, I can’t help but feel incredibly *seen*. How did he know I would love this? How does he know me after meeting me two times?

“Thank you,” I stutter out. Clearing my throat, I try again. “This was so nice of you, Dean. Thank you so much. This sounds exactly like something I would enjoy.”

Dean smiles down at me. “I’m glad.”

“Do we need like some sort of library card to take these?” Nix asks. “We don’t live here, so I don’t really know the rules.”

“Oh, there’s no need,” Dean says, rubbing the back of his neck. “These are actually from my own collection.”

“You’re letting us borrow *your* books?” I can’t help but ask, marveling at the warmth building inside my chest. “Really? Are you sure?”

“Are you going to make me regret letting you borrow them?”

“Absolutely not,” Nix says straight away, shaking his head. He holds the book against his chest like it’s something precious. “I promise I’ll take care of your book, Dean.”

“I know you will. Otherwise I wouldn’t have trusted you to borrow it. The only thing I ask in return is your honest feelings about it when you’re done.”

“I promise!” Nix says, a little bounce in his step. The three of us walk back to the desk where we initially found Dean working.

“What do you guys have planned for the rest of the day?”

“Probably just wandering around town in search of a place to eat before heading back to our hotel room. Now that we have something to read, I guess we’ll just order takeout for dinner and stay in,” I tell him, leaning against his desk once more.

Dean leans back in his chair, looking at us for a long moment. Finally, he nods to himself, like he’s coming to a conclusion only he understands.

“There’s a little cafe not far from here that I sometimes frequent. You could check it out for lunch. As for dinner, why don’t you come over to my place?”

“What?”

Dean looks away, the tops of his cheeks slightly pink. “I hate hearing that you’re eating out so much. Let me cook dinner for you.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Nix says right away. “We wouldn’t want to intrude!”

“You’re not intruding,” Dean says, shaking his head. “I’m inviting you. Both of you. If you’d rather not, I understand.”

“We accept,” I blurt out quickly. “If you’re sure,” I add.

“I’m sure,” Dean says, giving both of us a small smile. “I’ll text you my address,” he says, passing Nix his phone so that they can exchange numbers. A quiver of jealousy wiggles its way into my stomach. A moment later, Dean hands his phone to me.

I stare down at it for a long time before my fingers start to move, pressing my numbers into the space. I send myself a text so that I have his number as well.

Why does this make me feel so giddy? What the fuck is going on with me?

"I'll see you guys later tonight then," Dean says, taking his phone back.

"Bye, Dean!" Nix says before the two of us are leaving the library. I take our books, tucking them into my crossbody bag that I always wear.

I feel like I'm in a daze as we make our way down the street to the cafe that Dean recommended to us. I'm having a hard time understanding what I'm feeling. My limbs feel all fluttery, my cheeks warm that has nothing to do with the sun shining down on us.

Could I be developing some weird crush on Dean while also being in love with Nix? No, that can't be happening. *Why* would that be happening?

Gods, I'm such a mess!

Nix and I get a table outside. We watch people walk by until the waiter comes to take our order.

"Dean has great taste," Nix says, looking around. "This place is so cute and all the food sounds really yummy."

I hum in acknowledgement. "It's nice."

"There's something going inside that pretty head of yours. I wish you'd talk to me about it."

I startle, my eyes landing on Nix who's staring at me, his face in his hands. "It's nothing you have to worry about, Nix. Just overthinking."

"You know I'll worry about you no matter what, right? You're my bro. Bros always look out for each other."

I give him a small smile. "I know. You're the best bro a bro could ask for."

"Hell yeah, I am!" I can't help but chuckle. "But you're the best bro too, Kassian. Honestly, I don't know what I would do without you."

My heart slams into my ribs so hard I'm sure my insides will be bruised. My throat is dry and I swallow thickly, trying to find my voice. "You'd be fine."

"I really don't think I would," he confesses softly. "You and me are a team through thick and thin until the end of time. There's no me if there's no us, you know?"

Why the fuck does this sound so much like a love confession? Why the fuck am I so desperately latching onto it?

“I feel the same way,” I say simply, reaching across the table to take his hand in my own, giving it a little squeeze.

“Good,” he says, squeezing me back. That’s when the waiter comes back with our drinks, setting them on the table. I take my hand back, doing my best to hide my blushing face.

“I’m really glad we have this break,” I tell Nix. “It’s really cool to have met Dean too. What do you think of going to his house tonight?”

I watch as Nix’s face brightens with a blush. It looks so pretty on his face but the idea that it’s from *Dean* sours my enjoyment of it ever so slightly.

“I think it’ll be fun,” he says after a moment, taking a sip of his coffee. “I’m not really sure what I think about all of this. He’s really nice, but it’s confusing, right?”

“What’s confusing?”

“The way he seems to fit with us so well.”

I just barely keep myself from letting out a deep sigh. So Nix is already feeling it. Good. That’s really good, even if it breaks my heart at the same time.

Chapter Six

Nix

“WHY’D YOU MAKE ME wear this?” I ask again, tugging at the collar of my shirt.

“It’s customary to look nice when you’re having dinner at someone’s house like this,” Kassian explains, running a hand through his long hair which falls down his back in soft waves. He looks so gorgeous with his hair down like this. I wish he’d do it more often but I know it’s a pain to keep out of his face which is why he prefers to wear it up.

“If he opens the door wearing sweats I am going to be so mad at you, bro.”

Kassian snorts with amusement, shaking his head. “That’s fine. I can take it, bro.”

That sets me off into a fit of giggles against my permission. It’s not my fault I have a dirty mind! Kassian sets himself up so easily! “Yeah, you can,” I tell him, wiggling my brows at him. “Is that why you’re wearing a skirt today?”

“Oh, shut up,” he says, shoving me away from him.

“Listen, I’m not complaining.”

Kassian tucks some of his hair behind his ear. "You couldn't handle all this anyway."

"Oh ho! I could handle you just fine, bro! Am I a virgin? Yes. Does that matter in this situation? Nope!"

"You're mighty sure of yourself."

"How hard could it be?"

"Isn't it supposed to be hard?" Kassian asks, raising his brow at me. It takes me a second to understand the joke but when I do, I start giggling all over again.

It doesn't take long before we're walking up the pathway to Dean's home. Our banter has left me grinning from ear to ear, feeling carefree and happy. My heart feels like an eagle soaring overhead, away from every problem or hardship.

Kassian steps up to the door and knocks a few times before taking a step back down next to me. We don't have to wait long before the door opens. My eyes look Dean up and down, suddenly happy that Kassian made me wear a polo and a nice pair of jeans.

Dean is still wearing his outfit from the library. He's wearing a baby blue button up with a tan cardigan overtop. He looks adorably snuggable.

"Hi," he says with a smile, opening the door wider for us. "Come in, come in. I'm just about ready to dish up dinner."

We walk inside, taking our shoes off at the door. Kassian wore a pair of flats so when he slips them off, he grabs his extra socks from his bag, sliding them over his feet before we go further. It's a little quirk he's had since he was little, never wanting his bare feet touching the floor, especially in a place he's not familiar with. It makes me smile watching him.

"I should have double checked but do either of you have any allergies or anything?"

"Nah, not that we know about," I tell him, shaking my head. "We're not vegetarians or anything either so whatever you made, I'm sure it'll be perfect."

"Let's hope so," Dean says, guiding us into the dining room. "I made a comfort food that Hazel loves. It's kind of like shepherd's pie but without any peas. Instead it's got green beans, corn, and carrots. And instead of potatoes on top, it's got a layer of sweet potatoes."

My mouth waters as Dean talks about the food. The entire house smells amazing and my stomach gives a grumble.

“Ah,” I say with a chuckle. “I think that answers that.”

“You two can sit down and get comfortable. I’ll grab everything from the kitchen.”

“We can help,” Kassian offers but Dean waves him off.

“You’re my guests. Sit down, please.”

The table in the dining room is small. There are two seats set up, side by side, the third spot across from them. We sit down side by side. There are wine glasses and plates already at the table with a bottle of wine unopened.

Looking around the room, I see decor up on the walls. On some nice shelving hung up there are family pictures in gorgeous frames. Everything feels like it was placed with purpose, knowing it brought out the best of the room as a whole.

“Remember when I said you were a proper grownup?” I call out for Dean. “This setup isn’t swaying my opinion!” I swear I can hear him chuckle from the kitchen.

“Don’t be rude,” Kassian murmurs under his breath.

“I’m not being rude! I’m pointing out a fact. There’s nothing wrong about that.”

Kassian looks like he’s going to argue but Dean returns holding a casserole dish in his mitt-covered hands. He places it at the center of the table before taking off the oven mitts and tossing them to the side.

“This smells amazing, Dean. Thank you for cooking,” Kassian says.

“It was no trouble. I enjoy cooking for people. It’s a great way to take care of someone and show them that you care.” Dean’s eyes widen as he sits down. “Not that I’m trying to take care of you guys. It’s a gesture of friendship.”

“We appreciate it,” I say right away, wanting to put Dean at ease. He’s been so kind since we’ve met him. I don’t want him getting all worried about something so silly. “We’re glad to have your friendship.”

Dean opens the bottle of wine, pouring himself a glass. Then he holds it up for us. “Would you like a glass?”

“Sure,” I say, scooting my glass towards him. Then he offers it to Kassian who nods. This feels so grown up. I know Kassian and I are adults, obviously. We’re in our mid-thirties, but we don’t act very grown most of the time. We’re prone to silly pranks and fucking off. Being around Dean makes me feel a bit more serious, a bit more grounded.

I think I like it.

After pouring each of us a glass, Dean grabs a serving spoon, dishing up a heap of casserole for each of us.

I take a giant bite. It's so hot that I have to gape my mouth open, moaning and groaning as it hurts my mouth. I wave my hand in front of myself, trying to cool it down.

"Jesus, bro. Why would you *do* that?"

"Hawt, hawt, hawt!"

Dean clears his throat. I turn towards him with tears in my eyes but he's looking at Kassian. "Just a heads up," he says to Kassian. "I just took it out of the oven. Might be a tad hot."

"Oh really?" Kassian murmurs, "I never would have guessed. Thank you for the heads up."

I finally swallow, grabbing my glass of wine and gulping it, hoping it'll cool down my mouth and throat. It sits hotly in my stomach, my head going a little light.

"Fuck," I murmur to myself. I turn towards Dean with a wince. "Really, really good, Dean. Mhmm. Delicious."

Dean snorts, shaking his head in amusement. "I'm glad you're enjoying it."

After that, I make sure to blow on every bite before I take it into my mouth. As we eat, we enjoy a bit of small talk.

"How did you two meet? You seem like you've been together for a long time," Dean asks softly, sitting back in his seat with his glass of wine in hand.

"We've been together since kindergarten," I say proudly.

"Childhood sweethearts? Wow, that's incredible."

"That's not what he means," Kassian says right away, jumping in. I look over to see his cheeks bright red. "We're not together. Not in the way you're thinking."

Dean tilts his head to the side. "Really? I'm sorry for assuming. You just seem-" his voice trails off. "So, kindergarten, huh?"

My stomach sours at Kassian's words. Why did he have to tell Dean so quickly that we're not together? Why did Dean assume we were? Why does it make me so happy to think about someone thinking we're dating?

Gods, my emotions are all mixed up inside of me and this wine really isn't helping me keep everything straight.

“We’ve been best friends since we were little. The very first day of school, the teacher thought we were the same person.”

“Really? But you’re so different.”

Kassian chuckles softly. He looks at me, nodding for me to explain.

“We used to have similar names. The teacher kept asking for Kas and we would both answer. Since then, we’ve been inseparable.”

Dean watches us, a small smile playing at his lips. “Nix suits you,” he says. Then he adds, “that’s a really cute story. It must have been nice to have someone beside you all these years.”

“It has been,” Kassian says softly. I feel his hand touch the side of my leg, like he was going to reach out and touch me properly but decided against it at the last minute. I look down, seeing his hands clenched in his lap.

“The bond we share is something special,” I declare proudly. “Bros for life.”

“Bros for life,” Kassian repeats with a little smile.

“For life indeed,” Dean says, “it’s incredible, how even your powers complement each other. It’s like you were meant to be in each other’s lives.”

“It does feel that way,” I say with a nod. “For as long as I can remember, it’s always been Kassian and Nix. Now that we work for the National Magical Education Department we’re even more reliant on each other. Our magical abilities play off each other super well.”

“What about you?” Kassian asks. “Do you have someone in your life?”

Something sad passes over Dean’s features. He takes a sip of his wine before setting the glass down.

“You’re right, I did not create Hazel all on my own,” Dean says with a chuckle that’s more sad than it should be. “Hazel’s mother’s name was Helen. She was my best friend. We were never together, in the way most parents are. We were just best friends who wanted to co-parent together but she passed away giving birth to Hazel.”

“Oh,” Kassian murmurs. “I’m really sorry to hear that.”

“Thanks,” Dean says with a little nod. “It was a long time ago. I’m okay.”

“So there’s no one special in your life?”

Dean tilts his head. “I have Hazel. She’s quite special.”

“Dean,” Kassian says with a frown.

“Sorry, I’m teasing you. I know what you’re asking and no, there’s no one special in my life. In all honesty, there’s never been a significant other in my life, other than Helen and like I said, our relationship was strictly platonic.”

“Huh,” I say without thinking, the wine making my tongue looser than usual. “That kind of surprises me, Dean. You’re really handsome and really kind.”

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“Thank you, Nix,” he says with a little smile, his cheeks turning a cute pink color. “That’s sweet of you to say.” Then he looks at Kassian. “How about you two? It must be nearly impossible to date while on the road.”

“We’re total virgins,” I blurt out. “Not a single date or kiss or *anything*.”

“Oh my gods, Nix,” Kassian hisses out, shoving his elbow into my side.

“What? I’m not lying!”

“I know that but you don’t have to go around telling people we’re virgins!”

“Fine.” I turn to Dean, leaning my elbow on the table. “I’m a virgin and I totally have no idea what’s going on with Kassian. For all I know he’s a secret sex god.”

“Oh my gods,” Kassian says again, covering his face with his hands. “I hope the floor opens and swallows me whole.”

I giggle. “Hole, hahaha.”

At that, even Dean starts laughing. I sit back in my seat, feeling light and airy. My head feels empty except for Dean and Kassian. Usually, my thoughts spin Kassian around like the inside of a microwave but now Dean is there with him.

What would it be like to have the three of us spend more time together? Why does Dean fit so well with us? And why the hell has Kassian been acting like this is somehow the best idea and the worst idea at the same time?

Too many questions for my tipsy brain to process.

"If it makes you feel any better, I don't have much more experience than you do," Dean says with a shrug. "The only time I've ever been intimate with someone, it was really awkward and we were trying to make a baby."

"Oh, yikes," Kassian murmurs.

"I wanna make a breeding kink joke but I feel as though now isn't the time," I say under my breath, making them both start laughing all over again. "Hey, Dean? Do you wanna go to the beach with us tomorrow?"

Dean looks at me in surprise. "I would love to," he says, my hopes rising. "But I have to work."

"Ugh! How dare your job get in the way of our beach trip."

"How are we supposed to live, laugh, love in these conditions?" Kassian asks, making me giggle.

Dean grabs a pitcher of water I didn't even notice was on the table. He pours me a glass of water, telling me I should drink it. I do as I'm told, sipping at the cool water as we talk.

"I started my reread of 'Through Winding Doors'," Kassian tells Dean. "Thank you again for allowing me to borrow it. It's been so long since I've read it and it feels like being embraced in a warm hug."

Dean looks down at the table, smiling softly to himself. When he looks back up at Kassian, there's something in his blue eyes that makes my stomach flutter. I take another drink of my water, just watching them interact.

There's something about the way Dean looks at Kassian that sets something ablaze inside my stomach. He's soft with Kassian in a way that Kassian deserves. He sees Kassian, the same way that I do.

"That makes me really happy to hear. When you're done with it, I think I'll do a reread as well."

"I will continue until my dying breath for you are worth nothing less than my all," Kassian says with a grin. "I just got to that part tonight and I got literal goosebumps rereading that line."

Dean groans. "That part is so good. I can't believe he's just saying these things to himself without knowing that his beloved can hear every word of it. Can you imagine just seeing and hearing that without being able to *do* anything to help or let them know you're listening and supporting them? Gods."

"Right?"

That's when it hits me. I *enjoy* seeing the two of them together. Is that weird? Maybe that's weird, but I don't care. I like seeing Kassian happy and talking to Dean makes him happy. It's as simple as that.

A plan starts to form in my head. How can I get Dean to stick with us more often? How can we convince him to stay in touch once we have to go back on the road?

I'll figure out a way to make this happen, one way or another.

I didn't even realize I was so zoned out until a warm, familiar hand finds my thigh. My eyes snap over to Kassian, widening in surprise.

