

Kelsey Soliz

Hemlock or Bust


Hemlock Academy

Let's call this book 5

HEMLOCK OR
BUST

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Kelsey Soliz

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THANK YOU PATRONS

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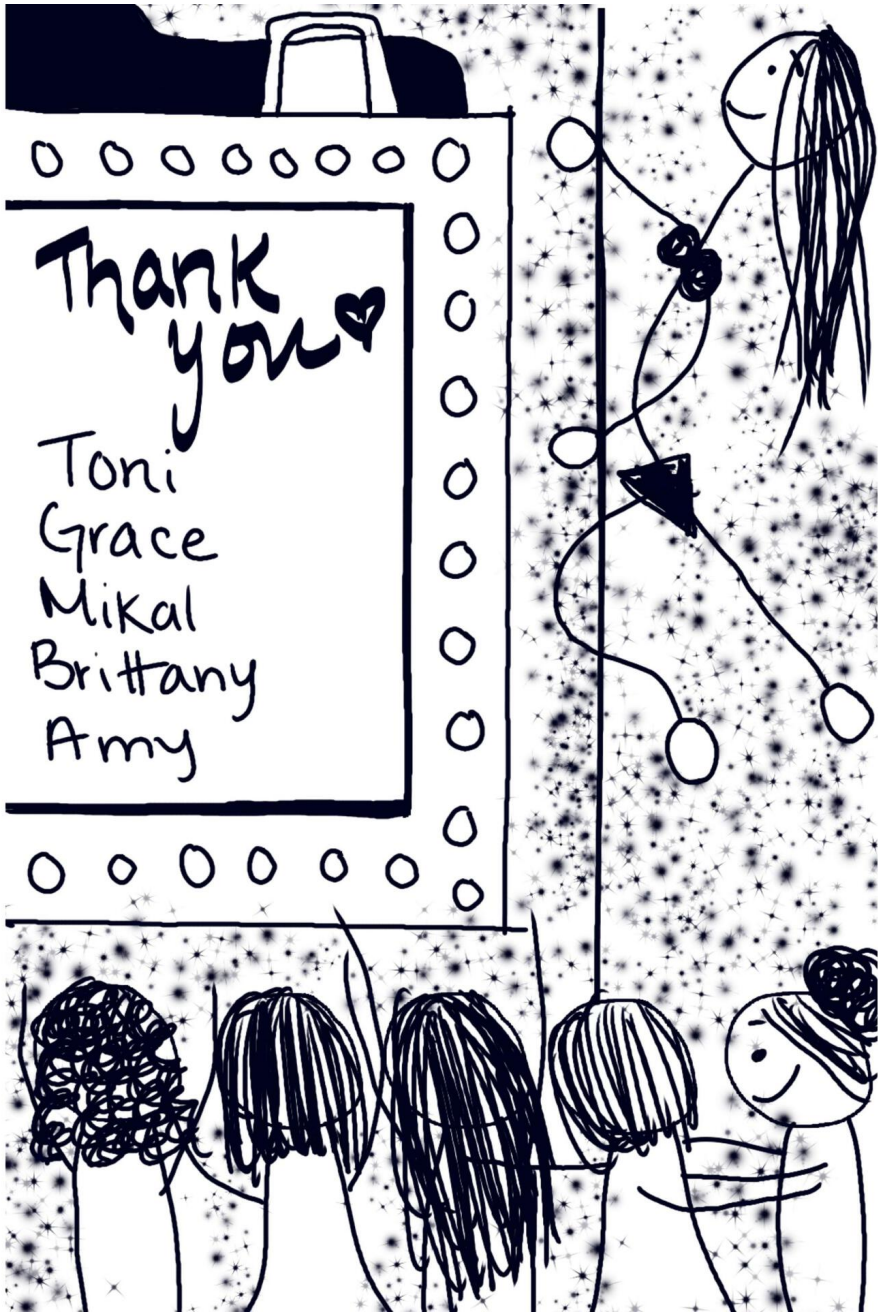
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A QUICK CHAT

This book does not have a happy ending. There are also some potential TWs that I want to mention in case it puts anyone in a bad headspace. We have tied to a tree naked fun time, DVP, DP, twin brothers naked together with Delany with accidental touches that they definitely enjoy, an unsolicited mating bite, and bad pickle jokes. I promise you though that my characters are all well, and everything will work itself out.

This is intended to be really the introduction to Delaney's story, launching you into her first semester at Hemlock so you'll understand where she's at romantically and personally when she gets there.

As such, you're going to meet some guys that may or may not be a part of her forever harem, who may or may not stick around, and who may or may not show up again later for a round two.

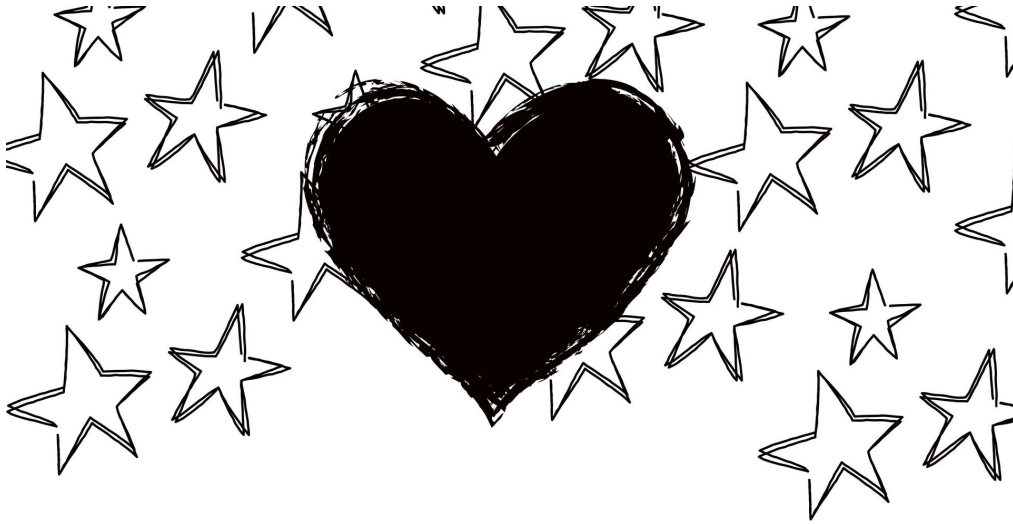
Put your trust in me, because you know I'll take care of you. I'm trying to avoid real big cliff hangers with this series because these characters don't feel like they really want them, but there will be an ending that makes it clear more is about to happen.

I promise that within the series as a whole, Delaney will get a happy ending and have so many wonderful, permanent mates that make their way to her, but you've got to go on that journey with her to find them.

Some other things to take note of: there will MM relationships within this series, within and outside the harem. There's going to be hot twin bodyguards that love to take her together, and there's going to be some moments where you question how the hell my brain is wired. I'm still trying to decide that.

If you didn't read the Hemlock boxed set or the Territory Walk series, there will be a few references you don't understand, but that's okay, the story will still make perfect sense to you.

One other important note: the word '*buttah*' is not a typo, and I hope you imagine the character using a thick NY accent when he uses it.



CHAPTER ONE

Delaney's Journal

My therapist thinks this might help me start fewer orgies, but I remain unconvinced. I'm really good at starting orgies.