"You look like you're about to pass out, Nix."

"I am a little tired," I confess softly.

"You two should get back to your hotel," Dean says, standing up. "Do you want a ride?"

"The walk isn't terribly far," Kassian says, helping me up. "I think we'll be okay."

"Thank you for dinner, Dean. It was amazing. You can cook for us anyday."

Dean grins. "I'd like that. It's been too long since I had people to feed."

"I wish you could come to the beach with us."

Dean thinks for a moment. "Maybe we can go this weekend, if you still want to go."

I brighten at that, turning towards Kassian with a questioning look. He just shrugs and nods his head in agreement. I let out an excited cheer, pumping my fist and accidentally punching Kassian in the side.

"Shit, sorry! Got too excited!"

I swear I hear Dean murmur about the two of us being adorable but it's so quiet I'm not sure if I hear right. He ushers us out the front door with a tentative promise to speak with us soon.

I carefully put my arm around Kassian's as we walk, lacing our elbows together. Letting out a happy sigh, I allow myself to marvel at how well that went and how much I'm enjoying getting to know Dean.

"Dean seems nice," I say to Kassian. "His cooking is really good. I wish we could have home cooked meals all the time."

"Yeah," Kassian murmurs, though his voice sounds off. I look over at him, finding his brows wrinkled in worry.

"I wish you'd tell me what's on your mind. I know you well enough to guess but I'm not a mindreader."

“Thank the gods for that,” he says with a snort, pushing his elbow into my side.

“You got a crush on him or something?”

Kassian stumbles over nothing and I keep him held up. His face turns bright red and he looks anywhere but back over at me.

Oh.

Oh.

Kassian has a crush on Dean. It all makes sense now! Well, not really. If he was the one crushing why did he try to stage a meet-cute between *me* and Dean? But at the same time, all the signs are there! Could Dean feel the same way? Is that why he’s being so nice to us and inviting us to his home and letting us borrow his books?

“It’s okay,” I tell him with a smile. “I think that’s kind of cute. As long as he treats you good, that’s all I care about, Kassian.”

Kassian groans, covering his face with his hands. “That’s not... I don’t... Well, I don’t not... Oh my gods, let’s just go back to the hotel,” he finally blurts out after stumbling over his words.

He’s cute when he gets all flustered like this. Would it be so bad for him to date Dean? I picture the two of them hugging or holding hands or kissing. A tiny part of my chest aches because I want Kassian, and maybe even Dean, to do those things with me, but the bigger part just wants to see them happy. If it’s with each other, why would I get in the way?

Against my permission, a new vision unfolds inside my head. The two of them are hugging but instead of watching them, I’m in the middle of them. I have two hands, why can’t I hold them both?

Something unexpected unfurls inside of me. I’m stunned by how much I love this picture, how desperately I want it to be real. Would that be okay? Would they even let something like that happen between the three of us? Would they even be interested in me or are they only interested in each other?

We make our way back to our hotel room, mostly in silence. I’m not sure what’s going on inside Kassian’s mind but mine is racing a mile a minute with new possibilities. When we step up to our door, we both freeze.

There’s a bouquet of flowers sitting at our door.

“What’s this?”

I squat down, pulling off the tag. “It’s addressed to Mars,” I say, looking up at Kassian with a raised brow.

“Does it say who it’s from?”

“Nope,” I say, standing up with the flowers in my arms. “Does Mars have some secret admirer that we don’t know about? What room is he in again?”

“That one,” Kassian says, nodding at the door next to ours.

I knock on the door and wait. It doesn’t take long before the door opens and Mars, one of the men who work with us as our own personal security, is standing there. He tilts his head to the side, looking at me and then the flowers.

“Hey, Nix. What’s this?”

“Flowers,” I tell him with a grin. “They’re for you!”

“Oh,” he says, taking the flowers from me. He smiles softly, his cheeks turning pink. “Thank you for bringing them over.”

Mars is about to close the door but I stop him. “Who’re they from?”

“I’m not sure. I haven’t read the card yet.”

I hum softly, narrowing my eyes. “Any guesses?”

Mars pauses, looking at me. “You’re being rather nosy. What about you, Nix? You planning on sending anyone flowers?”

I sputter and close the door. I can still hear him giggling from the other side.

“So?” Kassian perks up when I step into our room. “Who’re they from?”

I shrug, letting myself fall back onto my bed. “He wouldn’t tell me! He said I was being *nosy*!”

Kassian snorts. “It’s a mystery.”

I turn over and look at Kassian. “A mystery I think we should solve.”

Chapter Seven

DEAN

THE WINDOWS ARE DOWN as I drive, ruffling my hair. The air outside smells like freshly cut grass. The sun is out and I grab my sunglasses, popping them onto my face.

The radio is softly playing in the background, some pop station that Nix put on. He bobs his head to the song, singing to himself while looking out the window, taking everything in as we drive past.

My eyes flick up to the rear view mirror, looking at Kassian. He's reading, his brows furrowed as he does. His long hair is braided behind his ears and then pulled up into a messy bun at the crown of his head. It looks really pretty like that.

None of us are talking but that's okay. There's a peacefulness that comes with being with people who are allowed to sit in each other's presence while being quiet. It's nice. Really, really nice.

I'm not sure how it happened but since meeting Kassian and Nix, I've felt happier. It's hard to put into words but now that I've been spending time with them, I look back and see how lonely I've become. It's been over twenty years since I've had companionship like this.

I like spending time with them. I like listening to them talk. I even like how childish they tend to be around each other. It makes me feel younger. It makes me feel light.

I want to keep getting to know them. I want to spend all my time with them. My heart stutters in my chest as I remember they'll be leaving soon. What am I going to do when they go back on the road? What will I do when my house goes back to feeling too big, too empty?

Genuinely, I cannot remember the last time I felt longing like this in my chest. Have I ever felt longing like this? With Helen, things were different. She was my best friend and I loved her unconditionally, but I didn't *long* for her.

All of these feelings are brand new. I'm over fifty years old, yet I'm feeling things I've never experienced before. It's terrifying, but at the same time, it's exhilarating. I want to chase these feelings. I want to dissect them and discover what they mean. I want to hold them close to my chest and keep them safe.

Clearing my throat, I look in the rear view mirror again, getting Kassian's attention. His pretty golden eyes snap up and meet mine. "You should find a good place to stop. We're almost there," I tell him.

"Thanks, Dean," he says with a soft smile, his eyes going back to his book.

Nix looks away from the window. "I'm so excited. Hopefully it's not too cold to get in the water."

"It'll be cold," I tell him with a shrug. "But I think you can handle it. Once you're in, you'll get used to it quickly."

"If I'm freezing, you'll be ready to warm me up, right?"

Something twinges through my stomach, something unnamed that I don't really understand. I chuckle and respond, "of course. I brought plenty of towels."

It doesn't take long before I'm pulling my vehicle into a parking space near the beach. We all get out and go to the trunk, grabbing our bags. I also have a lawn chair because there's no way I'm lying in the sand. I'm getting too old for shenanigans like that.

The three of us make our way up a hill that divides the beach from the parking lot. Once we crest, we finally see the beach. Stretching left and right of us is white, sandy beach. The water laps at the shore, the water so clear you can see the bottom.

“Oh wow,” Nix breathes out, his eyes wide. “This place is beautiful.”

A hand touches my arm on my left. I look over at Kassian. “Thank you for bringing us here, Dean.”

I give him a small smile. “It’s my pleasure.”

We walk down the path onto the beach, finding the perfect spot to set up our area. I open up an umbrella, sticking it in the sand. Then I open up my lawn chair, getting it settled.

“Come on,” Nix is saying, tugging on Kassian’s arm. “Let’s go get into our swim trunks.”

“What’s your rush? We just got here!”

“Wanna get in the water!”

“Let me put my shit down.”

“Come on, come on!”

I smile as I watch the two of them interact. After Kassian sets out his towel and pulls his swim trunks out of his bag, the two of them are running over to the changing area. They shove and tug at each other the entire way over, their giggles drifting towards me even from a distance.

My heart tugs inside of me. Before they get back, I set up our area properly, setting everyone’s bags on a towel so they don’t get full of sand. Digging through my own bag, I set the book I plan on reading on my seat and then pull out the sunscreen I brought.

“You *have* to join me in the water,” I hear Nix say with a whine.

“I don’t know,” Kassian says back, “I don’t want my hair getting all gross from the water.”

“Then just come walk in the water with me a little bit. You don’t even have to get your trunks wet.”

I hear Kassian sigh and smile to myself. It’s hard to say no when Nix sounds so excited. I’ve only known them a small amount of time but even I have a hard time saying no to him sometimes.

Turning around, I freeze when my eyes find them. My stomach feels funny as I take them in.

Nix, for the first time since meeting him, isn’t wearing a hat on his head. His hair is thick and dark, cut short. He’s got an open flannel on, his chest bare otherwise. The fact that he’s not completely shirtless is somehow even more tantalizing than if he was. There are lines under his nipples, scars from his top surgery. His stomach is toned and strong, the faint indents of a six pack visible. He’s wearing bright purple board shorts.

Kassian still has his hair up on the top of his head but a few strands have fallen loose, framing his face in such a delicate way. He's wearing a sheer black robe that's completely see-through. His swim trunks are tight and short, much shorter than Nix's. His skin is pale and smooth. My hand clenches at my side when I'm suddenly struck with the urge to *touch* him. I want to run my hand up his leg, to feel if his skin is as smooth as it looks.

My mouth is completely dry and my stomach swims with something I don't really understand. What the fuck is going on? Why do I feel so lightheaded all of a sudden?

The two of them toss their clothes into their bags, completely unaware of whatever the hell is going on inside my head. This warmth in the pit of my stomach is unlike anything I've felt before.

"Do you want to walk with us, Dean?"

"Sorry, what?"

Kassian looks up at me, his brows wrinkled in confusion. "Are you okay? Your face is really red."

"I'm fine," I say, my voice cracking. I clear my throat, trying again. "Totally fine."

"Okay," Nix says slowly, looking unconvinced. "Do you want to join us in the water? I want to swim but Kassian said he'll just walk in the water with me. You could stand with him if you wanted!"

"Umm, right. Sure. But first you have to put on sunscreen."

Kassian holds out a hand for the bottle. I pass it over. His fingers touch my hand and sparks crawl up my skin. I drop the bottle and turn around, pretending to be busy with something in my bag.

I wrack my brain for what's going on. Am I coming down with a fever suddenly? Am I sick? Why does my skin feel all tingly and my stomach feels so warm? Why do I have the urge to touch Kassian like that? Why do I wanna ruffle Nix's hair?

As best as I can, I get myself together before straightening once more. Nix tosses his shirt onto the towel and my mouth runs dry all over again. His shoulders are so broad and strong. I might be taller than him but I have no doubt he could throw me over his shoulder and carry me. Why does that thought make me want to squirm?

"Here," I say, holding my hand out for the bottle as Nix struggles to get his back. "Let me."

Nix tosses it over and I just barely stop myself from slapping my own forehead. Why the fuck did I just volunteer for this? I'm having an inner crisis and getting my hands on Nix's body isn't going to help that!

I squirt some sunscreen onto my hand before carefully slathering it against Nix's shoulders. I push it down his back, stopping at the waistband of his trunks. His skin is hot to the touch and I'm not sure if it's from the sun or if Nix just runs hotter. Part of me would really like to learn the truth someday.

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My stomach swoops as I touch him. I swear, I feel him shiver and that just makes these confusing feelings inside of me even stronger. I make sure that Nix is completely covered in sunscreen before finally taking a step back.

Swallowing thickly, I murmur, "all done, Nix."

"Thanks, Dean!"

I look over at Kassian and my face flushes. He's bent over, applying sunscreen to his long, lithe legs. When he straightens, he takes off his robe. The act shouldn't be sensual and yet, somehow it is.

My cock gives a twitch and suddenly, everything seems to come into focus. This feeling? It's arousal.

I think I'm attracted to Kassian and Nix.

I don't think I've ever been attracted to someone before. I've never really had these types of feelings or sensations. I never really understood the hype around sex, never chasing it the same way people around me did.

"Can you get my back too?"

"Yeah," I say, doing my best to smile. "Come here."

Kassian turns his back to me and I squirt more sunscreen onto my hand. I start at his shoulders and work my way down. Now that I know what I'm feeling, it's obvious. I'm getting pleasure from taking care of Kassian and Nix. It feels so good to have my hands on their skin, to feel them like this.

Gods, I have to stop. I can't be the creep who's getting turned on from something as simple as applying sunscreen! There's a million reasons why I shouldn't be feeling this way, yet I can't stop them now that I have a name for them.

Kassian makes a breathy noise at the back of his throat and I'm a goner. Thank the gods I'm wearing khaki shorts because it helps hide the fact that I have an erection. If I was wearing swim trunks, everyone at the beach would know.

"There you go," I say, taking a step away and immediately turning back towards my chair. I set the sunscreen down.

"Water time," Nix says happily, grabbing my wrist and pulling me towards the water. Kassian gives him a soft look as he follows on my other side.

I quickly kick off my sandals before I'm dragged into the water. The water is cold, helping to calm down the racing inside my head. My body comes back to myself, no longer feeling like I'm about to overheat or pass out.

Kassian and I stop once the water gets to about our knees. It laps over our legs, tickling our skin. Goosebumps break out across Kassian's pale skin.

Nix, on the other hand, runs forward until it's deep enough for him to dive under the water. He swims for a bit before cresting back up, shaking his head and scattering droplets every which way, not unlike a dog.

I look down at Kassian, seeing him watch Nix, a soft smile on his lips.

Even if what I'm feeling for these two is something more than friendship, it's easy to see that they only have eyes for each other. I might be new to these feelings, but that doesn't mean I can't see what's in front of me. They belong together.

Maybe that's why I'm here. Maybe it's my job to help these two finally get together. Maybe the universe wants me to be the catalyst that will instill change.

"Tempted by the darkness, you will always be my light. May my feet continue forward until I find that which lights my path."

Kassian startles, looking up at me with wide eyes. The sun reflects off the water, brightening his eyes even further.

"How do you remember these quotes, Dean? Your memory is amazing."

I rub the back of my neck. "I don't even know why I said that. The way you were looking at Nix made me think of it."

“I love that part. Lazar’s devotion is something out of this world. People like that aren’t real.”

I turn back towards Nix, shaking my head. “I think maybe there are people like that but we’re too stubborn to actually *see* them sometimes.”

Kassian wraps his arms around himself, shivering. He stares out at Nix, chewing at his bottom lip. Finally, he makes a scoffing noise.

“Are you cold?”

He takes a step towards me until his side is against mine. “Yeah. A little bit.”

Against my better judgement, I wrap my arm around his back, pulling him close. Immediately, he snuggles himself against me, allowing my body to warm his up.

I’ve never touched a man like this before. Hell, I’ve never touched *anyone* like this before, other than Hazel and she doesn’t really count.

Kassian is wearing nothing but a little pair of swim trunks. His skin is just as soft as I thought it would be, smooth and silk and mostly hairless. My stomach flips, making me feel borderline sick.

“Maybe you’re right,” Kassian murmurs. “But sometimes, that doesn’t matter.”

“What doesn’t matter?”

“The devotion of the one you’ve known, the affection from the one you desire most. Sometimes, even with that, it’s just not in the cards for you.”

The words are like a stone falling into the pit of my stomach. Kassian sounds so heart-broken it threatens to make me cry. I squeeze my arms around him tighter.

“Who cares about cards? Who cares about fate? Sometimes, you have to be brave enough to make your own fate, Kassian. You’re *brave*.”

“You really think so?”

“I know so.” I pull him until we’re hugging each other, our chests pressed together. This should be strange, to just be hugging in the water like this, but somehow it feels right. Everything fades into the background, the only thing that matters is cheering up Kassian. “I haven’t known you long, but I know you’re brave and you’re strong. I’ve enjoyed knowing you and Nix so much. I like the time we spend together.” I clear my throat and softly admit, “you’re special to me.”

Kassian makes a noise that I don’t understand before he finally pulls away. He tucks a loose strand of hair behind his ear. “Thanks, Dean. You’re

really special to me too.”

Just then, Nix bursts out of the water by our legs. Water splashes all over us and we instinctively jump apart from each other.

“Oh my gods,” Kassian says, holding a hand over his chest. “You scared the shit out of me!”

Nix just giggles, staying on his belly in the water. He looks up at Kassian with pleading eyes. “Wanna play mermen with me?”

“What are you? A child?”

“Yes! Play with me!”

“Fine,” Kassian murmurs before sitting in the water with Nix. Nix lets out a cheer, the two of them swimming away.

I walk back to my seat and sit down. I grab my book and do my best to focus on the words but they blur all together. My mind is racing a mile a minute, unable to hold onto one clear thought.

My eyes drift back out to the water, watching Nix and Kassian play. They roughhouse and wrestle and swim around each other. They’re playful and excited. They touch each other with such ease it leaves my chest aching with something else I can’t name.

So many emotions, so many new sensations. What the hell does any of this mean?

Thankfully, I don’t have to have it all figured out right this second. Letting out a deep breath, I pick up my book and try again. This time, I can focus on the words just fine and sink into my reading while the sound of laughter and splashing are my background soundtrack.

Chapter Eight

KASSIAN

HOW THE FUCK HAVE I gotten myself into this mess? What choices in life did I make to leave me *here*?

Right now I'm sitting on Dean's couch, watching as Dean laughs at something Nix just said. He looks so handsome when he laughs like that. Of course he'd get along with Nix so well, who *wouldn't*? Nix is perfect.

Oh my gods, I have to look away before they realize I'm staring at them.

I turn away, only to catch Hazel watching me, her brows wrinkled in confusion. Great, now I'm being judged by Dean's daughter. Could this night get any worse?

Clearing my throat, I lean forward, picking up my glass of water from the table. I take a quick drink just to do something before setting it back down.

"I want to be on Kassian's team," Nix says, making me look up at him again. He's staring at me with bright, brown eyes.

"What game did you decide on?"

"Charades!"

I can't help but crack the tiniest smile. "Your favorite."

"Dean said he's bad at it and you know how much I like winning."

Hazel scoots over, making room for Dean on the couch. He sits beside her before passing out pens and paper. We all take some time to write out different things for the game. Then we toss them into a bowl in the middle of the table.

“You get two minutes,” Nix says, explaining the rules. “For every one your teammate gets right, you get a point. At the end of three minutes, if you’re still stuck on a prompt, the other team has one attempt to steal and that’s worth two points. We’ll go around so everyone gets a turn charading twice. At the end of that, we’ll see which team has the most points.”

“Sounds good,” Hazel says brightly. “I’ll go first!”

Nix comes and takes her place beside me on the couch. He puts a hand on my thigh, giving my leg a quick shake as he tells me how excited he is to beat them.

My heart clenches painfully inside my chest. I’m going to miss this when those two fall for each other and decide to leave me behind in the dust. I’m going to miss having Nix’s excitement around. I’m going to miss his easy touches.

Fuck, why did the universe or fate or whatever decide to do this to me? Why am I being left out?

Nix picks up the kitchen timer that we’ll be using for the game, setting it for two minutes. “Ready. Set. Go!”

Hazel picks up a piece of paper from the bowl. She lets out a really long sigh that makes me crack a smile. She holds up three fingers and Dean is quick to start guessing.

“It’s three words?”

Hazel nods her head. Then she puts up two fingers.

“The second word?”

Hazel grins, nodding her head again. Then she throws up another peace sign.

“The second word is to? Blank to blank?”

“Yes. Okay,” Hazel murmurs to herself. She puts up three fingers, letting Dean know she’s going to be miming the third word first. She forms an oh with her hand, sliding it up and then using three fingers to depict she’s holding something with three prongs, like a pitch fork. Then she gives herself little devil horns with her fingers and then finally points at the ground.

“Hell?”

Hazel taps her nose rapidly, grinning from ear to ear. Then she mimes that she's driving a car and Dean gets it.

"Highway to hell!"

"Yes!" Hazel says excitedly. She goes to grab a second piece of paper but the timer goes off. "Oh, boo!"

Dean offers her a high five as Nix stands up, walking around the coffee table.

"Better than zero," he tells her.

"I guess," she says with a pout. "I have a feeling these two are gonna be really good at this. We should have separated them."

"This is one of Nix's favorite games," I say with a shrug.

"Although," Hazel says, more softly. "You two shouldn't be separated. You're a package deal."

What the hell does she mean by that? She can see the soul ties, she knows the truth.

"Ready?" Nix asks, forcing me to focus on him. I give him a nod and he starts the timer.

Nix picks up a piece of paper, tucking his hands under his armpits.

"Chicken!"

Nix shakes his head, pretending to eat something.

"KFC!"

"Yes," he explains, picking up another piece of paper. This time he cups his hands like he's holding onto some handlebars.

"Riding a bike!"

"Hell yeah!" He picks another piece of paper. He tilts his head to the side before getting into a deep stance, holding his arms out in front of him.

"Volleyball!"

Nix motions for me to keep going, pretending to receive a ball.

"Liberio!"

"Yep!"

This time when he picks up the paper, he starts giggling. My stomach warms at the sight. "Neil Armstrong," I guess based on his reaction.

"What the fuck?" Hazel murmurs beside me.

"That's not fair," Dean says, "he didn't even *do* anything yet."

"It's silly," I tell them, turning to look at them as Nix picks up another piece of paper. "It's our favorite thing to use for guessing games like this."

"See," Hazel says, nudging my side with her elbow. "Package deal."

My cheeks flame as I turn back towards Nix. He's got his back to me with his arms wrapped around himself. His hands slide up and down his own back as he starts making kissing noises.

"What the fuck?"

Nix spins around, holding up his arms like he's dancing with someone. He swings his hips back and forth and I can't stop staring at him. My mouth is dry, my lips unable to move in order to form words.

Hazel and Dean start laughing beside me as we watch Nix make out with himself. The timer goes off and for once, I'm glad to be done with my turn.

"Well?" Nix asks, looking over at Dean and Hazel. "Do you have a guess?"

Hazel and Dean put their heads together, whispering between them. I pick up my glass of water, taking a deep drink of it. Hopefully, it'll help cool me down after watching Nix move like that.

Hazel's words keep playing over and over inside my head. Why the fuck would she say that to me unless she knows something that I don't know. She's kind and doesn't seem like the type of person who'd tease me for my unrequited feelings. That means, she's being earnest when she says that Nix and I belong together.

Except, I *saw* the soul ties. I saw that Nix and Dean belong together. There's no ifs, ands, or buts about it. Does that mean I missed something that day?

"The horizontal tango!"

"Yeah!" Nix says, adding two points to their team's score. He quickly switches places with Dean, sitting beside Hazel.

"You two are something else, Nix," Hazel says, jostling Nix's side. "It's like you had some sort of telepathic mind melding moment or something."

"That's what happens when you've been best friends since kindergarten," Nix says proudly. "I know Kassian better than I know anyone else."

"That's really special," Hazel says, looking over at me with a soft smile. "I'm really happy for you."

Before I can properly ask her what that even means, Dean is starting the timer. I sit back against the couch, watching him act out a few things. He's kind of clumsy but very earnest in his actions.

Hazel is currently stuck guessing one thing. Dean starts to get playfully frustrated. It's so obvious that he's trying to communicate a kiss on the

cheek, how is she not getting it? Finally, Dean strides forward and kisses Nix on the cheek, waving his hands around in a ‘this is what I mean’ way.

I’m struck square in the chest, like a bat’s been swung at me. I suck in a sharp breath, my entire body going tense.

“Oh! A kiss on the cheek!” Hazel calls out just as the timer goes off. She turns towards me, giving me a wink.

Nix looks like he’s on cloud nine. His cheeks are red and he can’t stop grinning.

I replay the image over and over inside my head. The sight of Dean kissing Nix’s cheek should make me feel sick to my stomach. It should be a physical reminder of what I can’t have. I see it behind my closed lids and I’m filled with *warmth*.

What the fuck is going on with me?

I can’t deny that the two of them look perfect together. They look like they’re meant to be, like a rom-com couple awkwardly figuring out they like each other. I *liked* seeing them kiss like that.

I want to see them do more than kiss. I want them *both* to turn their head and see me watching. I want them *both* to decide to kiss me too.

Fuck.

Things start rapid fire going off inside my head. Their soul tie was clear as day but I never looked down at myself. I never checked to see where my own soul ties went. By the way Hazel keeps looking at me, I have a feeling she knows where my own lead.

I do my best to focus on the game. It’s no surprise that at the end of two rounds, Nix and I come out on top, by a pretty big margin. The rest of the night is filled with random board games we find on Dean’s shelves. We play, we chat, we learn more about each other. Everything feels so incredibly easy with Dean and Hazel.

At the end of the night, as Nix is saying good night to Dean, I grab Hazel’s wrist.

“Hazel,” I whisper so only she can hear me. “Can I ask you something?”

Hazel’s eyebrows shoot up to her hairline before her face softens. “Of course, Kassian. What’s up?”

“It’s about *my* soul ties.”

Hazel grins before telling me everything.

Chapter Nine

Nix

I SIT DOWN AND pull open my folder filled with today's agenda and agreement with the cafe we're currently using for our meet and greet. A little pink envelope catches my eye.

"What's this?" I murmur to myself.

Kassian is suddenly there, peering over my shoulder. "Huh? Is that a love note?"

"I'm not sure," I tell him honestly, pulling the envelope out fully. It must have gotten shuffled into our things by accident. The name on the front says 'Mars'.

"Oh my gods," Kassian hisses out, grabbing the envelope out of the folder. He lifts it to his nose, smelling it. "It's sprayed with perfume and everything! And look, the outside has a lipstick kiss!"

"Who the fuck has access to our things? How did it get here?"

Before we can fully discuss everything, someone clears their voice at the door. We both look up, wincing. I suddenly feel like a child again, being caught with my hand in the cookie jar.

"What's up, Mars?" Kassian says, pretending like we weren't just talking about him.

“Sorry for the intrusion,” he says softly. “The cafe owner is getting ready to open the door and I wanted to make sure you’re both ready.”

“As ready as we’ll ever be!” I say brightly.

“We found something with your name on it,” Kassian says, both of us watching Mars for any indication he might know what it is. He simply tilts his head to the side, waiting.

I grab the envelope from Kassian and stand up, walking over to hand it to him. Finn peeks his head into the room. He looks down at the envelope then up at the three of us. Finally, he smirks at Mars.

“Fan mail?”

“Oh, shut the fuck up,” Mars says, tucking the note into his pocket, a little blush on his cheeks. They step back out of the room, leaving the two of us alone again.

“What the fuck was that?” I ask Kassian who can only shrug at me.

The two of us lean against the table, waiting for the first people to arrive. Normally, I would be overjoyed to be here. I love traveling, I love meeting new people, I love the work that Kassian and I do. Yet, my heart just isn’t in it today.

“I know,” Kassian murmurs, leaning against my side. “I feel the same way.”

“It feels weird, right? Like we’ve been doing this our whole lives so why am I feeling so empty about it all of a sudden?”

Kassian turns his head, giving me a small, sad smile. “I think you know why.”

I quickly look away, my chest feeling all wobbly and wrong. Kassian is right, I know exactly why I’m feeling like this but that doesn’t make it any easier to admit, even to myself.

The reason I feel so morose is because Dean isn’t here. The month we spent together was unlike anything I’ve experienced before. It’s hard to explain the way the three of us just instantly clicked. Everything felt so easy, so right when we were spending time with Dean.

But then the real world came knocking and we had to go back to traveling for our job. What would Dean have said, if we’d asked him to come along? You can’t just ask someone you met to come traveling the world with you! That would be ridiculous. At the same time, it’s consuming my mind nonstop. I want Dean with us. I wish he was here. It feels like there’s an

empty slot inside my chest that's suspiciously Dean shaped and it won't be filled until we meet again.

Thank the gods for Kassian. If I had to deal with all of these feelings alone, I'm not sure how I'd be handling it. A lot worse than I am right now.

My hand goes to my cheek. I swear I can still feel the warmth of Dean's lips against my skin. My stomach goes all tingly when I think about that moment. It happened so fast yet it's cemented within my mind, forever burned into my memory.

"Ready?" Kassian asks, wrapping an arm around my back and giving me a little shake. I lean against his side even harder, allowing his touch to ground me the same way it has for many, many years.

Ever since he talked with Hazel after our game night, he's been *different*. He's been more open with his touches. His smiles come easier. It's like there was a weight on his shoulders that's suddenly been lifted. I have no idea what they talked about but I'm happy they did because Kassian seems happier now.

"Yeah, let's do this."

The day passes in a blur of faces and magic. As always, we help so many people discover their magical abilities. There are a few people who truly have no powers, but they're few and far between.

There's a little girl who has the ability to grow gills in her throat which is really fucking cool. Neither Kassian nor I have seen anything like that before.

The cafe owner brings each of us some lunch halfway through the day. We sit side by side outside, under a tree. There's still a huge amount of people to see but we settle into this moment of solitude, enjoying each other's presence.

"We should call Dean," Kassian says out of nowhere, pulling out his phone.

"Yeah, okay," I say, excitement thrumming in my stomach. I want to hear his voice. I want to tell him about our flight. I want to hear about how his day has been going.

We might have known Dean for only a month, but already he feels like such a part of us.

The phone rings and we both wait. I impatiently squirm against my seat, my eyes never leaving the phone.

“Hi, this is Dean. I can’t get to the phone right now but if you leave me a brief message with your name and number, I’ll be sure to get back to you as soon as I can. Thanks, bye!”

Kassian hangs up without leaving a message. We share a look, disappointment practically palpable.

“He’s probably just busy with work,” Kassian says with a shrug.

“He usually takes lunch at this time,” I murmur softly. “Maybe he went out and left his phone at the library. It’s no big deal.”

“I’m sure he’ll call us back tonight when he sees we called.”

We finish up lunch and get back into the cafe. As we see people, we put on brave faces but now it feels like there’s a rain cloud following us around, hanging over our heads and dragging us down. There’s so many reasons why Dean wouldn’t answer our call, but for some reason, we’re both so bummed about it.

Maybe I didn’t realize how entwined Dean has started to feel until he’s no longer here, no longer available whenever we want him.

“That’s the last one,” Finn says, coming into the room and closing the door behind him. He sets our donation box down and opens it up, starting to sort through all the cash. Thankfully, the credit union we use, Fairway Credit Union, is a major chain and can be found in most major cities. He’ll make a deposit for us tomorrow morning.

“Thank you, Finn,” I say, sitting down and letting out a deep sigh. “It feels like it’s been a really long fucking day.”

Mars comes inside the room, carrying a tray of food for each of us. I quickly grab a sandwich, happily munching on it.

“The crowd felt about as big as usual,” Finn says offhandedly.

“You feeling alright?” Mars asks, looking between me and Kassian.

“We’re fine,” Kassian says right away. “I think we just have to get used to working again. That month-long break made us soft.”

“I thought it made you hard,” Finn murmurs under his breath, making Mars snort.

Kassian sputters and I can’t do anything but silently blush. What the hell does he mean by that? Is he implying some sort of innuendo?

Gods, is this weird crush super obvious for everyone? Sure, I’ve always loved Kassian. Loving him is a part of me, just as much as my legs or my hands, but these feelings for Dean are brand new. I can barely wrap my head around them.

Would Dean even want that? Would Kassian? The idea of all three of us together lights a fire inside my belly. I want to hold Kassian's hand and have Dean's arm around my waist. I want to kiss them both. I want to watch them kiss each other.

I cover my face with my hands and groan, much to everyone's amusement.

"Tomorrow will be easier," Mars says, patting my shoulder. "We'll be back into the swing of things before we all know it."

"I've missed this," Finn says, pushing all of the cash into a zip up bank bag, shoving it into his backpack before working at breaking down our donation box so he can fit that in his backpack as well. "This month has been so boring without being able to properly tease you two."

"You're a menace," Kassian says with a laugh, shoving a bagel into his mouth. "I feel like you get off on this."

"A little bit." Finn shrugs, grinning over at us. Mars slides some food over to him and he gets with the program, eating some dinner.

"Did you guys do anything fun on your vacation?"

Finn and Mars share a look, one that I don't understand. Finn smiles before answering, "as you know, we spent two weeks back home."

"Oh right," Kassian says, nodding his head. "That must have been nice."

"Really nice," Mars agrees, his voice soft. "I spent most of the time on the couch with an anime I've been meaning to watch. I don't think I put pants on once during that time."

Finn snorts with amusement. Why does it feel like there's something I'm missing?

We finish up eating before packing up our things and heading out of the cafe, after thanking the cafe owner again. We'll see him again tomorrow for round two.

The walk back to the hotel we're staying at helps ease some of the tension in my body, helping me clear my head. Just because I miss Dean doesn't mean I can completely lose my head. What would Captain Tag do in this situation? Well, he's a bit of a wild card so he'd probably rush back to his love interest's side, hold him against his chest, and tell him to run away with him.

Yeah, I don't think I'll be doing that.

Also, when the fuck did I start thinking of Dean as my love interest?

Unconsciously, my eyes drift to my side, watching Kassian's profile. He's talking to Finn who's walking backwards in front of us. His hair is half up, half down, some of his waves cascading down his back. He's wearing a little bit of makeup which only serves to highlight his beauty. Just looking at him could leave me feeling content for a lifetime, yet I always find myself aching for more.