I haven't felt the compulsion to keep a diary since I was much younger, so this might take me some getting used to. In an effort to blur the actual events, and to provide plausible deniability for anyone involved, I won't be using dates for any of my entries.

I know that must make no sense to you, but you are merely a piece of paper forced to bear witness to all the ways my magic has failed me.

But then again, you used to be a tree, rooted to the ground, part of an entire ecosystem, so maybe we have something in common— we both had high hopes for the life we thought we were getting, only to be sacrificed for someone else's purpose.

Before I can tell you why I start orgies all of the time, it's important that I give you the rundown of my life so far— without that, none of these words that want to spill out of me will make any sense.



Even re-purposed trees know this world has magic, so I don't need to go that deep into the basics, but I can't expect a piece of paper to know anything about my parents.

It's their fault my magic goes haywire and refuses to be contained.

I have this theory that growing up with eleven dads and a mom that needs energy from sex to refill her own magic was so utterly chaotic, that my magic developed wrong.

Did I mention they're all disgustingly in love?

My mom told me she was only supposed to have six mates. She's a conduit, a person specially blessed by the goddess to have destined mates and gain extra magic from them. She had six circles, or mate marks, on her arm when she came of age, and even though she tried to hide them from gramps, she reluctantly went to this college called Hemlock Academy to try and find her six mates before her magic dried out. Every time she'd accept a mate, a circle would fill in with a pattern unique to that mate. This is the way of conduits. When a conduit collects a mate, they gain some magic from them. So the more mates, the more powerful the conduit.

Daddy Bal was a potions and runes teacher at Hemlock at the time, and gramps was the headmaster. Gramps set them up on a date and it went a little too well, because mom's magic claimed him by the end of the night. Apparently without her telling it to.

I hope accidentally claiming mates isn't hereditary, because that sounds terrifying. It's probably going to be hereditary though, because there is no way I'm that lucky.

Daddy Grey was mom's roommate, and when his vampire self accidentally got hooked on mom's blood, she claimed him.

Daddy Foster met mom at the campus bookstore when he worked there, and mom came in to buy her schoolbooks. This story is one of my favorites, and not only because Daddy Foster is my biological father—mom always told me how he got so flustered when he saw her that he was knocking stuff over left and right and lying about how interested in her he was, even blaming the “flashlight” in



his pants (I know, ew,) on a shipment of bookmarks they got in. He forgot, of course, that my mom's sex magic allows her to sense lust, so she knew he was just hiding to cover said flashlight up. Now it's an ongoing joke he will likely never live down that bookmarks make him randy.

Daddy Foster didn't know mom was a conduit because she was keeping it under wraps, but was too in love with her to even think about turning her away once he found out. Mom put off collecting mates as long as she could, but the Goddess had plans for her. As soon as one came along, so did the rest. I hope that's not hereditary, either.

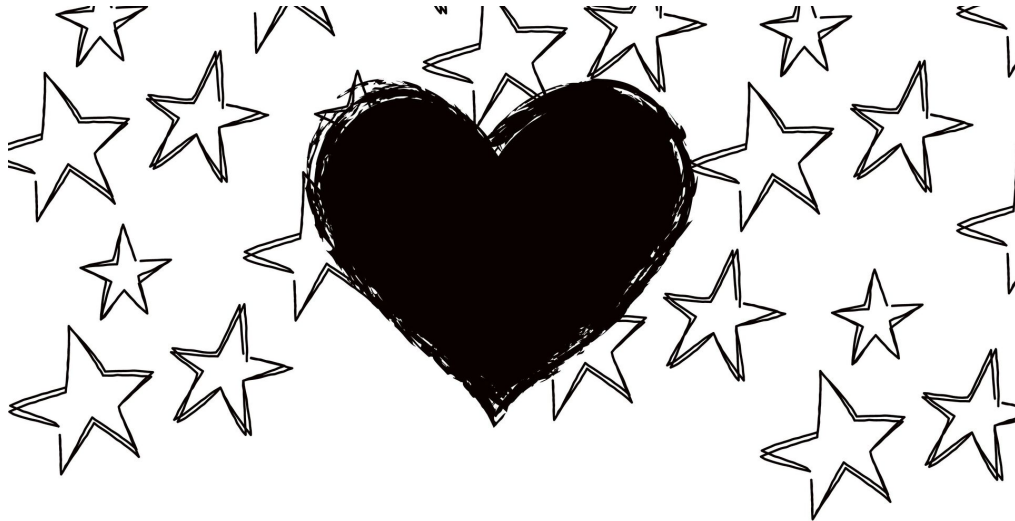
I take after my mom in lots of ways. Like her, I'm a conduit, though I don't know how many mates I'll have. We'll discuss that more later, but it's a source of anxiety I've worked hard to

get over. Literally could have two mates or could have twenty-five.

Holy fuck, if I've completely jinxed myself by writing that I'm blaming you, you son of a bitch. Your innocent blue lines don't fool me. Journal or not, I'll come for you if that comes to fruition. Have you seen the damage a blender can do to wet paper?

Oh, shit. I forgot I was supposed to switch my laundry before my parents got home, so I'll have to get through the rest of my parents later. You...don't go anywhere. We have some shit to talk about, and don't go working any ritualistic journal voodoo on me to condemn me to a life of schlong overload incarceration. You have no idea what I'm capable of.

And if anyone tries to break you open and spill your secrets, please give them a massive papercut. Preferably on their eyeball. The left one would be best.



CHAPTER TWO

Delaney's Journal

My mother legit gave me a gold star today—she thought it was hilarious that I only managed to start two orgies when I ventured out of the house this afternoon; well, two orgies that I could see, anyway.

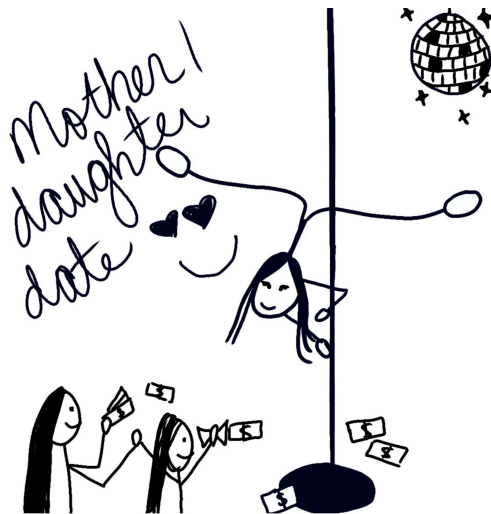
Okay, the gold star is kind of funny, but that's only because my family has a very unique sense of humor. Mom even took the time to write "Only started two orgies today- yay!" On it. Oddly enough, my dads gave me congratulatory high fives when they saw it. Then I removed the sticker and hid it before anyone else saw it, because that's just asking to be teased.

So here's the deal. My mother needs sex energy to refill her magic. And as far as I can tell, I cause sex magic to run rampant through the closest population to me. My mom can do that, too, but she says she has to do it on purpose; I can't seem to control it or turn it off.

My magic started changing when I turned 17, when the sexy side of my magic began to develop—a magical puberty, if you will. My mother insists I call my magic by its proper species

name, bodysmith, but I prefer the term ‘sex crazed mad woman’. It hasn’t taken off yet. Whatever I call it, my bodysmith side remains a big fat question mark. Bodysmiths, like my mom, rely on lust to refill their magic stores and are ordinarily very sought after companions because they’re like sex wizards. Mom broke that mold by becoming properly mated, thank the goddess.