When I look at him, I see *my person*. I see the one I plan to stick with for the rest of my life. Kassian is my partner.

I turn away, thinking about Dean. Why does he make my chest feel whole? Why does he fit with Kassian and me so well?

It's all so confusing and yet, I feel like I'm so close to figuring it out. I'm on the cusp of understanding yet it's frustratingly just barely out of reach.

"You okay?" Kassian asks softly, his hand reaching out and tapping my wrist. Feeling bold, I lace our pinkies together as we walk.

"I'm okay," I whisper back. "Just have a lot in my head right now."

"I have a lot going on inside my head too."

"Good things?"

"Definetely."

"Good night," Mars says when we get to our rooms.

"See ya in the morning," I say, stepping inside our room and closing the door behind us. I immediately leap onto my bed, allowing myself to faceplant against the pillows. I let out a long sigh, feeling my body unclench.

The bed moves as Kassian sits down beside me, right by my hip. His hand touches my back and I shiver despite myself. He runs his hand up and down my spine. I feel like a cat, wanting to arch up into his touch and start purring.

I turn my head so I'm facing him. He's looking across the room, out towards the window.

"What's going on inside that beautiful brain of yours?"

Kassian seems to startle. His hand freezes on my back, but only for a moment before he's going back to rubbing me. My stomach warms and my chest aches with affection. It threatens to choke me.

"You think I'm beautiful?"

"Well, duh. You're the most beautiful man I've ever met. I've thought that since we were kids."

A gorgeous blush rises up on Kassian's cheeks. He nibbles on his bottom lip, looking unsure.

"Nix," he breathes out, my name suddenly sounding so different from him. Usually, it feels safe, it feels affirming, it feels like me. This time, it feels reverent. It feels worshipped.

"Kassian?"

"You mean so much to me. I wish I were brave like you. Maybe then things would have changed a long time ago."

My heart picks up speed. "You're brave."

"Not like you," Kassian says softly. "You forge your own way. You're never afraid to be yourself or say what you mean. It's really, really beautiful, Nix."

"That's not true," I say, my voice suddenly sad. "Not always. Sometimes I keep things in my chest so tight that I'm afraid it'll never come out."

"I know." Kassian leans down, resting his forehead against my shoulder. My heart is racing so violently I swear I can hear it in my own ears. What is happening right now? "I know, and that's okay because I'm willing to be the brave one right now."

"Kassian?"

"Nix, I have to tell you something. I should have told you years ago. I should have told you a month ago. I had so many opportunities but I was so scared because I couldn't see the whole picture but I get it now."

I carefully push Kassian away so that I can get off my stomach. I sit cross-legged on the bed across from Kassian. He rests his hands on my knees, staring at me softly. My head is spinning in circles.

Could it finally be happening? I can't help but hope so fucking desperately that Kassian is about to tell me that he has feelings for me. Why is it happening now? I have no idea but I don't *care*. I want it. I want him. I want everything he's willing to give me.

Inside my head there's a mantra of *please, please, please*.

"Tell me," I whisper.

Kassian opens his mouth to speak, to possibly say the words I've been so desperate to hear for years. Just before anything comes out, there's a knock at the door.

Chapter Ten

DEAN

SITTING UP IN BED, I stare at the wall, trying to process everything I just saw. I saw myself enjoying a cup of coffee on my porch outside. I saw myself talking to Hazel though I'm not sure what we were talking about. I saw a retirement party at work. I saw myself buying a plane ticket.

I run my hands through my hair, letting out a long sigh. I'm getting more used to the dreams, but they're getting foggier now that I'm not spending time with Nix.

Just thinking about Nix leaves my chest aching. They left a couple days ago, heading to their next meet and greet. Never in my life have I felt this way.

I've always prided myself in how independent I am. Sure, Hazel is the exception to the rule. If I could hang out with my daughter all the time, I probably would, but otherwise, I'm very happy being alone. I've never felt like I *needed* another person around. I've never *longed* to spend time with anyone else.

But now I crave. It's been a few days and I miss Nix and Kassian. I miss watching them interact. I miss talking to them. I miss our spur of the

moment plans. I miss their soft smiles and loud laughter and rambunctious antics.

Having them around made my house feel so full. Things felt so much more full of life. Even my normal routine felt more alive.

Letting out a deep sigh, I get out of bed and start my day. After showering and getting dressed, I grab myself a cup of coffee. I sit outside, enjoying it as the sun slowly rises. There's dew on the grass, not quite chilly enough for it to frost over quite yet. The sky is painted with gorgeous shades of pink and purple, rays of orange interspersed. Despite the color, a part of me can't help but *feel* gray. I think that feeling is from missing Nix and Kassian.

Despite all of the confusing feelings swirling around inside of me, I find myself smiling. This moment weirdly feels like the calm before the storm. There's something brewing, something big, and for just a second, I can sit still and enjoy this.

I'm not opposed to change. Sure, it's terrifying but that doesn't mean it should be something to shy away from. Change can be a good thing, it can bring some of the best things in life.

I have no idea what sort of changes are coming, only that they are. I can't stop thinking about that plane ticket I saw in my dream. What the hell did that mean? Am I really going somewhere? Am I chasing after Nix and Kassian? That would be weird, right?

I tip my cup back, drinking the last of my coffee before standing up. I pack my bag for the day before heading out to my car and driving to work. Everything about today is familiar, the same routine I always go through. At the same time, there's something in the air. My skin prickles with anticipation, like something big is going to happen, like maybe I saw it in my dreams last night but my brain hasn't quite caught up yet.

My walk from my car into the library is short. I smell coffee and fresh bread from the cafe nearby and I think about Kassian and Nix. They enjoyed having lunch there. They would bring me coffee sometimes if they were in the area.

I miss them.

Once inside, my steps falter. I find a banner across the front of my desk that says happy retirement. To the best of my knowledge, no one is retiring. What the heck is going on? Why is that there? This is the same banner I saw in my dream last night.

I go to the employee only area, setting down my bag and hanging up my coat. Then I walk back through the library, finding my boss, Richard, waiting for me. He's an older man wearing a blue shirt under a black suit. He adjusts his glasses when he sees me, giving me a small smile.

"Good morning, Dean."

"Good morning, sir," I say, nodding at the banner. "Care to explain who's retiring?"

Richard leans his hips against my desk, crossing his arms over his chest. "I wish there was an easier way to talk about this, but I'll do my best to simply be straight with you, Dean. You've been here a long time, you understand how things go."

"Okay," I say slowly.

"With the budget cuts, your job has become redundant. Michelle was the last one hired, meaning she's getting paid the least. You've been here long enough that you can comfortably retire. You'll have your pension and benefits won't stop until the end of the year. This is a great way to send you off."

Instead of responding, I go around to my desk, pull out the chair, and heavily sit down. I cover my face with my hands, breathing in slowly.

That feeling that's been trailing behind me all morning crashes over me all at once. Apparently the big change happening is here and despite feeling like I was ready, maybe I wasn't. What the hell am I supposed to do now?

With a deep breath, I place my hands in my lap. I look up at my boss and nod. "Okay."

Richard gives me a big smile. "Take the morning to clean up your things. We'll have a big lunch in your honor."

"Right," I say, still trying to process everything. "Right, okay. Thank you, Richard."

Richard pats me on the shoulder. "You've done great things here. I'm really happy you can leave on such a high note, Dean. Thank you for all the years you've put into this library and this school."

I give him a little smile before he takes off, leaving me alone in the library. I pull out my phone, bringing up my messages. Then I freeze.

Why was my first thought to message Nix and Kassian? Why do I want to call them and tell them everything?

They're busy. I shouldn't be bothering them with this.

I hit call and wait. It doesn't take long before I get a response.

“Dad?”

“Hey, Hazel. You busy?”

“What’s going on? It’s not like you to call while you’re working.”

I let out a chuckle that sounds pitiful even to my own ears. “You’re never gonna believe this but I have a question for you. Would you like to come over to the library for my retirement party?”

There’s silence before Hazel bursts out, “*what do you mean your retirement party?* Dad, don’t move. I’ll be right over.”

That makes me chuckle for real this time. I move through my morning like I’m on autopilot. I pack up all my things, realizing just how much I’ve brought to work. I’ve made this place my second home.

Eventually, Hazel comes storming in. Her eyes land on the banner and she scowls at it. If she had some sort of fire ability, I’d worry for the state of the books. Thankfully, they’re safe from her wrath.

“Dad,” she says, walking over to me and pulling me into a hug.

“Hey, everything’s okay,” I say right away, squeezing her tight. “This isn’t such a bad thing.”

Hazel pulls back, looking up at me. “But you love this job.”

“I do,” I tell her softly, tucking some of her hair behind her ear. This is easier. I can comfort Hazel. I can focus on reassuring her instead of thinking about myself. “I love this job very much and it’s been my life for a long time, but that doesn’t mean this is a bad thing. Good things can come from change.”

Hazel looks at me like I’ve grown another head. Then the look blinks away just as quickly. She shakes her head.

“Let’s go get ice cream.”

“My boss is catering lunch. Let’s eat the free food and *then* go get ice cream.”

“Great plan,” she says with a small smile. And that’s exactly what we do. We eat the free food, accept slices of cake, and I say goodbye to a lot of the teachers I’ve worked with all these years. There are cards and well wishes. How they managed to get cards on such short notice is a mystery to me until I notice a lot of these have the school logo on the back, meaning they bought them from the university supermarket.

When that’s all said and done, Hazel helps me pack everything into my car before we head over to the ice cream shop.

With our dishes of ice cream in hand, we sit down in the corner of the shop across from each other. My mind is still swirling with emotions, all of them too overwhelming to properly piece together.

“So,” Hazel murmurs softly, “what now?”

I shrug. “That’s a great question, baby girl.”

“I have a suggestion or two but I’m not sure you’re gonna like them,” she says with a bit of a grin. It seems the melancholy of the moment has finally passed and we’ve moved directly into acceptance.

“I can finally work on that garden in the backyard I’ve talked about doing for the past few years.”

“That’s an option,” she says with a nod.

“I could start a puzzle club at the local public library.”

“Right. Another solid idea.”

“I could buy myself a motorcycle?”

“Nope. Veto,” she says, laughing. “You’re not allowed to have some strange mid-life crisis now.”

“Fine,” I say with a dramatic sigh. “What’s your idea?”

“Before I tell you, can I ask you something?”

“Anything.”

“How’re you feeling about everything?”

I take a bite of my ice cream, allowing the question to settle inside of myself. How am I feeling? I’m feeling terrified of the unknown yet excited at the prospect this brings me. I’m lonely yet I know I’m a phone call away from alleviating that feeling. I’m sad because I miss two people more than words can say but at the same time, logically I know that’s silly. I’ve only known Nix and Kassian for a month. Why are my feelings for them so strong?

“I’m excited for what the future will bring,” I say softly, trying to vocalize my feelings. “At the same time, I have no idea what that even looks like or what I want it to look like.”

I take another bite of ice cream. “For a long time, it was just you and me. Now it’s just me.”

“For a month, it was you and Nix and Kassian,” Hazel says, barely above a whisper. “You weren’t so lonely with them around, were you?”

The statement startles me. She’s not wrong, but I hadn’t realized she was paying attention to us that closely.

“You’re right. I really miss them.”

“What do you feel for them, Dad?”

Against my permission, I feel my face heat up at the innocent question. I’ve never felt anything like the way I feel for them. It’s all new, unexplored territory for me.

“I don’t know,” I confess truthfully. “I’ve never felt like this before. I want to be around them. I miss them terribly now that they’re gone. Everything feels so strongly right here in my chest,” I say, placing a hand over my heart. “But that doesn’t have to mean anything. I should just be happy I’ve made some new friends who make me feel happy when they’re around.”

Hazel lets out a long sigh, pinching the bridge of her nose. “I cannot believe I have to be the one to explain this to you, Father.”

“Don’t Father me,” I say with a chuckle, knowing she’s about to drop some sort of truth bomb now that she’s broken out the ‘Father’.

“Those feelings you’re feeling? I know what they are. I’m a little hesitant to say too much but just know, there’s a reason you feel like that, okay? You want to be around them. You want to take care of them. I bet you’ve thought about what it would be like to hold them or maybe even kiss them?”

I quickly look away. “Hazel, don’t say stuff like that. You’ll stop my poor heart.”

Hazel snorts. “Remember what you used to tell me as a teenager?”

“If you can’t talk about sex with your partner you’re probably not mature enough to be having it,” I say with a groan. “You’re not my partner, you’re my child. I don’t want to talk about this with you.”

“I’m not trying to make things weird,” she says, holding up her hands in surrender. “I’m simply saying you should think about it.”

“This is all very new for me,” I tell her, shaking my head and staring down at my ice cream. “I’ve never wanted anyone the way I want them.”

“Then you have to do something about it, Dad! Don’t let them get away! Fight for them or whatever.”

“This isn’t a movie, Hazel.”

“It’s not,” she says in agreement. “But I bet they’re missing you just as much as you’re missing them. Some sort of romantic gesture is just the thing you all need to spark this into something real instead of this awkward ‘will they, won’t they’ you all have going on.”

“Why are you so invested in this?”

“Because I know you’re all going to work out,” she says with such conviction that I realize what she’s trying to say between the lines. Hazel’s magical ability is to see people’s soul ties. If she’s certain the three of us belong together, it’s probably because she saw it.

“Okay,” I say, sitting back in my seat. “Okay.”

“Okay? Just like that?”

I nod my head. “I don’t even know where to start.”

“I do,” she says, pulling out her phone. She pulls up a website to buy plane tickets. The moment leaves me with *deja vu*. Ah, so this is what the dream meant, this is what today was leading me towards.

Excitement starts to thrum inside of me, boiling just under my skin. Tonight I’ll see them again. Tonight I’ll tell them how I feel. Tonight will be the start of something magical.

I hold onto Hazel’s certainty, allowing it to give me confidence. I don’t even know what I’ll say or do when I finally get there, all I know is that I want to be by their side. I want to see them smile.

I want them. I want everything they’re willing to offer and offer everything I have for them in return. Now that I’ve talked things out with Hazel, these feelings seem so obvious. I want to hold them and kiss them and see them succeed. I want to be there when they celebrate and hold them when they mourn.

I care about Nix. I care about Kassian. I want the three of us to be together, to be companions, to be partners.

I think I might be falling in love with them and I can’t wait to share that with them. Tonight.

Chapter Eleven

KASSIAN

“TELL ME,” NIX WHISPERS, his voice full of longing and desperation. Now that I know what to look for, I curse myself for ever doubting our feelings for each other. It’s written across his face that he wants me, just as desperately as I’ve always wanted him.

Why the fuck did it take me so long?

The answer is obvious. We were waiting for Dean.

I open my mouth, to confess to Nix all of my feelings. To tell him the depths of my love for him. Before I can manage a single word, there’s a knock on the door.

Just like that, the moment is shattered. I look away, feeling my heart throb painfully in my chest.

“Did you order room service?” Nix asks, standing up off the bed. I follow him.

“Nope. Maybe Mars or Finn forgot something?”

The two of us move over to the door. Nix peeks through the eye hole. He turns towards me, his face splitting into a grin.

“You’ll never in a million years guess who’s here,” he says, his voice filled with excitement.

The dread filling my chest from our moment being ruined suddenly brightens. If Nix is this excited, there's only one person that comes to mind.

"Bro," I say, mirroring his grin. "Are you serious?"

"Look for yourself," he says, taking a step back.

Peeking through the hole, my stomach floods with a million butterflies. Standing outside our door, with a bag in his hands, is Dean.

"Holy shit," I say before I can stop myself. I watch as Dean smiles at the door.

"Are you guys gonna let me in or just keep looking at me through the peep hole all night?"

I quickly pull the latch away from the door and throw it open. "Dean!"

Dean's face brightens, his mouth stretching into a wide smile. Before I know what's really happening, like my body is moving on autopilot, I throw my arms around Dean's middle, hugging him tight. Thankfully, I'm not the only one moving. At the same time, Nix collides with Dean's other side, the two of us sandwiching him in the middle.

Dean chuckles softly, dropping his bag so he can wrap his arms around the both of us. The sadness I was feeling just a moment ago at not being able to confess properly to Nix falls away, being replaced with joy. I'm so glad Dean is here. Tonight is the night. Tonight, I'll tell them both how I feel.

If I need to, I'll explain what Hazel and I talked about. I'll tell them that three of us have soul ties, tying our lives together. We're soulmates and I'm not letting them go, not without a fight.

"I can't believe you're here," Nix murmurs softly. "We missed you so much, Dean."

Dean's hands tighten around us for a moment. "You did?"

"Of course we did," I say right away, looking up at him with a smile. "You missed us too, right?"

"Yeah," he says softly, "I did. I missed you both a lot."

I let go of Dean and pick up his bag, dragging him into the room after me. My head is spinning and my heart is thrashing against the inside of my ribs. I'm so happy that it's overwhelming but at the same time, I feel more nervous than I've felt in a really long time.

Why is Dean here? Could it be that Hazel explained the soul ties to him? Is he here because maybe he's feeling the same sort of tug that Nix and I

have been feeling?

Like a blooming flower, hope stirs inside of my chest. I can't stop grinning as we get Dean's things settled inside our room. He takes off his shoes and his coat before sitting down on the bed. Nix and I sit on the other bed across from him.

"What are you doing here?"

Dean rubs the back of his neck, looking adorably out of his depth. Ever since I've met him, he's always seemed so unattainable, so untouchable in the way he has his shit together. I think this is the first time, other than when he realized he had magical abilities, he has looked unsure.

"Okay, let me start at the beginning," he says, looking between the two of us. "Today, I got let go from my job."

"What?"

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah," he says, nodding his head. "Long story short, I officially retired today."

"Okay," I say slowly.

"Congrats? I guess?" Nix says awkwardly.

"But it's fine. It kinda made me realize some stuff. I sat down with Hazel afterwards and we talked things out. She really helped me get my thoughts in order."

Nix and I share a look. My stomach feels like it might burst with how many butterflies are flitting around inside of me.

"And those thoughts," I say, looking back at Dean. "They're good thoughts?"

"The best," Dean says, his face finally turning into a smile. The wrinkle between his brows smooths out. He reaches forward, taking my hand and then Nix's, holding them together between his own. "These thoughts mostly revolved around the two of you."

I suck in a sharp breath. My hand tingles where it touches both of their hands. I can't believe this is happening.

"I've been thinking about you as well," I confess, not wanting Dean to do all the work. "I've been thinking about both of you."

"Really?" Nix asks, his voice hopeful.

"Yeah. Especially you, Nix. I think I've left far too many things unsaid."

"I think you should say them," Dean says, squeezing my hand. "Tell him."

I turn my body so I'm facing Nix full on. I clear my throat, hoping the words don't get caught. I force them out. "I'm in love with you, Nix."

Nix's pretty brown eyes widen in shock. His cheeks take on a red tint to them, his lips stretching into a shocked oh before sliding up into a grin.

"Oh my gods, bro," he whispers. "I've been dying to hear you say that for years."

"Well, I've said it."

"Yeah, you did," he says, pulling my hand up so that he can kiss the back of it. "I'm in love with you, too. I think I have been since we were kids and you knocked that kid on his ass after he made fun of me for being trans. That was the moment I knew I'd love you forever."

I close my eyes against the sting of unshed tears. I allow Nix's words to run over me, to settle inside my chest where I can hold it dear forever.

Nix loves me back. He's loved me for years. Gods, why the fuck was I so terrified of telling him? Why have we been holding ourselves back all this time?

Right, because we were waiting for Dean to complete us. We were waiting for our third to fill in the slots. The wait was worth it because it made us who we are today, it made this moment all the sweeter because of how desperate we both were to get here.

I let go of Nix's hand. He looks shocked but only for a moment because as soon as I have my hands free, I cup his face and pull him forward. Dean makes a noise at the back of his throat as he watches me kiss Nix for the first time.

Closing my eyes, I sink into the kiss. Nix's lips are soft against my own, slotting together perfectly. He's warm and soft and tender. Exactly how I always assumed kissing Nix would feel like.

My heart spins and my stomach flips violently. I pull back but Nix chases me, slotting our lips together again. It's wonderful and life-shattering and amazing all at the same time. I feel like I'm freefalling, knowing strong arms will be there to catch me.

Those strong arms are more than metaphorical as Nix shifts, putting one arm around my back, the other finding my thigh. He holds me as he kisses me over and over, like he can't bring himself to stop now that we've started. I can relate. I don't want to stop. Nothing could stop me.

"Wow."

Okay, maybe one thing can stop me. The sound of Dean's voice brings me back to the present. I pull away and Nix does the same. His eyes are blown wide, his lips red from our kisses. We haven't even kissed with tongue yet and he already looks as wrecked as I feel.

Kissing Nix felt like coming home. As I turn to look at Dean, I can't stop wondering how his kisses will feel.

"You two look so wonderful together. I couldn't look away."

"That's okay," Nix says right away, reaching for Dean's hand once more. "I wanted you to watch. Just like I want to watch you kiss Kassian."

Now it's Dean's turn to suck in a sharp breath. I don't think I've ever seen him blush like this before. He looks really cute when he's flustered.

"I like you," I blurt out, looking at Dean. "I like you a lot. Having you with us like this, it just feels really right."

Nix nods his head. "I feel the same way."

Dean sucks in a shaky breath, doing his best to find some composure. When he does, his blue eyes turn towards us.

"In some ways, I feel like I've fallen behind when it comes to the both of you. You know what love is because you've always had it when it comes to each other. You've never had to question these feelings, you've just always known. I'm new to all of this. I've never felt this way about anyone before so please, be patient with me."

"We're willing to wait as long as you need," Nix says right away, squeezing Dean's hand. "We waited this many years for each other, what's a few years waiting for you to catch up?"

Dean pulls our hands up to his mouth, kissing Nix's hand and then mine. "I won't need years. I'll just need a bit of patience while I get used to everything. The feelings though, they're already here. You don't have to worry about that."

"So you," Nix starts to say. He clears his throat, caught in emotions. "You like us too? Both of us? The same way we like you?"

"Yes," Dean says simply. "Yeah, I do."

Hearing the confirmation is like a balm against my soul. Everything feels right in the world now that Dean is here, now that we're all on the same page.

"Holy shit," Nix murmurs, more to himself than to us. "Holy fucking shit."

I can't help but snort with amusement. I look at Nix, pinching his arm.

“Ouch! What the hell, bro?”

“Just proving to you that this isn’t a dream,” I say with a grin that makes his scowl immediately drop away.

“This is real. This doesn’t feel real. This feels like all my dreams are coming true.”

“I know a thing or two about dreams coming true,” Dean says with a grin. “I didn’t dream about us kissing but umm, is that something you might be interested in doing?”

“Yes,” I answer immediately. “Please. I would love to kiss you, Dean.”

“Me too! I want a turn!”

Dean leans forward and I meet him halfway. My lips meet his. His lips are fuller than Nix’s and a little chapped but this kiss is no less gentle. Dean kisses with his full attention just like everything else he does.

If I was standing, I would have actually swooned from my knees going all weak. This kiss is completely different from my kiss with Nix yet at the same time, it’s just as perfect. Dean’s cologne fills my nose, his scruff rough against my palm. He moves against my lips just right and when I feel the tip of his tongue against my bottom lip, I moan into the kiss.

“Holy shit,” Nix murmurs beside me, the hand on my thigh tightening. I pull back, staring at Dean. He touches his lips, looking like his entire world is being turned upside down.

“Dean,” I whisper, surprised by how broken my noise sounds. “Are you okay?”

Dean’s eyes seem to clear. He smiles. “I don’t think it’s possible to be any better.”

“Bet,” Nix says before grabbing the front of Dean’s shirt and tugging him forward. I sit back and watch the two guys I’ve been pining over kiss each other.

Nix kisses Dean hard, fully on the mouth. It’s rougher than how he kissed me. This one is full of passion and impatience. Their lips part and I can see their pink tongues poking out, touching each other.

My stomach swoops and my cock fills with blood at the sight. Jesus fucking Christ, they look so good together. I could get off just watching them kiss each other, watching them make each other feel good.

They kiss each other until they’re panting, breathing each other’s air more than actually kissing. When they pull apart, there’s a string of spit

connecting their lips and my mouth waters, wanting to lap it up from their lips.

“Wow,” Nix breathes out, looking just as mystified as Dean. I can’t help but chuckle, watching them process everything that’s happened.

“I imagined that moment so much but I never thought it would be like that,” I tell them. “After meeting Dean, I was so fucking jealous.”

Nix looks at me in surprise. “But you’re the one who was pushing the two of us together.”

“Well yeah! Because I saw your guys’ soul ties!”

“Our what?” Nix asks with a gasp of surprise.

“I saw your string of fate, the one that connects the two of you together.”

“Using Hazel’s ability?” Dean asks softly.

I nod my head. “I saw the line between the two of you. I pulled away from Hazel before I looked down at myself.”

“Oh, Kassian,” Nix murmurs, wrapping both of his arms around me. I lean against him, allowing myself to revel in the feeling of his strong arms, his broad chest. “That must have been awful. I’m so sorry you felt like you weren’t wanted or supposed to be with us.”

“I’m okay. All that matters is that we’re here now.”

Nix leans forward, kissing my cheek. A moment later, I feel Dean switch beds, sitting beside me on my other side. He kisses my cheek as well. I feel so warm, so safe in that moment. I’m tucked between my soulmates.

Soulmates.

This is the first time I’ve allowed myself to think the word. That’s what we are. That’s what those soul ties meant. We’re meant to be together. We’re meant to love and support each other. We were destined to end up here, one way or another.

The three of us get into our pajamas and crawl into bed together. For the first time, we’re sharing a bed. They allow me to get into the middle, each of them snuggled against me. We still have so much to talk about and discuss and work out, but that can wait until tomorrow. Right now, I’m content to lie here with my soulmates, content to know that we’re together.

Suddenly, the sound of something hits our ears.

“What the hell is that?”

It kinda sounds like something hitting the wall from the other side of it. It’s bonks over and over in a rhythm. Then we hear a loud groan.

“Oh my gods,” I murmur. “Is that *Mars*?”

“No fucking way,” Nix murmurs back. “Is he? Wait? With *who*?”

“It must be that secret admirer! The one who left him the love note!”

“What’s going on?” Dean asks.

“Mars is one of our security guys. We think he has a secret lover but we haven’t been able to figure out who yet! I think they must have come to visit him!”

The three of us stare up at the ceiling. I fall asleep happier than I’ve felt in a long time, but unfortunately, I fall asleep hearing Mars enjoy the horizontal tango next door.

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Chapter Twelve

Nix

MY ARMS TIGHTEN AROUND the person in front of me. I run my nose over their hair, breathing them in. I feel so warm, so content. It takes me far longer than I care to admit to remember what happened last night.

When I do, my eyes snap open. I find Kassian in front of me. I'm spooning him, holding him tight. His hair is a mess against my face because he didn't tie it up like he usually does. I look over his shoulder, finding the bed in front of Kassian empty.

Fuck, was everything last night just a dream? No, that's not right because otherwise why would I be spooning Kassian? But where the fuck is Dean?

"Kassian," I murmur, tucking my nose against his neck. "Kassian, wake up."

Kassian hums softly. His eyes flutter before his body goes tense. "Nix?"

"I'm right here," I whisper into his shoulder. "Good morning."

Kassian's body goes lax once more. He runs his fingers over the back of my hand and I shiver. It's still so hard to wrap my head around all of this. I thought I would live with this pining forever. I thought I would always be the bro but never the bromance. Apparently we needed Dean to open our eyes to what's been in front of us this entire time.

“Where’s Dean?”

Kassian sits up slightly before falling back down with an amused huff. He points at the other bed. I lean over his back, looking over and finding Dean sleeping in the other bed.

“What the hell?”

“Maybe we move around in our sleep or something?”

“Maybe he hates us,” I say with a pout.

Kassian snorts. “That’s one option, but let’s not think like that without hearing what he has to say.”

“Fine.”

I tuck my face against his hair. My hand plants itself against his chest. I want to kiss him so badly it makes my chest ache. That’s when I remember I don’t have to hold myself back. I don’t have to pine. I’m allowed to touch him! I’m allowed to kiss him!

After moving Kassian’s hair out of the way, I kiss the side of his throat. He makes a noise, his body shivering in my embrace. I kiss him again, a little higher this time. Then I kiss his jaw.

“Nix,” he gasps out, his ass moving further back, pushing against my pelvis. I push against him in return, humping his backside. “Oh, fuck.”

“Kassian,” I breathe out, my body feeling like a livewire that’s ready to start letting off sparks. “Fuck, I can’t believe I get to do this. I can’t believe I get to have you.”

Kassian turns over, putting a hand around the back of my neck and tugging me down. Our lips connect, more hastily than they did last night. Last night was like finally breathing after holding our breath for too long. It was relief.

Now, we’re allowed to explore. We’re allowed to indulge. We can enjoy this knowing it’s not the last time but the beginning.

“I am so in love with you,” I whisper against Kassian’s lips.

“Bro,” he whispers back with a grin. “I’m like so totally in love with you too.”

“Good. That’s really, really good.”

There’s shuffling on the bed across from us and we both turn over towards Dean. He turns towards us.

“Good morning,” he says, his voice deeper than usual from just waking up.

“Hi,” Kassian says.

I narrow my eyes at him. “Why’d you leave us? You hate us, right?”

“Are you always this dramatic in the morning?”

Kassian nods his head. “He’s not usually much of a morning person. He’s a drama king.”

“Cute,” Dean says, smiling over at us. “I’m not used to sleeping next to anyone. I’ve been alone for fifty years and you’re both like a furnace so I jumped over here once you were both asleep.” Then he quickly adds, “don’t worry, I still very much like you.”

I tuck my face against Kassian’s hair once more, hiding the way I’m grinning from ear to ear. “I want to stay like this forever.”

Kassian sighs. “Unfortunately, Finn will be knocking on the door soon making sure we’re up and ready to go. We’ve got another meet and greet, Nix.”

“Fuck me,” I murmur against Kassian.

We get out of bed slowly, mourning the fact that we can’t stay here all day. Once Kassian is in the shower, I turn towards Dean. I jump into his bed and give him a good morning kiss, not wanting him to feel left out. He startles, making a surprised noise that I quickly catch with my lips.

His hands wrap around my hips, holding on tight as I kneel in front of him. I kiss him slowly, much slower than I did yesterday. I love learning all these new ways to kiss, all these new ways to touch each other. I can’t wait to explore and learn even more.

“Good morning,” I say again with a grin.

“Good morning,” he murmurs back.

“You look surprised.”

“I *feel* surprised,” Dean confesses. “It’s hard to wrap my head around everything that’s happened and how smooth it’s all fallen into place. This feels like a fairy tale or something.”

“I’m happy to be your prince.”

“Charming,” he says with a grin, kissing my cheek.

I get out of bed and start grabbing my things so I’m ready to jump in the shower once it’s my turn. “What will you do today?”

“I have no idea,” Dean says with a groan. He flops back onto the bed, staring up at the ceiling. “This is by far the most impulsive thing I’ve ever done in my entire life. I have no idea what I’m supposed to do now.”

“You could come with us to the coffee shop.”

“I don’t want to get in the way.”

“You wouldn’t,” I tell him right away. “We’d love to have you there.”

“Maybe,” he says. “I brought my laptop and a bunch of books. I guess I could just hang out in the cafe while you guys do your thing.”

“That sounds perfect! And then you’ll be there to join us for lunch.”

Dean gives me a soft smile, nodding his head. “Alright, you’ve convinced me.”

Kassian steps out of the bathroom, steam billowing around him as he walks out. His skin is still pink from the hot water. He’s brushing his fingers through his wet hair. It’s nothing I haven’t seen before but I’m struck all over again with how *happy* I am that he’s mine.

“You’re so beautiful,” I murmur, watching as Kassian blushes. His movements halt for a moment before he goes back to brushing out his hair.

“Thank you,” he says shyly. I pass him as I get into the bathroom. I can hear the murmur of them talking in the other room and I find my reflection grinning back at me in the mirror. I make quick work of my shower, getting myself changed.

Dean takes a quick shower as well. After about a half hour, all three of us are ready to head out. As we leave, I glance over at the door beside our own. Kassian catches me looking and he covers his mouth.

“Oh my gods,” he whispers, “do you think Mars’ partner is still in there? Also where the hell was Finn? Don’t they usually share a room?”

“Would it be terrible if we waited out here for them to leave the room so we could see?”

“Yes,” Dean says right away. “We are not staking out your security personnel.”

“Oh come on,” I say right away but laugh as Dean puts a hand on my back, pushing me towards the elevator. Right when we reach it, the doors open, revealing Finn.

“Oh,” he says, his eyes filled with a knowing look as he takes the three of us in. When his eyes land on Dean, a grin spreads across his face. “Oh, why hello.”

We all take a step back, allowing Finn to walk out of the elevator. He’s holding two paper bags on his wrist, his hands each holding a drink carrier filled with coffees.

“Good morning,” I say right away. “You’re up early.”

“Yeah, I didn’t get a lot of sleep last night so I thought I would just get up and get everyone some coffee.”

Kassian is already making grabby hands at Finn, taking the iced coffee meant for him from the tray. Okay, so apparently Finn must have been out all night, waiting for Mars' partner to leave or at least for the two of them to be done fucking before he came back to their room.

That's surprisingly rude on Mars' part, very unlike him.