Until I turned seventeen, I could tell I had magic, and I’ve always had access to the other half of my genes that allow me to shift into an animal thanks to my bio dad, but ever since my magical puberty hit, it’s like I’m constantly starving. It’s a different sort of hunger than when I need food, but just as debilitating when no sustenance comes forth.



course my parents have tried to help me — mom brought me to every strip club in town once I turned eighteen, hoping I’d be able to feed off the thick cloud of lust that hangs around places like that, but no go.

I could definitely feel the lust there, but it always feels like there’s a barrier in place, preventing my body from absorbing anything.

We had to stop after a while, because we realized going to places that already thrive on sexual energy when I can’t consume it only made me spiral faster.

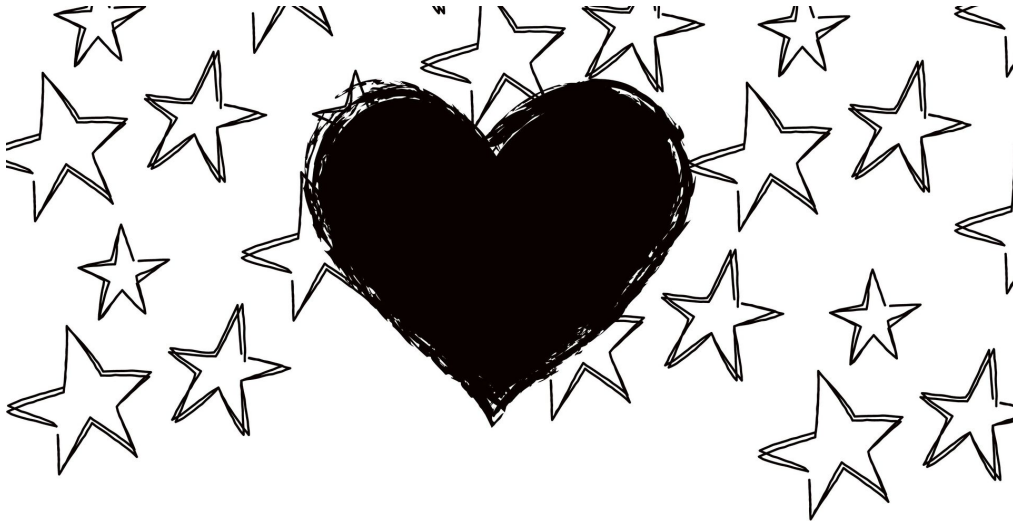
At one point, when my lust hunger pangs got to an all-time high, something invisible snapped and I started causing orgies.

I have all the physical markers of the bodysmith I am—pronounced curves, platinum blonde hair, unmitigated sex appeal, but the problem is it feels like it's trying to kill me. I feel as if I've been hungry for so long that I'm slowly being poisoned from the inside out, and I know everyone is worried about me, but no one seems to know how else to help me.

I'm supposed to find lust and drink it in, but clearly I'm broken, because I can't.

This is a very depressing journal entry, isn't it?

The only person that seems to make me feel better at all is my best friend Adam. When we hang out, my head always feels a little bit clearer, but I could never admit that because of the implications. Anyway, he's off at school now, at Hemlock Academy. Living his life. I'm stuck hiding away at home though, because...orgies.



CHAPTER THREE

Delaney's journal

I just realized I never finished telling you about my parents. Cyrus and Dar are brothers, and before they met mom they were famous monster hunters. I say used to be, because my mom is a complete badass and stopped all monsters from getting into our world before I was born.

I think something's happening though, because my parents have all had a lot of meetings lately, and they always come out smelling a little like sulfur.

This happened once when I was little too, and mom told us not to worry about it, but whatever business she has with what I'm pretty sure are demons, is apparently top secret. It's cool. We'll just ignore that harmless bit of information, I'm sure it won't ever become a problem.

Daddy Palmer is probably the biggest dork of all my parents, and he's able to use fire and smoke to create pictures and can even make smoke solid temporarily when he wants to. Daddy Pearson can manipulate anything solid and stretch it out or condense it or change its shape, which is very convenient

when you're learning how to drive and accidentally run over your mother's most treasured garden gnome.

I know what you're thinking journal, you inquisitive bitch. If my mother, who is basically a goddess, runs on sex, what business does she have collecting garden gnomes?



Apparently this one, whom they've affectionately named Madison, was 'handcrafted' and for reasons no one will explain to me, has a unicorn horn on her forehead that looks like a penis.

Anyway, daddy Pearson fixed her right up when my rear tire mistook her ugly face for a bit of driveway.

Growing up with a sex goddess for a mother, knowing one day I'd have sex magic too, pretty much guaranteed that my brother and I were nearly numb to the thrill of it.

In fact, that's why my mother says my magic doesn't work the same way hers does—it would be pretty messed up if I could feed off the endless amounts of lust my parents seem to carry for each other.

No joke, they used to make me and brother Adler wear bells so they'd know where we were at all times, because my parents have a knack for having disgusting amounts of sex everywhere but the bedroom. Once we were old enough to really understand what was happening, we didn't have to wear bells anymore, but we did have to make lots of noise when walking

through the ridiculously large mansion my family lives in if we didn't want to walk in on our parents getting it on.

Fuck, I can't wait to move out.

Here, I wrote you a little poem to teach you about the rest of my parents because there's too goddess damned many, and I don't want to spend anymore journal time writing about stuff that won't help to mitigate the orgy crisis. Now there's a cause you should get behind.

Jericho, Jericho, daddy of mine,

Mixes poisons from flowers and vine.

He's scary and deadly and master of plants,

And around mommy dearest hates wearing pants

[insert vomit noise]

Just remember journal, this is for your benefit.

Royce the illusionist was hard to win,

Mom almost gave him up when he wouldn't give in.

Pax is a mermaid but wouldn't you know,
prefers the term "aquatic shifter" and look I know that doesn't rhyme at all, but shut the hell up because I'm trying here. I'm supposed to woo men with my magic coochie, not my ability to put my life history into rhyming iambic pentameter.

Last is Apollo who's not from around here,

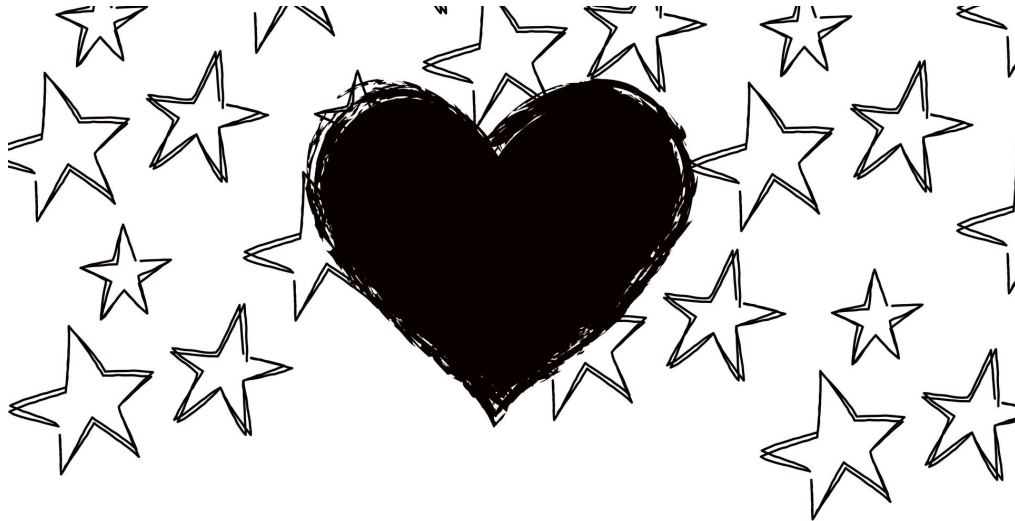
Was the son of a demon that was massively feared.

Mom conquered him and made the world safe once more,

And all of them raised me, shaping me down to my core.

I'll just interrupt your rampant cheering for that lyrical genius to make an exit.

So...yeah. Eleven parents. Let's never speak of this awful attempt at poetry again, hmm?



CHAPTER FOUR

Delaney's Journal

It finally happened. I managed to embarrass my sex goddess of a mother. At a very public event, on national television.

Let's just say I didn't get a gold star today.

My brother Adler thought it was hilarious when I told him, but then he didn't have to sit there trying not to flinch as a group of very old conduits and their mates started trying to strip each other down in front of a crowd of a thousand. And there's the national TV aspect as well.

Mom has so many mates because the goddess thought she was extra special. We all agree of course, but this means that when shit went down in our world back in the day with all the monsters and shit, it was up to my mom to save the goddess and send her off to another realm so the goddess wouldn't completely die off. That's how my uncle Bennett got sent away, but we still see him now and again. He's got a whole big poly family of his own, but we are not talking about him right now.

Because the goddess had to leave, she chose my mom as her pseudo successor. She's able to talk to my mom through dreams occasionally, and before she peaced out, she gave my mom all kinds of wisdom to help her rule.

Ohh...did I not mention my mother is the queen? My bad. Yeah, that's why we live in such a ridiculous mansion.

Whenever I have to be on TV or in public with my mom, I try and keep my face hidden. The fewer people that know what I look like the better, in my opinion.

So there my mom was trying to give awards out to these conduits to thank them for their contribution to society over the years, and I felt the internal alarm bells start to ring.

I probably shouldn't have gone to the event because I could tell by the way my head was aching when we left the house that it could go bad, but I thought I had it under control.

Spoiler alert: I definitely did not have it under control.

I was ushered off the stage and taxied home. It should be impossible for men that old to even produce erections; you're absolutely picturing old wrinkly dick with saggy balls, aren't you?

Daddy Jericho has garden magic, so he can grow plants at a crazy fast speed and crossbreed them in nearly any combination. He can make all kinds of useful poisons and medicines out of them. He pretty much has a solution for whatever you'd want, and thousands of different poisons to kill you at varying rates besides. Okay, so almost everyone is terrified of him since he's "one of the deadliest assassins in recent history" or whatever, but to me he's the guy that made me rainbow popcorn that tasted like cotton candy when I was eight.

He's been experimenting with ways to shield my magic from traveling too far away from me, and he thinks he's on to something, though he's warned that the plant that produces the shielding properties smells like rotting meat. So I'm looking forward to that.

He and daddy Bal are working together to create special rune-infused potions that might help as well, but I just wish I could figure this out.



Of course, I had to call Adam and tell him all about the old people trying to fuck, and he too, thought it was hilarious, but I'm pretty much resigned to hiding in my room for at least a week or two now, because I'm a menace to society. And people online started calling me a wizard for getting old man dick so hard and ready. I so do not need to be known for that.

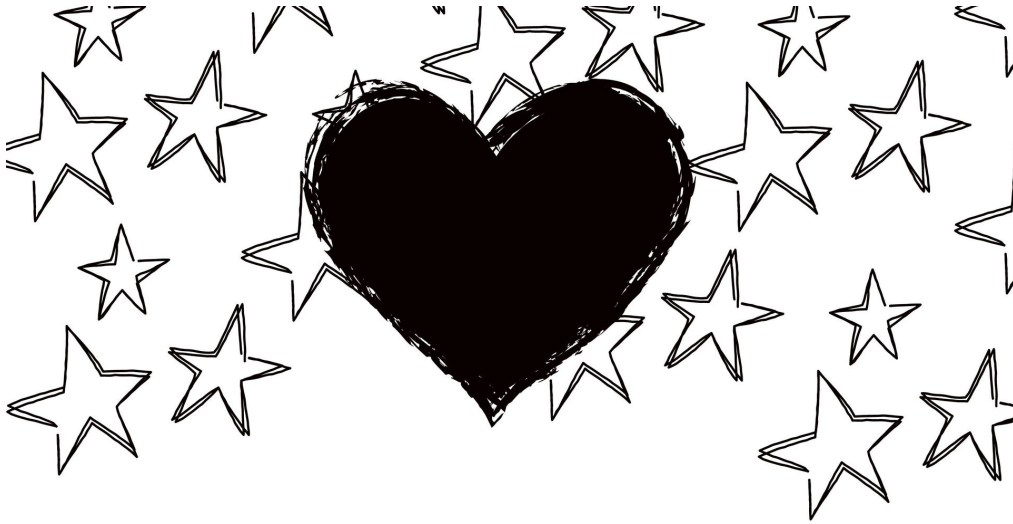
Needless to say, there's now a new magical filter on my email I didn't think I'd need that locks out horny old people searching for magical cures for ED.

Send help. They're targeting me and making t-shirts for the 'cause.'

[insert more vomit sounds]

As a little aside, if you're wondering why my fathers are all so hunky dory about me and sex and aren't crazy overprotective trying to prevent anyone from ever touching me, it's because I have way too much blackmail material on them. Also, they're just good people that want to support me more than they want to keep me innocent.

It's their fault anyway that the term 'reverse cowgirl' became a part of my vocabulary as an eight-year-old, so there's also that.



CHAPTER FIVE

Adam

Maybe it makes me strange, but I'm one of the few men I know that actually enjoys wearing a suit. There's just something about how the stiff fabric sits on my frame, making me feel so much more important than I know I am.

My parents work for Queen Gabriella and her mates, which means I got to grow up in this amazing mansion right alongside Delaney.

Even though it's ostentatious, I still get that cozy feeling when I'm here. Doesn't hurt that nearly every corner in the place holds some memory of me and Delaney.

I kind of think the feeling of home just belongs to her, actually.

It's not terribly far from Hemlock Academy to here, but I still don't come home as much as I ought to. I know Delaney needs me, but I just wish she could join me at school. I have this whole other set of friends she's never even met, this person I'm becoming that she can't see, because she's not there. Goddess knows I love the woman to pieces, but I'm starting to get nervous for her.

I always thought she'd grow out of this phase of not being able to control her magic, because she's twenty-one and should have it mastered by now. I don't know how many specialists I've seen assess her over the years, but nobody has quite figured out exactly what kind of lust she actually needs.

I promised her I'd accompany her to the annual conduit gala tonight, but I don't want to think about her meeting anybody. I know she needs to, but I'm not ready for that.

It's a risk bringing her into public, but she's assured me that's the bracelet her parents sorted out for her should block the conduit magic for the most part, so should be safe for a while.

Or rather, the masses will be safe from her.