"I have one for you too, Dean."

Dean looks pleasantly surprised. "That's really kind of you. Thank you."

"No worries. I'm assuming you'll be around more in the future so it's good to get to know you. Hopefully you're okay with what I ordered for you."

I roll my eyes. "We all know it'll be spot on, just like always."

Dean takes the hot coffee, blowing on it before taking a sip. His eyes widen in surprise.

"Don't look so surprised. I'm the vibes guy."

Dean looks at Kassian who explains, "that's part of Finn's ability. He can feel people's vibes. It makes him an excellent bodyguard because he can always tell when someone has bad intentions."

"That's really handy."

Just then, Mars leaves his room. I do my best to be as subtle as I can when I try to catch a glance into the room. I look around but I don't see anyone hiding inside. They must have left already or maybe they're still in bed or something.

"Good morning," Mars says with a bright smile, taking the coffee being offered to him from Finn.

"Holy shit," Kassian blurts out before covering his mouth with his hands. "Shit, sorry."

"What?" Mars asks, letting out a long yawn. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing!" Kassian says right away, his voice cracking. "Everything is perfect! Don't mind me!"

"Mars, come meet Dean," Finn says, gesturing for the two to come closer.

"Lovely to meet you," Mars says, shaking Dean's hand.

"You too."

"If no one is gonna say it then I'll say it," I blurt out, pointing at Mars' throat. "Dude, you have like a necklace of hickies. You looked like someone *mauled* you last night."

Mars' face turns bright red. He throws a hand over his neck before slapping Finn's shoulder. "Why didn't you warn me?"

"The lights were off when I left the room this morning! Don't blame me!"

Mars turns around and goes back into his hotel room. Kassian lets out a sigh before going back into ours, coming back out with a scarf and allowing Mars to borrow it for the day.

As we walk to the cafe, coffees in hand, I can't help but slide up next to Kassian. Making sure no one but him can hear me, I murmur, "we have to get to the bottom of this."

"I'm right behind you," Kassian says, nodding his head.

"Maybe we should rope Dean into helping us. Maybe he can just ask Mars who he's dating since he's new to the group."

"We shouldn't--" before Kassian says anything more, he's grabbing the back of my coat and yanking me away from the edge of the sidewalk. A moment later, a car that's trying to park comes up over the curb before correcting himself and getting back on the street.

I slowly turn towards Kassian, my eyes wide.

Kassian looks just as freaked out as I do.

"That was quick," I murmur, putting a hand on Kassian's wrist. "I'm so glad you were paying attention."

"I wasn't," Kassian says, shaking his head. "I just knew that was gonna happen. It was like I'd seen it happen before."

Dean steps over to us, putting a hand on Kassian's shoulder. "It's weird, right?"

"Oh fuck," Kassian hisses out. "This is because we slept together, isn't it? Your ability rubbed off on me."

"Is that the only thing rubbing on you?" Finn asks with a chuckle, making Kassian narrow his eyes at him.

"For now," I say with a grin. Dean and Kassian both blush.

"It's jarring," Kassian murmurs, "I don't like that at all. How do you deal with that all the time?"

Dean just shrugs. "You get used to it, I guess. Or at least, I'm slowly getting used to it. I guess that's the price we pay for wanting to sleep next to each other."

"The idea of you having your own bed is sounding better and better," Kassian says but by the grin on his face, he's clearly joking.

It's blowing my mind how much a difference a day can make. Yesterday, Kassian and I did this same exact thing. We came to this cafe, we helped people discover their abilities, we chatted with Finn and Mars. The entire time, there was this cloud of sadness tinging the air. There was something missing and no matter how smooth things were going, there was still this pit of gray clouding our vision.

Today, everything feels bright and new and clear. Dean is in the cafe, typing away on his laptop. He's not even in the same room as us, but Kassian and I are *happy*. Everything feels right in the world. Everything feels like it's the way it's supposed to be.

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I'm so glad this hotel has a decent gym set up. Sometimes, they claim to have a gym but it's just a single treadmill and some dumbbells. This one has some nice equipment, some weight lifting machines and multiple cardio machines. I'm just finishing my last few reps when my phone dings with a message.

I finish up, sliding the weights back onto the rack before looking at my phone. There's a message from Kassian, asking how much longer I'm going

to be. I tell him I'm just finishing up. My phone pings again, this time reminding me that it's my T shot day.

My stomach swoops as I reread the message. There's something so intimate about Sundays. It's the day that Kassian gives me my shot. His hands on my skin. His soft praise in my ear.

Will things feel different now that we've confessed our feelings for each other? Will things escalate in the way I've always dreamed for them? Will he kiss my shot location when he's done?

Normally, I would head up to the room, let him give me my shot, and then jump in the shower so I could quickly jerk off. This time, I shower down in the gym area, wanting to be squeaky clean. I don't anticipate anything happening but that doesn't mean I don't want to be prepared. Just in case.

A man can have sexy hopes and dreams!

I make my way back up to our room, my body warm all over with anticipation. My stomach is tying itself into knots, but not the bad kind. No, it's the kind that makes me wanna squeeze my thighs together, the kind that's making my dick throb inside my boxers.

"I'm back!" I call out. I walk into the room, looking around, unable to see either of my partners. Boyfriends? No, I think I like partners better. My partners are nowhere to be found until I hear a giggle come from the bathroom.

"We're in here," Kassian says, opening the door and allowing me inside.

Dean is sitting up on the counter as Kassian does his makeup. He leans against the counter beside Dean's hip, bringing his face close to the mirror as he applies some eyeliner. I stop in the door way, watching him work.

I've always found Kassian beautiful. When I was younger, I didn't want anything to do with femininity. I shunned it because of the way it made me feel wrong in my skin. Kassian is the opposite. He's embraced it in a way that's his. He doesn't shy away from pretty things, I admire that about him.

"How was your workout?"

"Really good," I say, rolling up my sleeve and flexing my arm, showing off my muscles. Kassian whistles and even Dean watches me with a sparkle in his blue eyes. "They had proper weights and everything. It was awesome."

"I'm glad. I know how much you miss it when you can't work out."

I walk into the bathroom properly and Dean taps me with his leg. When I'm close enough, he drags me closer, putting a hand around my bicep. He squeezes, feeling my muscles for myself.

"That's impressive," he says but there's something in the tone of his voice that makes me pause. Something unsure yet undeniably sexy.

"Putting these T shots to work," I say with a grin.

"Right! T shot time!" Kassian says, pulling away from the mirror and tossing his makeup on the counter. He runs back into the main room, rummaging through his bags.

I watch Kassian go with fondness warming my chest. When I look back up at Dean, he's watching me. He lifts a hand, gently carding it through my hair and making me shiver.

All of our touches are still so tentative, so unsure. We're still trying to gauge each other, figure out what we like and what we're allowed to do.

"I hope you don't mind," Kassian says, coming back into the bathroom. "I was telling Dean about our T shot routine. I kinda implied it was, you know, *our thing*, but if you're okay with it, I thought it would be alright if he stayed in here and watched. It might be good for him to know in case I'm not around for some reason."

Dean's eyes never leave my face. I swallow thickly. "Yeah," I say softly. "I don't mind."

"Thank you for including me," Dean says.

Kassian pushes me forward until I'm slotted between Dean's thighs. He's bracketing me in, his hands going to my back and holding me tight. My pelvis is pressed against his where he's sitting against the counter and I have to bite my bottom lip to keep myself from groaning.

"You two look so cozy like that," Kassian says and I finally look away from Dean. Kassian is grinning as he works, pulling out an alcohol pad and the other supplies he needs to give me my shot.

"I feel real cozy," I confess, leaning even harder against Dean. I swear I can feel his dick twitch against me. Both of our faces are red. My skin feels like there are little sparks dancing around it, goosebumps raising. "I'm right where I want to be."

Dean's hand tighten around my back. He doesn't say a damn word but his eyes bore into me, watching me, gauging my reaction.

"Drop your pants, bro."

I suck in a sharp breath when *Dean's* hands find the waistband of my sweatpants. His fingers are tentative, exploring as they slowly lower my pants. He only brings them down until the top of my ass cheek is visible. Normally, that's exactly how it would be. Kassian doesn't need more than that.

Feeling brave, I slide all the way out of my pants, stepping out of them and kicking them to the side. I feel a bit silly, standing here in my shirt and no pants, but the looks my partners are giving me help drive that feeling away.

"Fuck," Kassian murmurs softly, his golden eyes taking in my legs and my ass.

"Nix," Dean breathes out. He looks down between us. One of his hands move to my front, splaying across my hard stomach. His thumb goes lower, running through my pubic hair.

A full body shiver goes through me at the feel of him there, where no one else has ever touched me before. I want him to go even lower. I want to feel his fingers on my dick. I want to feel him inside of me.

A cold alcohol pad runs over my ass cheek and I tip forward, falling against Dean's chest. He pulls me into a kiss that swallows the broken little noise my throat threatened to make. I kiss him until my head is spinning. When I open my lips for him, he's right there, darting his tongue into my mouth.

"Fuck," Kassian says again, standing right behind me. He runs his hands over my hips, gripping me tight. He moves one of his hands to tangle with Dean's, both of them touching my pubic hair but not daring to go any lower.

It's maddening, to be so close to what you want but not getting it.

"It's hard to focus when you're like this," Kassian confesses softly. He leans forward, kissing my shoulder before taking a step back. I whimper into Dean's mouth.

I pull back, leaning my forehead against Dean's chest. I can feel the way he's panting, I can hear the way his heart is racing. He's just as worked up as I am.

Glancing down, I can see the outline of his erection through his pants and my mouth suddenly fills with saliva. I want to taste him. I want to make him feel good.

Fuck, I want everything when it comes to these two.

“Ready?”

“Yeah,” I breathe out, my voice sounding slurred even to my own ears. I feel Kassian pinch my ass before there’s a poke. After a few seconds, he pulls away, tossing the supplies into the corner of the counter and out of our way.

I hear shuffling and when I look back, Kassian is on his knees, crawling so that he’s between my legs.

“Oh fuck. Kassian!”

“Please,” he says, running his hands up my thighs which are now properly shaking. “Can I? I want to so badly, Nix. Please say yes.”

“Yes,” I breathe out before Kassian properly gets in place between my legs. I spread my thighs as he buries his face against my pelvis, running his nose through my curls.

“Nix,” Dean breathes out, grabbing my chin and pulling me into another kiss. My tongue is shoved roughly into Dean’s mouth as Kassian licks my cock for the first time.

My cock is so sensitive and I’ve never felt anything so warm and wet against it before. If Dean wasn’t holding me up, I think I’d have fallen to my knees already.

Kassian’s mouth feels so fucking good against my dick. He takes the little nub between his lips, sucking on it gently while I squirm and cry out. My hands latch onto Dean’s thighs, holding on for dear life. That’s when I remember he’s here too.

“Dean,” I say between whimpers. “Can I touch you? Please?”

“Yeah,” Dean says with wide eyes. “Anything you want, Nix.”

“Oh fuck,” I groan out as I get my hands on Dean’s pants, pulling them down in the front. When his cock springs free, it slaps against his stomach. I lick my lips before curling forward, bringing my lips to the head and giving it a little kiss.

“Oh,” Dean breathes out, his hands going to my head. He cups my cheek with one, the other going to my hair. “Oh, that feels so good. I’ve never done anything like this before. I didn’t know it could feel like this.”

Dean’s cock is heavy against my tongue. I push down until the head hits the back of my throat. I know not to go further than that, not wanting to choke or gag. I slide my lips back up, swirling my tongue around the tip, tasting his bitter precum and moaning.

Kassian's hands are on my ass, keeping me from squirming as he laps against my dick, licking over it in broad strokes over and over. My head is swimming and my body feels like it's on fire. Everything is too much, the dual sensations of sucking off Dean while Kassian sucks me off is too much.

"Fuck," I gasp out, taking just a single moment to catch my breath before diving back down onto Dean's dick. My movements are clumsy and unpracticed but based on the soft noises coming from Dean, I'm not doing too bad of a job.

"Nix," Dean murmurs, his voice broken and soft. He tugs on me until I release his cock, standing up straight. Dean cups my face and kisses me.

"Kassian," I say against Dean's mouth. "Put a finger inside of me. I'm so close. I'm so close, please."

Kassian pants against my thigh as he skims one finger against my front hole. "Here?"

"Yeah," I tell him before going back to kissing Dean. My hand is still around his cock, stroking him slowly.

When Kassian pushes a finger into my hole, my world feels like it comes crashing down around me. He flicks his tongue back and forth against my dick and my orgasm plows into me. My stomach clenches, my thighs shake, and my hole tenses around his finger, like my body wants to keep him there forever.

Dean holds me through my orgasm, my body shaking wildly. Tears spring to my eyes. All of the feelings I've been holding in for so long come slamming into my chest full force. I've wanted this for so fucking long and I finally have it. Not only do I have it, but I have Dean here as well, holding me and loving me and touching me the way I've always dreamed of being touched.

Kassian licks over my cock and it twitches for him, throbbing with aftershock. Finally, he stands up beside the two of us. He looks absolutely *wrecked*. There's slick on his chin, his hair is a mess, and his eyeliner is streaked down his cheeks.

He's never looked more beautiful.

"Come here," I demand, grabbing him and hauling him into a kiss. I shove my tongue into his mouth, wincing when I can taste *myself* on his tongue. He makes a noise at the back of his throat, something desperate and needy. Dean's cock jerks in my grip.

Dean works a hand between the two of us and shoves it into the front of Kassian's pants. Kassian breaks our kiss and turns his head, kissing Dean instead.

I watch the two of them kissing, my hand on Dean's dick while his hand is on Kassian's. The three of us are touching each other, connected, in sync. My stomach floods with emotion so strong it nearly brings me to my knees. I'm overwhelmed despite having already come.

It's hard to believe I get to have this.

"Oh gods," Kassian hisses out against Dean's lips. "Fuck. I'm already so close."

"Me too," Dean says. They both turn towards me, pulling my face between them. They each latch onto one side of my jaw, kissing, biting, sucking marks into my skin. I pant between them.

Dean comes first. His cock grows impossibly hard against my palm and a moment later, it jerks in my grip, splashing cum against the front of our shirts. He bites down against my shoulder as he does. It might be the hottest thing I've ever watched.

That's when Kassian comes. I quickly turn my head, needing to watch him, needing to see him reach his peak. His eyes scrunch up and he moans, unashamed to chase his pleasure.

I allow myself to look down where Kassian's cock is peeking out through his pants. He's long and thin, the tip a pretty pink color. Cum covers the side of Dean's hand, dripping down onto Kassian's pants.

Okay, maybe *that* was the hottest thing I've ever seen. How are both my partners so fucking hot?

I gingerly let go of Dean's hand and take a step back, regaining my breath. Then I go to the sink and wash my hands before grabbing a washcloth and getting to work on cleaning everyone up. One good thing about doing this in the bathroom is the easy clean up, I suppose.

"Fuck," Kassian sighs, slumping back against the counter. I carefully wipe up the cum as best as I can but we'll need to do a laundry run in the near future.

"Wow," Dean says, running his clean hand through his hair.

"Yeah," I add to the conversation.

That makes Kassian and Dean start giggling and I quickly follow behind. Once the three of us are cleaned up, I step back into the gap between Dean's

thighs. Kassian gets in behind me so that the three of us can conduct a hug session together. It's kind of awkward but also kind of perfect.

Kassian kisses my cheek from behind before leaning forward and kissing Dean.

"I didn't think it would feel like that," Dean says, barely above a whisper. "I've never even wanted to do that before I met you two. I finally get why some people love sex so much."

"As someone who's always been interested, I think it's special when it's with people you care about," Kassian says, his thumb rubbing random circles against my hip.

"You're both very special to me."

They're so cute, having this sweet moment. The feeling of Kassian's hand on my hip though is driving me a bit mad. Already, I can feel myself clenching around nothing desperately. I know we just came but I can't help but ask.

"So," I say with a grin. "When can we do that again?"

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Chapter Thirteen

DEAN

IT'S BEEN A FEW weeks since I've started traveling with Nix and Kassian. Already, we have a bit of a routine going. It's nice. Definitely not something I ever saw for myself but now that I'm in the middle of it, it's going surprisingly well.

Every day feels like an adventure. We explore every new city we're in. We eat at new locations. We meet so many people it's overwhelming and yet, Nix and Kassian were made for this. They meet so many people and somehow, they take the time to learn names, to talk with people, to truly get to know them. They help people accept when they don't have magic, and help guide the ones that do.

I'm honored that I get to be beside them. I'm honored that I'm the one they 'come home' to after all that hard work. I'm the one that gets to see them relaxed, the one who gets to comfort them and take care of them.

My feelings for them have only grown since joining them on the road. What was a little spark of potential has grown into an inferno of affection inside of me. My heart has somehow grown in size, making room for two more people.