When she finally walks down the staircase, I actually forget for a moment that I'm not in love with her. I forget that she's always going to be this platonic best friend of mine, and I forget everything else about myself.

Her gown is silver and classy, but she looks like she's covered in stars. It's only a few shades darker than her hair, which she for once has down and curled, instead of tucked away in a hoodie or a baseball cap. I know she doesn't like the attention, so to see her out of her typical baggy clothes? I seem to have also forgotten what an incredible body she has.

She sees me and squeals, flawlessly running down the stairs in shoes with two-inch heels because she doesn't care that she's nearly six foot tall already. I'm tall enough that I can still see the top of her head slightly, but I've always loved that she's such a similar height to me.

“Adam, you came! Gods it's good to see you. You're the only thing that's gonna make this event bearable.”

I look around, noticing it's empty. “Where's everyone else?” I try really hard not to stare at her breasts, but that dress is just doing something to them.

She waves me off. “They left already. You know I don't like to make an entrance, so we're going to show up after everything's gotten started and Mom's made her big welcome

speech. I even convinced her to completely ignore me so no one will think I'm important."

I fight down the urge to tell her she's the most godsdamned important person that will be there aside from her mom, but we've had that fight too many times and tonight is supposed to be fun. I take a deep breath instead and guide her outside.

There are drivers and security waiting to escort us, but I still shiver when it's my hand she reaches for to help her into the car.

We sneak into the back of the venue just as she wants, and I find myself wanting to reach for her bare arm that should display her mating marks.

She's a conduit like her mom, which means she'll have fated mates as well, but the goddess decided not to tell Delaney how many she was fated for.

As far as we know this has never happened.

Every conduit usually has between two and six marks, and as the daughter of the conduit queen, she's almost guaranteed to have at least six like her mother originally did.

Queen Gabby can tell that Delaney is a conduit as well, but can't seem to do anything about the fact that the goddess has hidden her marks. Not even Queen Gabby knows how many mates Delaney will end up with.

As I understand it, it had something to do with the Goddess wanting Delaney to go on the journey to figure out who she wants to be with, or maybe it was that her mother complained too much when she kept getting more mates? Maybe both.

When we get into the grand ballroom, everybody's already dancing and trying to talk to as many people as possible. Conduits everywhere are trying to sparkle like Delaney though they all fall flat, even they look pretty enough, but my eyes can't see past the stunning, awestruck woman on my arm.

Delaney should be part of the lineup, trying to interact and find her mates, but this whole mess with her magic misbehaving has pretty much stopped any sort of social calendar for her. She can't date, because being around her gets

everybody too riled up. She can't really have friends, because when her magic flares up, they all start stripping and try to seduce whoever is near them.

I unfortunately know that she's hooked up with a few guys to make sure she didn't need physical affirmations of lust to be able to absorb it, but we don't need to analyze why that bothers me so much to think about.

I live my life by one over arching tenet: denial. And damn, I'm good at it.

It wrecks me that Delaney can't really accept comfort in the form of friendship, or any sort of connection. Growing up with her seems to have made me immune to her orgy attacks, but lifelong friendship isn't exactly something you can just pull out of a hat when you desperately need a new friend. It kills me to see her suffer, it kills me that I can't help her in other ways, but being here is something I can do.

She squeezes my hand, her eyes soaking in all the couples flirting and dancing. "You see people you know from school?"

She should be there with me, I think. She should know all these other conduits, instead of being stuck at home doing online college. "Yeah, a lot of them."

She isn't asking anything else; she keeps smiling and watching everybody around her have fun. In a sick way, she enjoys this. She likes to watch people live normal lives when she can't, and this is a part of her I seem to understand. "Want to get out there and dance?"

She opens her mouth to speak and promptly snaps its shut, shaking her head. "It's too dangerous, I can't."

My thumb taps the bracelet on her wrist, the one that supposedly has protection in it. "Then what's this for, huh? You look beautiful, Del. You deserve to be shown off." I step towards the dance floor and extend our still-linked arms, silently asking her to trust me. "Come on, I've been thinking about this dance for months."

And I have. It's the first time she's been to the conduit gala, because before...her magic. The root of all of our problems.

For once though, I just want to see her laughing and carefree and doing something other twenty-one-year-olds take for granted.

The giggles that erupt out of her when I spin her out and pull her back in like a top have my own face lighting up in response. She's so beautiful. These thick curves would drive any person to their knees; strong legs, long arms, a bust you could happily drown in. But it's her energy that's the best of all. Even though it feels like she has some weird, rare, magical disease, she still makes me feel things I don't understand.

I've mistook these feelings for romantic ones before, but she pushes everybody away because of her situation, so we could never be together. Plus, she's my best friend. I can't screw that up, and I'm not entirely convinced I'd actually want to take things further with her anyway. What we have is too nice. Kissing and sex, that always complicates things.

We keep dancing. No one really seems to know who she is because she hides from the public so much, but the security around the room when Queen Gabby isn't in it tells people that someone important is here somewhere.

Delaney has put a rinse in her hair for the night to take her silver hair and turn it just the slightest shade of periwinkle, further throwing people off so they don't know that she's a bodysmith. There's not many bodysmiths around, so it's like a mini disguise under for her.

I can see guys all around the room eyeing her up and down, making me puff my chest as I pull her in tighter, but after a few songs, her eyes widen in panic. She looks down at her wrist and realizes the bracelet has fallen off somehow, likely trampled by now under the hundreds of pairs of feet moving up and down the dance floor.

Maybe nothing will happen, or maybe we have thirty seconds to get her off the dance floor before we turn this room full of conduits and hopefuls into a huge scandal.

I start ushering Delaney towards the edge of the floor, catching the eye of the closest security guard I see for help keeping her safe.

He's in the same blue suit as the rest of the security guards, with a piece in his ear so he can hear instructions. He's standing with his back to the wall, his hands clasped at his hips, eyes constantly roving the room. He's about the same height as me but definitely has the build of a security guard. I wouldn't want to go up against him.

Of course he knows who Delaney is, so the second he sees us waving him down, he's speaking into something on his wrist and walking quickly up to meet us.

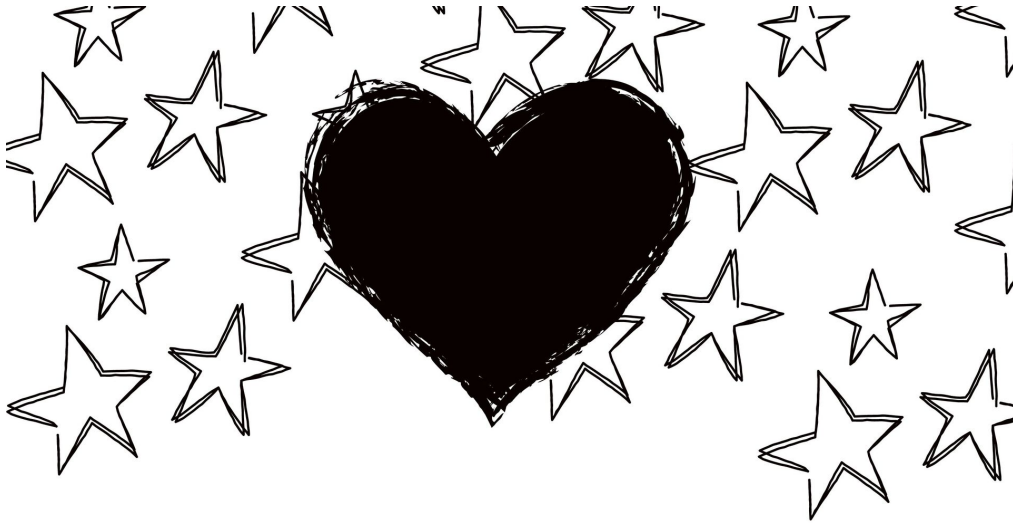
I can hear the people around us starting to breathe heavier just from Delaney's presence, but then something really weird happens.