I look out the window, seeing the two of them still talking on the phone. The sounds of the washers and dryers going all around me fade into the background as I focus on them. Nix is laughing while Kassian is grinning, shaking his head about something. They're speaking with their manager about their contract, seeing if they can include my travel fees in with their expenses. I'm not sure how well it's going but the two of them look completely at ease so I'm guessing it's going alright. I didn't ask them to do that but they wanted me to be included.

They said that the three of us are a package deal now. I can't even begin to describe what that means to me. For such a long time, I was just me and now I'm part of something bigger than myself. Now I have not one, but two partners beside me.

I'm just about to pull my laptop out of my backpack when Nix and Kassian step inside the door. Kassian hip checks Nix. Nix stumbles, catching himself against the back of a mechanic who's working on the washing machine that says it's out of order.

Sparks fly, quite literally, as the washing machine cranks to life before it starts to smoke slightly and shut back off.

"What the fuck was that?"

"I am so sorry," Nix says right away. "I'm an amplifier."

"Shit," the mechanic murmurs, shaking out his hands. "My ability has to do with electricity. I must have jumpstarted this thing when you touched me."

"Serious, I am so sorry. You're okay, right?"

Kassian jumps in, also apologizing. The three of them awkwardly make small talk for a moment, reassuring each other that everyone is okay, no harm done. Finally, Kassian and Nix make their way over to me.

Nix hums softly as he sits down on my right side, Kassian sitting on my left. They each put a hand on my thigh, my stomach swooping with warmth at the simple touch. I don't know when I'll get used to these easy touches. Maybe never. Maybe they'll always be a novelty.

"What did she say?"

"Everything is all squared away," Kassian says, smiling brightly at me. "Also, we'll start staying in rented AirBnB's from time to time which is gonna be really nice! I want an actual kitchen sometimes so you can cook for us."

"You just want me around so I'll cook for you?"

“Among other things,” Nix says with a grin, squeezing my thigh.

The mechanic moves into the back room, leaving the three of us in the main part of the laundromat alone. I turn towards Nix. “What other things are you talking about?”

Nix sputters for a moment, his cheeks turning pink. He readjusts the cap on his head, looking away. “Like companionship or whatever.”

Kassian giggles. “Mhmm, that’s totally what you were thinking about. What’s got you blushing like that, Nix?”

“Shut up! You know what I’m thinking about!”

“You know,” I say, letting out a long sigh. “If you’re not mature enough to talk about it, you’re not mature enough to participate in it.”

“Yeah alright,” Nix quickly says, looking at me. “I like having you around for every reason you can think of. I like your presence. I like that you help out with the chores. I like that you hold my hand when we’re flying. I like that you make sure we’re eating healthy.” Nix swallows. “I really, really like the way you kiss us and touch us. I want to have sex.”

I blink slowly, processing all the lovely things Nix just said. Then I tilt my head to the side. “What was that last part?”

“I think he said he wants us to have sex,” Kassian says helpfully.

“Yeah. That.”

“We’ve had sex,” I say slowly. Which is the truth. Kassian gave Nix oral sex, we’ve touched each other and helped each other come. In my book, we’ve had sex. “Oh,” I say suddenly, “you mean penetration!”

“Oh my gods, don’t yell it like that,” Nix says, tilting his hat down to cover his face and sinking down in his chair. His face is bright red and it’s incredibly adorable.

“If it helps, I’ve been thinking about it as well,” Kassian says, much less embarrassed. “I wasn’t sure if we were ready for that though.”

“Well, I’m ready whenever you guys are,” Nix says, sitting up once more. Just then, the machines with our clothes come to a stop. The three of us stand up, making our way over to the machines. We start pulling everything out, tossing them onto the table by our baskets so we can start folding them and putting them in the baskets.

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"I appreciate you waiting for me to be ready," I say, picking up a shirt. It's Nix's. I fold it carefully, setting it in the blue basket. "We'll have to make a stop at a drugstore for supplies."

"I think I would rather shave my head than go and buy condoms at a store," Nix says with a dramatic groan. "Why does sex have to be so embarrassing?"

"Balances out how fucking good it feels," Kassian says with a snicker.

I pick up one of Kassian's sweaters, careful with how I fold it so it doesn't get wrinkled or creased. His clothes are much more delicate than Nix's or my own. I want to take care of it, the same way he takes care of it when he's folding it himself.

This feels so incredibly domestic, the three of us washing our clothes, folding them together, making small talk while we do it. I'm suddenly hit straight in the chest with emotion. This could be the rest of my life. This could be what my forever looks like. I'm no longer alone but even better, I'm with people I can just exist with. I find myself smiling as I grab the next piece of clothing only to freeze.

Holding up the pink pair of panties, I turn towards Kassian. "Are these yours?"

Kassian looks up, his eyes widening in surprise. "No," he says slowly. "All my panties are black."

I drop the panties onto the table. "Who do these belong to?"

"Oh my gods," Nix blurts out. "No fucking way."

"What? What do you know?"

"We took a load of Mars' clothes too! These were in his clothes!"

"Oh my fucking gods," Kassian says, his eyes bugging out of his head. He grabs the pair, tossing them into Mars' pile.

"Do you think they're his?"

Kassian shakes his head. "There's no way those would fit him. He's got a fat ass and these would have to be for someone a bit more slim."

"Holy shit. Maybe it's his mystery girlfriend?" Nix asks, going back to folding his clothes.

"We have to ask him about it, right?"

I shake my head. “That would make it seem like we’re going through his clothes in a weird way.”

“I mean, we kinda are,” Nix counters with a shrug. “If he didn’t want us to see the panties, he should have made sure they weren’t in his clothes when he gave us the basket.”

“Mistakes happen,” I say. “They must have been left behind the last time his partner came to visit him.”

“I still cannot believe we haven’t been able to pin down this mystery person,” Kassian says, tossing a pair of socks into my gray basket. “How do they manage to get into his room, they fuck all night, and then we just *don’t* catch them in the morning? Plus, Finn is always just mysteriously gone? Something’s not adding up.”

The answer feels so obvious and yet no matter how I think about it, my mind still comes out with a blank. Instinctively, my right leg pops out and I kick the bundle of socks that Nix just dropped. He quickly catches it with a loud cheer.

“Oh,” Kassian murmurs, the tips of his ears suddenly pink.

“What?”

“So, remember how I woke up hard this morning?”

“Yeah?”

“It was because I saw *that* moment in a dream last night and I found it super hot.”

I raise my brow. “And seeing it for real?”

“Still super hot,” Kassian says with a nod. “We might have to make quick work of these clothes so we can get back to our room.”

Nix chuckles but doesn’t disagree. I find that my hands move a little faster as well.

It’s weird, now that I have feelings for Nix and Kassian, it feels like a new world has been opened to me. Before them, I was never interested in sex. Sure, every once in a while I would jerk off but I never once had a desire to actually touch another person that way.

They’re different though. It’s like my affections for them have opened up this new part of my brain. Now I crave them physically. I want to make them feel good and in turn, I want them to do the same for me. I want to learn what feels good for the first time, guided by three uncertain pairs of hands. I want them the same way they want me and each other.

Now that I'm here with them, I don't know if I'll ever be truly sated. I don't think that's such a bad thing.

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Chapter Fourteen

KASSIAN

I LOUNGE ON THE couch with a book in hand. Yes, a couch instead of another hotel bed. We're staying in our very first AirBnB and it feels downright luxurious. I'm finally getting around to reading the book that Dean recommended to me after we first met. Somehow, even back then, he nailed my tastes exactly.

This coming of age political intrigue book is exactly what I would normally get completely sucked into. The characters are great, the setting is amazing, this author's prose is to die for, yet I find myself staring at the page unreading more than actually following the words. I look back over to the front door, waiting, like somehow by looking at it, it'll open revealing Nix.

I had a dream last night, thanks to being so close to Dean all the time. I know Nix will be coming home soon and I know exactly what's going to happen when he's back. I already took a shower, making sure every inch of myself was squeaky clean in preparation.

My legs bounce where they lie against the back of the couch. Anticipation makes my body warm all over. I've been wanting this for such a long time I can barely believe it's going to happen today.

“What’s got you wiggling so much?” Dean asks, sitting down at the other end of the couch. Immediately, I shift so I can lay my legs in his lap. His hand cups my ankle, massaging it and making me shiver.

“Just have a good feeling about today?”

Dean raises his brow at me. “Do you know something I don’t know?”

I hum, grinning over at my partner. “Maybe,” I say in a sing-song voice. “It’s something you’re gonna like. Trust me.”

“I trust you,” he says right away, squeezing my ankle.

There’s something so overwhelming about having someone’s trust. I feel like I’ve always had Nix’s trust. We’ve been side by side since we were kids. I trust him like I trust myself. Gaining Dean’s trust feels different but no less satisfying. It wasn’t a sure thing. I had to work at it.

“I trust you too, Dean.”

Dean gives me a soft smile before opening his book. We both read for a bit before the front door bursts open. Nix walks in, his cheeks red, completely out of breath. He storms over to the couch, staring down at us with a crazed look in his eyes.

“I have the goods,” he says seriously.

Dean raises his brow. “Sorry, what?”

Nix produces a plastic bag from behind his back, holding it for us to see. “Condoms! I bought condoms! And lube!”

The words hang in the air between all of us. I do my best to conceal my smile as I reach under the pillow and also show a box of condoms.

“So did I.”

Dean looks between us. “So did I.”

We stare at each other before Nix buries his face in his hands. “Oh my gods! Why did I have to suffer if you both bought some!”

Dean just shrugs. “They’ll be put to use.”

“Dean!” I say, a giggle bursting out of me. All three of us laugh. When we finally calm down, there’s a tangible air of anticipation around us.

Now that we have the supplies, there’s nothing holding us back.

“Well?” Nix says, his face still red. “Can we?”

“Can we what, Nix?”

Nix narrows his eyes at Dean. He looks away, takes a deep breath, and blurts out, “would you two like to have sex? With me? Together?”

“I was expecting a little more romance,” I say with a teasing grin.

“Oh fuck you,” he says before taking his bag of condoms and walking back towards the bedroom. I do my best not to squirm on the couch, Dean’s hand still warm on my ankle.

“We really shouldn’t keep him waiting,” I say, nodding my head, pretending to be serious.

“Wouldn’t want him getting too impatient,” Dean says back with a grin.

We stand up from the couch and follow behind Nix. When we get into the bedroom, he’s already down to his boxers. Gods, I’ll never get tired of seeing him like this. His body is a fucking work of art, one that I will happily spend the rest of my life worshipping.

“Nix,” I say breathlessly. “You’re so fucking hot.”

“You’re one to talk,” he says, stepping into my space and putting his hands around my hips. He tugs me close. Before I can say anything snarky, he’s kissing my lips.

I can feel Dean step in behind me, his skin hot against my back. He pulls my hair to the side so he can kiss the back of my neck, a weakness I didn’t even know I had until recently. My cock fills with blood, my stomach warms with lust and affection.

My own hands don’t stay idle, running over Nix’s taut stomach, feeling the muscles quiver for me. I’m already so fucking turned on and we’ve barely even started.

Dean’s hands sweep around me, sliding under my shirt so he can touch my stomach. I shiver, lightning bolts of pleasure flashing across my body. When he pulls up, the three of us break apart so he can pull my shirt all the way off. Then Nix makes quick of my pants. When I’m in my underwear, they both groan.

“Jesus, Kassian,” Nix breathes out, his hands touching my hips, his thumbs rubbing against the pattern of my black panties.

“You look so beautiful,” Dean breathes against the back of my shoulder. My body warms at the praise, my cheeks no doubt turning bright pink.

I turn around and put my arms around Dean’s neck, tugging him down into a kiss. He makes a surprised noise before melting into it. His hands cup my ass, squeezing me through the panties.

Nix gets Dean out of his pants and his boxers. Then he slides out of his own boxers as well. They both leave me in my panties for now.

We stumble over to the bed. Nix crawls in, his head on the pillows, his thighs spread. I crawl between those strong, gorgeous thighs, my mouth

watering with how badly I want to get my mouth on him.

Before I do, I want to make sure we talk first. I want to make sure we're all on the same page before we're all too lost in our lust for each other.

"How do you guys want to do this?"

"I want you inside me," Nix says right away, cupping my cheek. "Please, Kassian. I've thought about it so fucking much. I need it so bad."

To say I'm shocked would be an understatement. "I don't know why, but I always pictured myself bottoming."

Nix smiles. "I don't really have the equipment for that."

"Yet," I say right away. "We can find something that works in the future."

"In the future, I wanna fuck you," Nix says excitedly, leaning forward and stealing a kiss.

I turn my head to the side, looking at Dean. "What about you?"

"Yes," Dean says, nodding his head. "I want that too. Both. Everything. Anything."

"Really?"

"Absolutely. I have no idea what I like or what I'll want to try in the future. All I know is that I want it all with you two."

"What about today?" I look between the men I love. "We both want to bottom."

"I think we can make that work," Dean says with a grin, getting behind me on the bed. "You'll be stuck in the middle, Kassian."

"Oh fuck," I breathe out, my stomach swooping.

Dean grabs the lube from where Nix had dropped it on the bed. He pulls the back of my panties down but doesn't take them off. With slick fingers, he touches my hole.

"Oh gods," I gasp out at the sensation. "Fuck, Dean."

When he pushes inside of me, he's careful and gentle. Dean takes his time opening me up, murmuring soft praises against my back, always checking in on how I'm feeling.

While he's doing that, I slump down, burying my face between Nix's legs. I lick his dick with long, broad strokes of my tongue, feeling the hard nub throb inside my mouth. Gods, that's so fucking hot.

When I press a finger into his hole, I find it hot and wet already. He moans above me, spreading his thighs even wider for me. Nix's hand touches my head, keeping me in place as I circle his dick with my tongue,

flicking it back and forth. When I take it into my mouth and suck hard, he gasps, his fingers tightening in my hair.

“I’m gonna come,” Nix says desperately, his hips moving against my face. “Fuck, Kassian. Just like that. Please. Don’t stop.”

I push a second finger into him, flicking my tongue even faster against him. My own cock throbs desperately against my panties. I’m getting off to his noises, his pleasure, his taste on my tongue.

“Shit!” Nix cries out as he comes, his hole pulsing around my fingers, growing impossibly wet until there’s slick dripping down onto the sheets. I pull away from his dick in order to lick him there, desperate to have a taste right from the source. He pulses around my tongue, whining in pleasure.

“You two are so hot together,” Dean says, his fingers still moving in and out of my ass. “I could watch you both all night and never grow bored. Next time I want to be the one to pleasure you with my mouth, Nix.”

Nix’s body goes lax as I finally pull away. He looks up at Dean with a dazed sort of look on his face. “I would love that. I would love anything you’re willing to try with me.”

“Next time,” Dean promises. He carefully removes his fingers from my ass and I whine at suddenly clenching around nothing. That whine turns into a moan as he wraps his fingers around my erection through my panties. The material feels so good against my heated cock, the front completely wet from my precum.

“Please,” I say softly. “Please. We’re all ready, right?”

“We’re ready,” Nix says, throwing up a thumbs up.

With Dean’s help, I slip out of my panties. I sit up on my knees and Dean crowds against my back. I lean against him, feeling his cock fit against the cleft of my ass, hot and heavy. He runs his hands over my chest then down my stomach before finally wrapping around my cock. He strokes me slowly, putting his chin over my shoulder so he can look down at Nix who’s splayed out before us.

“You two are so hot together,” Nix breathes out, one of his hands fisted against the sheets below him, the other resting on his stomach.

Dean picks up a condom, rips it open, and then rolls it over my erection. Then he adds a little bit of lube.

“Fuck,” I say, shivering at his touch. His hands go back to my hips, pushing me forward.

Nix reaches for my erection, guiding it to his hole. I slide right in without an ounce of resistance. He's so hot and wet around me. I fit inside of him so perfectly, like we were made for each other, made to enjoy this moment together.

"Holy shit," Nix says, his voice pitched up higher than usual. "Fuck, Kassian. That feels so fucking good, bro. Better than I dreamed. Fuck."

I push all the way in until our bodies are snug together. I hold still, getting used to the feeling, not wanting to immediately come.

That's when I feel Dean behind me. While I was pushing into Nix, he was getting a condom on himself. I feel the blunt head of his cock at my ass and I breathe out, doing my best to relax so he can push inside.

I make a broken noise when he breaches me for the first time. There's a stretch and it's almost painful but not quite. Dean's hands, which are gripping my hips and Nix's hole, which is gripping my cock, help me focus on the pleasure instead of the stretch.

"Fuck," I breathe out. Nix's hands reach up, plucking at my nipples, causing me to moan once more. "Fucking fuck. Holy shit."

Once Dean's hips are against my ass, I breathe out. I'm so fucking full. I feel like I can feel Dean up in my stomach. I'm sandwiched between them, connecting all three of us together.

"You feel incredible," Dean says, kissing the back of my neck again. "So good for us, Kassian."

"Can you move? Please?" Nix asks and I can feel the way he's tensing around my dick, silently begging for more.

"Yeah," I say softly. "I can move."

Dean moves first, pulling back so only the head of his cock is still inside of me. Then he holds still, allowing me to move at my own pace.

I slowly push myself back, impaling myself on Dean's cock. Then I push forward, fucking into Nix's wet hole. Both sensations leave my head reeling. Back, I get filled, forward I get wet, heat. Back and forth, over and over.

I build up a good rhythm, fucking them both in this way. Nix reaches down, putting a hand on his cock. I stare down at the way he pinches and strokes his cock. The noises he make are driving my pleasure even higher but I have to hold off my own orgasm. I want them to come before me. I want my body to make them feel good.

“You look so good like this,” I breathe out, running my hands over Nix’s thighs. “Come on my cock, Nix. Show me how good we’re making you feel.”

Nix whines, his thighs tightening around my hips. His hand goes impossibly faster and a moment later, he’s throbbing around my cock, finding his second release.

“Fuck!”

Dean whines behind me, digging his teeth into my shoulder. I clench around him, pushing my hips back with more force, fucking myself on his cock. He shoves me forward until I’m buried all the way inside Nix with my face pressed against his chest.

“Yes,” I say with a groan. “Fuck me, Dean. Yes, just like that! Feels so good!”

With this angle, Dean hits my prostate over and over, causing my toes to curl and my body to tense with pleasure. I don’t even have to stroke my cock which is still cocooned in Nix’s warmth.

“I’m gonna come,” I warn Dean.

“Good,” he says through clenched teeth, his hips moving even faster. “I want to make you feel as good as your ass is making me feel, Kassian. Come for us, sweetheart.”

I let out a high pitched whine as pleasure surges through me. It’s so overwhelming yet feels so fucking good. I come, filing the condom, twitching while still fully buried inside Nix.

Dean lets out a noise as his hands tighten around my hips. His movements still and I swear I can feel him come. I can’t stop wondering how it would feel if he came inside of me, if his cum was able to drip down my hole. Fuck, that would be so hot.

That is a future thing to discuss.

We stay like that for a moment, trying to regain some semblance of control. Nix pets my hair and kisses my face. Dean runs his fingers over my stomach, his other hand laced with Nix’s. When our breathing evens out, we finally start to pull apart.

After cleaning up and depositing the condoms in the trash, we snuggle together on the bed with Dean in the middle this time. Nix and I lay against his chest, his arms around our backs. We trade barely there, unhurried kisses.

“So,” Dean finally says, “was that everything you hoped it would be, Nix?”

Nix rests his chin on Dean’s chest, looking at us with a grin. “It was somehow better, but I think we’ll have to do it again just to make sure it wasn’t a fluke.”

“Insatiable,” I say with a teasing poke.

“Only because you’re both so horn inducing.”

“*Horn inducing?*”

“I said what I said, bro. Don’t want me bricked up and needy then stop being so hot.”

Dean chuckles, kissing Nix’s head. “We’ll just have to work on keeping you satisfied.”

“You do,” Nix says, his voice suddenly soft. He kisses me and then kisses Dean. “You’re both the best thing to have happened to me. You leave me satisfied just by existing.”

I pull him into another kiss. “Love you,” I mumble into the kiss. I can feel his answering smile against my lips.

We spend the rest of the day in bed, snuggling, watching tv, and trading soft touches. We end up having sex another time before the day is over, leaving me pleasantly sore and sated. All in all, a great way to spend the day before Nix and I have to work again in the morning, even if it means having the tiniest bit of a limp when we meet everyone at the conference center. Their knowing looks make me blush but I don’t mind. The soreness is a little reminder of what we did, and how we feel about each other.

At this point, there’s no denying it. I love them.

Chapter Fifteen

Nix

IT'S STILL HARD TO wrap my head around the fact that Kassian and I have only known Dean a few short months. As we get into our Halloween costumes, I marvel at how well the three of us seem to instinctively fit together.

We wanted some sort of themed costume so we're going as a BLT. We rented these silly costumes from a store near our AirBnB. Some sort of Halloween type place that only shows up in October and by the time November rolls around, the building will be vacant again.

"Okay," I say with a huff, looking at Kassian. "That's so not fair."

Kassian holds his arms out, doing a little spin. "What's not fair?"

"How the *fuck* are you making *bacon* look so sexy?"

Kassian chuckles, gesturing towards his bare legs. "It's all in the legs."

"You look incredible," I tell him, stepping into his face and cupping his face. I steal a quick kiss, conscious of the fact that if I kiss him any more, we'll end up late to the Halloween party because I'll want to toss him into the bed and have my way with him.

"You look good too," he says with a grin.

"If we get separated, I'm going to look so silly," I say with a pout.

Dean walks out of the bathroom and into the bedroom. He's wearing a round tomato costume. He kind of waddles while he walks and it's adorable as fuck.

"I haven't dressed up for Halloween since Hazel was a kid."

"We dress up every year," I say, walking over to him and running my hands over the material of his costume. "No matter where we are, we always make time to think of some sort of costume and find a party to hit."

"Never a dull moment with you two," Dean murmurs, leaning down and kissing my cheek. There's such fondness in his tone that it makes my stomach warm, surging through each of my limbs. "You're right," Dean says to me but looks over at Kassian while talking, "you look incredible."

"Thank you," Kassian says, ducking his head.

"Can't wait to have those legs wrapped around my waist tonight when we get back from the party," Dean says, his voice laced with heat.

As one, Kassian and I turn towards Dean, our mouths open in shock.

"Dean!"

He grins. "What? You two are the only ones allowed to tease?"

"We've created a monster," Kassian says with a giggle, stepping into Dean's space and kissing his lips. As I watch them kiss, most of the blood in my body surges between my thighs.

"Shit," I hiss out, turning away. "I can't watch this or I won't want to go to the party."

That makes them pull apart with great reluctance. Kassian runs over to grab a bag that he slings over his shoulder. He puts all three of our phones inside since none of our costumes have pockets. With that, we head out of the house and towards a local bar.

The walk over is cool and I shiver. A moment later, Dean wraps his arm around my shoulders, tugging me against his side. I lean my head against him, feeling so warm and content.

Somehow, the universe brought me not just one but two people. I feel so blessed. Kassian and I have been taking all of this at Dean's pace, but there's no denying the two of us are on the same wavelength when it comes to Dean. We love him. We love him so fucking much that one of these days, it's going to come barreling out and there's nothing that anyone can do to stop it.

We've been trying to hold ourselves back so as not to pressure Dean. All of this is very new for him, not just the sex but also the love. It's new for all

three of us. We wouldn't ever wanna do something that would make him uncomfortable. At the same time, there's only so much we can take before we're bursting with our love for him.

Kassian laces our fingers together and the three of us make our way into the bar. Already, the party is in full swing. There are people wearing costumes everywhere I look. A few amazing costumes include a guy dressed as a centaur, complete with the body being held up with what I can only assume is a tricycle behind him, making it look like his back legs are walking which is really fucking cool. Kassian makes a happy noise when he sees someone dressed as a character from a book he loves. There's also someone dressed as a demon, with horns, dramatic make up, and a forked tail behind him.

"This is awesome," I murmur, grinning from ear to ear.

There are random Halloween decorations hung up all over the walls with giant cartoon spiders dropping down from the ceiling. Right now there's some karaoke going on with someone singing a popular pop song. They sound amazing and I find myself bouncing to the music.

"I'll grab us some drinks," Kassian says, moving over to the bar.

Dean and I find a standing table to occupy as we wait for Kassian. A woman dressed as a sexy firefighter walks past. She looks at the two of us and asks, "where's your bacon?"

"Right here," Kassian says, stepping over and delivering our drinks.

"That's awesome," the woman says excitedly before stumbling away.

I shake my head in amusement as I pick up the bottle of spiked lemonade Kassian ordered for me. I take a sip, enjoying the sweet taste on my tongue.

"Have you ever done karaoke, Dean?"

He shakes his head. "And I don't plan to start tonight."

"Oh, come on," I say with a whine. "Live a little."

"I am living," he says, turning towards me. He reaches out, snatching my waist and yanking me towards him. He leans down until his mouth is by my ear.

"Dean?"

"Being with you and Kassian makes me feel more alive than I've felt in years," he says, a shiver going down my spine at the feel of him against me, the warmth of his breath fanning against my ear.

I suck in a sharp breath, trying to get my body to calm the fuck down. “Dean,” I say, my voice breathy against my permission. “That makes me really happy,” I say honestly. “*You* make me really happy.”

“Oh my gods,” Kassian says, shoving himself between the two of us. “Come on! I love this song!”

Kassian drags the two of us over to the corner of the bar where people are dancing. The music surges around us, thrumming so loudly I can feel it in against my insides. Kassian plants himself between the two of us, yanking the three of us together.

One of my hands is still holding onto my spiked lemonade, the other finds Kassian’s hip. A moment later, I feel warm fingers connect with my own. Past Kassian’s shoulder, I find Dean smiling over at me.

“I have a small confession to make,” Dean says loud enough that we can hear him over the music.

“What?”

“I know who Mars’ partner is.”

Kassian and I tense. He looks over his shoulder at me, making sure I heard.

“Who is it?”

“I can’t tell you but I saw it last night. I promise, you’ll know very soon.”

I lean my chest against Kassian’s back. “Oh my gods. I can’t wait to find out. We’re gonna tease him, right?”

“Duh,” Kassian says right away. “He’s been teasing *us* this whole time! Plus, he used to tease us about each other before we got our heads out of our butts.”

“Do you think Finn already knows? I can’t believe he never says anything. They must have the most solid bro code going on.”

“Oh lord,” Dean murmurs.

Kassian nods his head, his hips never stopping their movements under my hand. Instead of thinking about Finn or Mars or Mars’ partner, I think about my own partners in front of me.

The three of us dance from one song into another. Between songs, we switch places. When I’m in the middle, my dick *throbs* with want. I want to be sandwiched between them while we’re all naked, our hands roaming. I’m having such a fun time but a little part of me wants to get the fuck out of here and head back to our temporary home. I want to taste the sweet drink that Kassian is sipping on straight from his tongue. I want to lick the

droplet of sweat from Dean's throat. Gods, I want them so badly it physically hurts.

We're sweaty and panting by the time we finally pull away from the dance floor. High on endorphins, we make our way to a table once more. Just before I can ask them if they want to get out of here, Dean is grabbing our chins, turning our heads back towards the dance floor in perfect sync.

"What?"

Kassian sucks in a sharp breath, apparently seeing something that I don't. It takes a moment but finally, I see it. Mars is on the dance floor, his hands on someone's hips. They turn their head and now it's my turn to gasp. The two of them lock arms around each other and start making out, right there, in front of everyone.

"Oh. My. Gods."

"No fucking way."

"How the fuck didn't we notice?"

"It's been right in front of us the entire time."

"Fuck."

Dean starts chuckling behind us. "How did you not know Mars and Finn were together?"

"Hey!" I say quickly, throwing a pout his way. "You didn't know either!"

"Yeah! It's not like it was obvious," Kassian says.

The two of us look at each other and I swear I can see the gears in our heads turning at the same time. All of the pieces fall into place. All the hints, all the nights we could hear them through the wall, all the soft looks they give each other, all the stolen moments.

"Oh my gods," I murmur, covering my face with my hands. "How the fuck did we not *notice*?"

"It's okay," Dean finally says, gripping my shoulder. When I open my eyes again, he's doing the same to Kassian. "Sometimes you just need someone to help you see what's in front of you."

I swallow thickly, struck in the chest with emotions. "Kinda like how you helped us," I say, running my hand up Dean's arm.

"Yeah," he says softly with a smile. "Exactly like that."

"Thank you again for that, Dean. I'm not sure how much longer we could have handled being in that state of perpetual pining," Kassian says, stepping closer into Dean's space. "We're so much happier now that you're here with us. You help make us feel more rounded out, more complete."

"I didn't do anything," Dean murmurs.

"Maybe not, but that doesn't make it any less true. You make us happy, just by being you." I lick my lips. Maybe it's the dancing or maybe it's the alcohol or maybe it's finally finding out who Mars is dating, but something tonight is making me brave. I gently cup Dean's cheek. "Dean, I love you."

Dean sucks in a sharp breath, his blue eyes searching mine. Then he turns towards Kassian who's already smiling at him.

"Me too," Kassian says. "I love you, Dean. We've been holding that back, wanting to go at your pace, but I think maybe it was time it was said."

Dean closes his eyes for a moment. For that split second, I worry maybe this was too much, too quick. When he opens his eyes again, they're glassy but sure.

"I love you too," he says, letting out a startled laugh. "I love you both so much. I never knew it could feel like this. I feel so full, so content. I feel so happy with you both."

I let out a relieved breath before surging forward and tucking myself against Dean's chest. Kassian is right beside me, sharing Dean's space with me. The three of us hold each other tight.

"Let's go," Dean says softly. "I have an idea or two on how we can celebrate this big declaration."

"*Please* tell me this celebration includes being naked," I say, making Kassian giggle.

"I guess you'll just have to wait to find out."

Epilogue

DEAN

I SIT BACK AGAINST my lawn chair, letting out a content sigh. The book in front of me is so good and I'm getting so invested in the plot but at the same time, my eyes keep wandering away from the page.

Looking up, I find Nix and Kassian hitting a volleyball back and forth. As they hit the ball, they have to think of a word that starts with the next letter.

"Pineapple," Nix says, setting the ball over to Kassian.

"Queen!"

"Rotisserie chicken!"

"Are you hungry? You keep naming foods?" Kassian asks with a giggle.

"That was not an S word!"

"Sasquatch," Kassian says, hitting the ball again.

Hazel sits down beside me, shaking her head. "How's your book?"

"It's fine," I say, still watching Kassian and Nix.

"You're not even gonna pretend to keep reading?"

I shrug, putting my bookmark in place and setting the book back in my bag. I sit up a little straighter, looking down at my daughter who's watching me with a knowing look in her eyes.

"I'm just enjoying the view."

“Yeah, whatever,” she says with a snort.

The two of us lay in the sun, enjoying the quiet. The sound of Nix and Kassian playing can be heard, leaving me feeling warm and content and so in love it’s overwhelming.

“I’m really glad you wanted to meet the weird duo that day,” I say to Hazel.

“Yeah, me too,” she says back, sitting up. “They’re a really good addition to our family, Dad.”

My heart feels like it could burst with how full it suddenly feels. I close my eyes, reveling in it. When I open them again, the sun is being blocked by two men.

“Wanna come play mermaids with us?”

Hazel snorts but I can’t help but smile. “Yeah, okay.”

They both cheer before pulling me off my chair and onto my feet. I kick off my sandals and take off my shirt, following them into the water, Hazel not far behind.

Kassian laces his fingers with mine, stopping right before the water to pull me into a quick kiss. Before I can respond, he runs into the water, diving under the waves.

Nix stops as well, staring up at me with pleading eyes. “Come here,” I murmur with a grin.

Nix leans up on his tiptoes and kisses me. I squeeze his hip before he turns around and runs into the water as well.

When my feet hit the water, I’m struck with the dizzying sense of déjà vu. Not long ago, I bought myself an amplifying talisman that I’ve been sleeping with, wondering if it were possible to see things beyond the next day. The answer is, yes.

Last night, I had a dream about the four of us. We were at a playground, pushing a little boy, someone with eyes that looked just like Hazel’s. Hazel sat in front of the boy, cooing at him.

Kassian’s hair had a bit of gray at the temples. Nix still wore a baseball cap but there were smile lines around his eyes. All of us looked so happy.

So much has changed in the last year and I don’t regret a single one. I carefully squat in the water so that it’s up to my neck. Hazel swims further out, tackling Nix as she goes. Kassian laughs loud enough to scare some of the seagulls on the beach.

Kassian and Nix bring adventure and excitement to my life while I bring a steadfastness that helps settle them. We complement each other. I love them so much and it's an honor to know they love me just as fiercely.

They splash and tackle and play. I sit back until they call me over, demanding I referee for their merfolk wrestling match.

There's no place I'd rather be.

The End

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About the Author

Toby Wise is a stay at home parent who hails from a tiny town in Wisconsin. Contrary to popular Wisconsin stereotypes, he's not a cheese-head who enjoys beer but rather an introvert who spends all his time on the internet, drinking coffee, spending time with his kid, and cooing about his adorable cat, Pikachu.

In April of 2019, A Collection of Strays was born after the world of fanfiction drew him back into his love of writing. Now he's writing all things omegaverse and paranormal as long as it includes silly moments and found family.

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