The security guard steps up to her and covers her back with his body as he ushers her out, and the sexualized breathing ceases, and the party goes on as if nothing has changed.

That's a first. Usually, once she's kick started something, the magic doesn't dissipate right away even if she leaves the area.

I'm so confused that I stop walking. The security guard keeps a hand on her lower back and guides her through the doors, and nobody she passes even does anything more than a double take at how stunning she is. There's no forceful kissing, no sudden boners, no breathy moans as people's bodies get hit with a wave of pheromones.

Who is this guy?



CHAPTER SIX

Jackson

For a security guard with years of experience, I'm way more shaken up right now than I ought to be. My brother and I have been waiting for a chance at something more important, and something about the energy that hovers under my palm as I guide this woman out of the ballroom, tells me this might be the more that I've been hoping for.

I'm not sure exactly what has this woman looking as spooked as she did when she looked at me, but the glares her boyfriend are shooting me tells me I would keep my distance from her if I was smart. I can't claim that's a title I've ever tried to possess, though.

Of course I know who this is. Delaney Duncan, the reclusive princess who apparently causes trouble wherever she goes. I've never been this close to her, but if I thought she was breathtaking through a TV screen? Fuck.

I nod to my brother August who's holding the door open to the secure room as we approach it, and I kind of love that Delaney stumbles when she sees him. Her face whips back and forth

between the two of us, clearly not expecting to see my exact double in this hallway.

“Right this way, Princess,” he says this with a little roll to his words I’ve never heard before. I close the door behind me, sealing us into the room.

“Okay, what was that?” the boyfriend spits out, hands on his hips, and an expression on his face that tells me he thinks I owe him something. But I guess technically I do, since I’m the employee right now.

“What was what?” I ask honestly, not really sure what exactly he’s griping about. Is it too soon to decide I don’t like him?

“The... you know what I’m talking about, right Del? He showed up, and it was like ‘poof,’ everything went back to normal. What the hell was that?”

Delaney sinks into an armchair in the corner, her face looking a little lost, her breathing trying to even out. “What do you mean?” Okay, so it’s not just me that isn’t tracking.

“I could tell your magic was starting to affect people,” the guy accuses, “but it was like, as soon as this guy slipped in—”

“Jackson Lawrence,” I offer, hand held out for Delaney to shake. She takes my hand and a slight shock hits my palm; followed by a gut punch that has me aching a little bit. I don’t know what it means, but I need to know if my brother feels it too.

Delaney stares at her hand and shakes it a little bit, her eyebrows furrowed like she’s trying to figure out the same thing I am.

I glare at my brother until he steps forward, hand extended as well. “August Lawrence,” he says, shaking Delaney’s hand. I wait for the reaction... and there it is. His eyes widen just a little bit and his shoulders tense. For someone trained to be discreet in everything, that reaction was like a flashing billboard.

I don’t think her boyfriend notices though, because he’s just pacing back and forth, thinking way too hard as he runs this hand through his hair. “I know I’m not crazy; you guys did

something.” He turns to glare at us. “What did you do, and how did you do it?”

Let’s just take a wild guess here. “You mean...block her magic?” I ask simply.

“You did what?” Delaney asks, her tone with a ring of wonder to it.

“We’re shields,” August supplies. “We’re able to block out any magic around us with a thought. Not the most impressive skill, but it does come in handy occasionally when we’re on security detail.”

Delaney inhales sharply and pulls herself up to a stand. “A... shield? That’s not... I’ve never met anybody that could do that.”

“Yeah, well, I guess we’re kind of rare, but we never thought it was too impressive. It’s actually a magical accident. Things didn’t develop properly, in a magical sense, in utero. We wouldn’t go out and advertise that, now would we? Think of it as a strong inability to do any sort of magic.”

She gets up close to us, putting herself right in front of me and August collectively. Her eyes are huge now, her face lighting up. “You don’t feel it? I’m not affecting you at all?”

I can’t tell her just how much she’s affecting me, because that would be unprofessional. “If you’re referencing your bodysmith abilities, then no. Magic doesn’t affect us. Unless we will it to, but we pretty much leave our shield switched on as a default.”

“You can’t sense it at all?” The boyfriend asks, startled.

“Nothing at all sex-related is coming through our shield,” August says with an almost straight face. Good for him.

“And you can project...that shield out from yourselves?” the boyfriend asks, clearly disbelieving. Okay, I need a better name for him. I’m quickly learning I don’t like calling him her boyfriend. When did I puff my chest out? “I’m sorry man, I didn’t catch your name.” I try to stay casual as I fix my posture, wondering what the hell has gotten into me.

“Oh sorry, it’s Adam.”

“Adam. Yes, we can project it out. That’s why when we assisted your girlfriend—”

“Not my girlfriend,” he says way too quickly.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Delaney flinch ever so slightly, folding into herself again. Why would you ever want to clarify that this woman was not your girlfriend? Clearly, the man is insane. I knew I didn’t like him.

“Yes, we can project it out. About twenty feet if we’re alone, farther if we’re together and joining forces,” my brother chips in when I’m still running computations in my head about these interesting people in front of me and their confusing dynamic.

“Are there any limits to it?” Delaney asks in a small voice.

“Well not really,” August says scratching his chin. “Being around magic seems to fuel it. We sort of soak up what other people aim towards us, either purposefully or accidentally, and reflect that energy to block any magic out.”

“Has your ability ever shut itself down or run out of fuel?” Adam asks, getting more specific. It takes me an embarrassingly long time to connect the dots. “Oh. You’re asking if we could block out her abilities towards other people, aren’t you? Like if we could nullify her effect on the masses?”

“Yes,” Adam replies succinctly.

“I don’t see why not,” August tells them. “I don’t think we’ve purposely used our shielding for that reason, but I guess it would complement your bodysmithing magic pretty well. How exactly does your magic work, Princess?”

She crosses her arms around her middle, hugging herself tighter. My fingers twitch and I want to pull her into me, but that might get me fired. “The problem is that it doesn’t seem to,” she says quietly. “Are you... I can’t really say much else unless you’ve signed an NDA. My family’s rules, I’m sorry.”

“We have a standing one with the government,” I tell her. “All the security guards have to keep current NDAs on file, especially when serving events the queen and her family might

be at. We've had extensive background checks and we both have a high security clearance. You're welcome to call anybody you want to verify the information."

"Stop Del," Adam commands. I don't like the way he talks to her. But she listens regardless of my feelings, closing her mouth on what looks like might have been an acceptance of our information. "I want to check the guys out before you tell them anything. Could you guys give us a minute?"

"Of course; we'll just be out in the hall if you need us. Take your time."

Delaney nods at my brother then her eyes meet mine briefly, and for some reason I want to walk backwards so I can see her longer before I leave the room. She's like a magnet. I can't allow that kind of distraction, so I turn towards the hallway, only breathing when the door shuts behind me.

"What the fuck just happened?" my brother asks me, nearly collapsing in half as he breathes deeply. "Something happened when she touched my hand and it just... what was that?"

"I have no idea, but we need to get to know that woman better. Did you see how alone she looked? Even in that room full of people, I was watching her before they purposely caught my attention. It was like she was off in her own world, but not necessarily in a good way; like she keeps herself separate from everybody on purpose, like she doesn't have a choice."

"Nice work finding out if he was her boyfriend or not," my brother commends me.

"Yeah, what the hell was that? They're clearly close, he hasn't left her side all night. She definitely didn't like how quickly he denied it, though."

August shakes his head. "I don't get it. But that just means there's an opening...or two."

They keep information about the royal family on a need-to-know basis. Delaney's family has done a remarkable job of keeping her mostly out of the public eye. People are always trying to find out anything about her, being the Princess and all, but they're hardly ever successful. It likely helps that some

of her parents are completely terrifying. Her older brother Adler is more well known and seemingly indifferent to his royal status. Last I heard, he accepted an assistant football coaching job at Hemlock Academy. I'm sure he has a security detail, but other than that, he pretty much operates like he's anybody else.

It's not like the queen and her mates necessarily need an heir to name since the consensus is that they're basically immortal. "She doesn't have any marks on her arm..." I trail off, "but did her eyes look lavender to you?" I ask my brother. Lavender eyes means she's a conduit. Even without the marks, that's how you would know.

"Was the first thing I noticed," August says. "They're like metallic though." He closes his mouth and then thinks about it, before adding one more tidbit. "I didn't think she'd be so tall...tall is good, though."

Her height and stature make her almost unbreakable and therefore more fun to throw around. I can't voice that fun fact though, because that would also likely get me fired. I wonder how many things I want to do to that woman would end up with my employment being terminated? It's got to be an impressive list.

The not-boyfriend sticks his head out into the hallway. "Okay, you guys can come back in."

When we walk back into the room, he's standing behind her with his hand on her shoulder. She's shaking a little bit, and it looks as if she's crying too. I don't know what he did to make her cry, but I'm ready to pound him in for it. I take a step forward without realizing it, my hands clenched and ready, but my brother stops me with a hand to the chest. He gives me a look that tells me more than words could, and I take a second to master myself before I try to interact with them again.

"We had to make sure you guys were safe to talk to," Adam tells us like we didn't know why we were asked to leave.

Why is he speaking for her? She's the one we're really paid to guard, so I disregard the clown behind her and get in front of

Delaney, sinking to my knees so I can see her beautiful eyes.
“Are you okay, Princess?”

Her lip goes wobbly as she looks at me, but she makes no move to close the scant distance between us. I’m suddenly struck with images of feeling her lips on mine, tasting her skin, and I worry that maybe I’m not immune to her magic after all, but I feel very in control of my body. All I know is that she has some sort of sex magic, I don’t know how it works or what it would feel like, though.

“You seem interested in us. In a professional capacity,” I hastily add. “Do you want to talk to us about your magic, so we can see if we can help you?”

“She—” the fool of a man tries to answer.

“Can speak for herself, surely,” my brother says, cutting him off. Good, he’s got this guy pegged too.

Adam glares at us but lets her talk. Small mercies. “We can’t figure my magic out,” she admits. She looks ashamed, like it’s somehow her fault her magic doesn’t do exactly what she wants it to do. “We’ve tried everything,” she admits.

“Counseling, exposure to different people, meditation... I mean, I’ve seen way too many strippers, watched way too much porn... nothing helps though.”

I start choking, fighting a boner.

“I have to stay away from everybody, because if I’m around people and my magic flares up, like it does almost anytime I need it not too, I... start orgies. I can’t make them stop, and I can’t control them in any way, so I usually just hide at home. If I have to be somewhere public, it’s for short bursts, and then I’m leaving again. Like tonight,” she says slowly.

“You shouldn’t ever hide yourself sweetheart,” August says adamantly. I want to kick him, but he corrects himself before I can. “Sorry. Princess. Forgive me.”

Is she... blushing?

“From what I know of bodysmiths,” I start, “you need lust to fuel your magic and your control of it, correct?”

“Yeah. Nothing I’ve tried feeds it, though. Usually when bodysmiths have children, if their children have inherited their gift, their magic will work slightly differently. I think it’s some sort of evolutionary trait so that they and their parents can feed off of different demographics. Otherwise, they might compete, because I’m sure you’re aware that bodysmiths can be kind of cutthroat. I haven’t met any from aside from my mother, but I’ve heard enough stories of my grandmother to know that I don’t really want to.”

I’m fucking blown away. “So you can’t feed?” Suddenly, the slightly haunted look about her makes sense. I look at her face a little more critically, looking for any giveaways that might give me a clue about how I can help her. “So you just, what, live in a perpetual state of starvation? And because of that, you can’t control your magic.” I say it as a statement and not a question, because I know this is exactly right. Physically, her body looks like it’s in great condition, but she feels slightly unstable, and I guess that feeds into why she seems so unsure of herself.

“And before you ask, yes I’ve had sex, no it didn’t help. Honestly, I think not being able to feed my magic is a blessing sometimes, because that means I can’t feed off the disgusting amounts of lust in my household; but it’s kind of a downer in all other aspects,” she jokes, trying to make light of what I’m sure is a harrowing situation for her.

I can’t imagine feeling like I had to hide from the world in order to not be a menace. To feel like all I could offer the world was chaos. Because it’s clear that this is how she views herself.

“I had a bracelet on earlier,” she explains, fidgeting with her hands, “that some of my parents made for me. It was supposed to dull the effects of my magic or block it out temporarily, but it fell off. I guess we didn’t think about charming it to stay on. It was only a temporary solution, but it was nice to dance while it lasted.” She gives her friend a sad smile, and I know that if she trusted me to, I’d have the whole ballroom decked out and invite no one, just so we could dress up and dance

together. I'd throw a whole ball just for her, because she deserves to feel special. She deserves everything.

I have to check these intense emotions running through me, because that's not the job, but I know in this moment that I need to know more about this woman.

"Do you know how close to her you'd have to be to keep everybody safe from her?" Douche McStupidface asks.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" my brother asks, forgetting to be professional as well. "You did not just say that, my man."

Delaney ducks her head, and now I think the tears dripping from her eye are from embarrassment. "He didn't mean it like that," she tries to explain away. But we don't take that.

"I think he did," August challenges.

"I'm sorry," Adam offers her, brushing the top of her back lightly with his fingertips. "You know what I meant. This could open so many doors for you if they could help you. You could come to school with me. You could live your life."

I'm going to pretend for a second that he's not just assuming we'd give up everything to follow her around like dogs, because even though we absolutely would for some unexplainable reason, him assuming we have that level of devotion to our jobs is a little insulting. I think.

"You're getting ahead of yourself Adam," Delaney says.

"They have families, lives; they can't just drop everything to go everywhere I want to just so I can feel like a normal person. That's not fair of us to ask them. They're not tools at my disposal for a problem that has nothing to do with them."

"We can absolutely do that," August says without even checking with me. But he's right, we can. More importantly we want to, because we both need to know what that spark was between us. And also because she looks so lost and so hopeless, and it's painful to see. If I can help her, I might give anything up to do just that.

"We should test it out," Adam says. "Walk you back to the ballroom and keep one of them by you, just to see how it goes."

“I should just go home,” Delaney says, shaking her head and sounding defeated again. “It’s starting to get late anyway.”

“One dance?” August asks her, throwing out his most charming smile. She’s a few years younger than us, but definitely old enough to be able to decide what kind of attention she would like from us.

“That’s hardly appropriate,” Adam says. “I’ll dance with her; we’ll just stand near you guys and see what happens.”

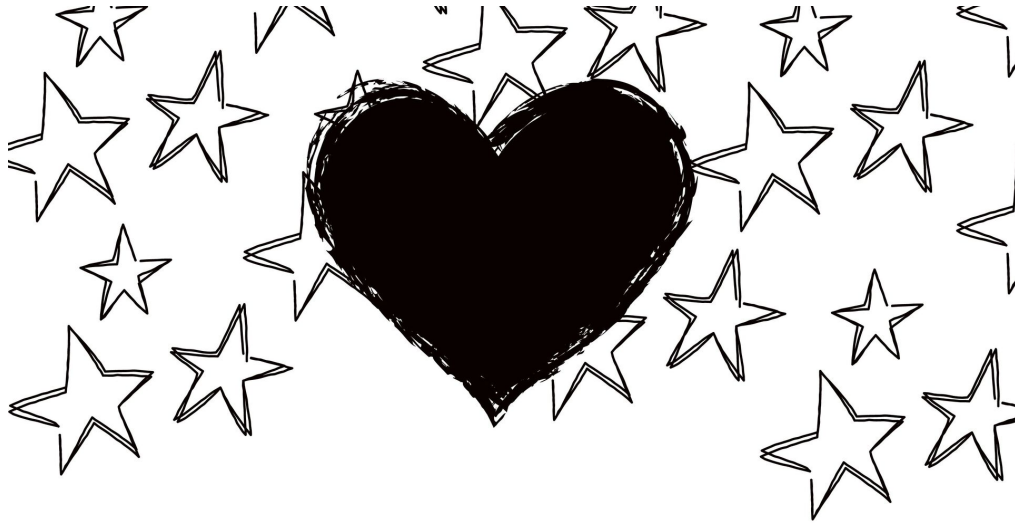
Adam speaks like it’s a done deal, but we don’t answer to him. While he’s brushing off his lapels and tightening his ugly blue tie, August is still staring down the woman with his hand extended in offer.

“You coming, Delaney?” Guy-I-feel-like-punching says.

She looks at Adam for a second before switching her attention back to August, and when she slips her hand in his, I feel like we just won a very small victory.

“I’d love to dance with you, if it won’t get you in trouble with your boss.”

“We can still guard you if we’re dancing with you and guarding you would be our honor. You just leave it to us to worry about any trouble.”



CHAPTER SEVEN

Delaney's Journal

Be prepared to throw something at me. Really. I'm sure you were hoping that this wouldn't at all end like one of those diaries teenagers keep where they wax poetic about their romantic interests, and how perfect the person is, and how glowy their smile is, but you're not escaping that fate today.

I seem to be in my own bed with my own sheets and everything, but I feel as if I am miles away.

I've never felt so floaty before, as if I just couldn't stop smiling. Losing control of my magic at the conduit gala might have been the best thing that's happened to me in a while, because meeting August and Jackson feels like a reward I've spent years earning.

I know Adam didn't want me to dance with them, which was a bit ridiculous, but if I can use my princess status to flout the rules and dance with the men hired to act as security, then I will.

For once, I actually feel hopeful that maybe my life could actually go somewhere. Or at least for short periods of time.

I was scared when August pulled me onto the dance floor last night; I shook the entire time they all accompanied me back down the hallways and towards where everyone was still gathered for an event that I should have participated in to find mates, but August made me feel safe. Standing between him and Jackson made me feel safe.

I still didn't dare venture further than the edges of the dance floor, because baby steps, but when August looked at me and started moving us to the music, I felt as if I was finally allowed to breathe properly.

He asked me to trust him, and I did.

No one looked at me like they were sex crazed, no gowns were torn off in a moment of passion, no erections tried to punch holes through the very nice tuxedo pants everyone was wearing. In short, zero orgies. That's a fucking record.

After the first song, when Jackson swapped places with his brother, I was able to enjoy the music a little more and actually have fun. I felt my body let go of some of its tension and I started to let my body actually feel the music and translate it into movement.

Unfortunately, August and Jackson kept things incredibly respectful, even if it got more challenging by the minute to not pull them into a kiss. But I don't know if that's something they'd even want from me, or if they were acting purely out of a desire to help someone they've pledged to guard.

I didn't feel like that was the case, but I'm scared to get my hopes up.

I've been taught by my life experiences that no one really wants to mate me, so I'm not hoping for anything that crazy right now, but if I could find a hookup that didn't run the second sexy times ended, I would be a happy, happy girl.

I'm supposed to hang out with Adam later since I only get him a few days before he has to go back to school, and before that I have a meeting with my parents, August, and Jackson, to discuss possible options of working with me.

I'm scared the twins will feel beholden to me out of duty, and offer up their services because they feel like they have to, but is it wrong for me to be selfish just this once and take whatever they'll give me and not even question the motives?

* * *

Okay, this day just keeps getting weirder and weirder. I'm going to write pretty fast here because Adam is in the bathroom, and I don't know how long I have until he gets back into my room.

I told Adam about the meeting with August and Jackson, and he started acting sort of weird.

He was definitely a little off last night when I was talking to the twins, a little caveman-ish if you will, but normally we hang out and just watch movies or play video games or something, and it's all chill.

But he showed up today a nervous wreck, his hair a bit disheveled, and it felt like he had something he wanted to say to me, but couldn't work up the nerve to do it.

I'm not going to pretend here, when it's just you and me book, that I haven't wished something would happen with Adam. I deny it to myself over and over again and have been mildly successful in convincing myself that I'm not completely in love with him, because he's one of my only friends since my magic doesn't seem to affect him a whole lot.

He's told me he can feel my magic and it was intense for him when it first manifested, but maybe just being around me so much in those years, since he was still living in the house, helped him develop a natural resistance to it? Like exposure therapy or some shit. I don't know. We pretty much just admit that it's weird it doesn't affect him and leave it at that.

Honestly, sometimes my mom gets this really creepy knowing smile when the topic gets brought up, but I've been too chicken shit to ask her what her thoughts on it really are, because if it's what I think it is, it will likely never happen.

Or so I thought.

I never thought I'd be able to openly tell Adam how I felt about him, because I can't shackle him to the life I'm bound to lead. I can't ask him to take our friendship further when I can't really leave the house or do anything a normal person can do, can't go to the school where he's building his own life, can't hang out with his friends unless they're all hell bent on having a wild sex party.

For the most part, I try to ignore the fact that I'm a conduit, because finding mates just feels too overwhelming when I'm dealing with all this magical malfunction.

When I told Adam that August and Jackson have decided to sign a contract to be my personal bodyguards, and that if everything worked out well after a trial run, I might be able to consider going to Hemlock, he looked so torn.

Like half of him was really excited to see me more often, but half of him understood what it meant if I wasn't confined to the house; I'd be free to finally explore the world and become an actual bodysmith and conduit.

He looked panicked, actually.

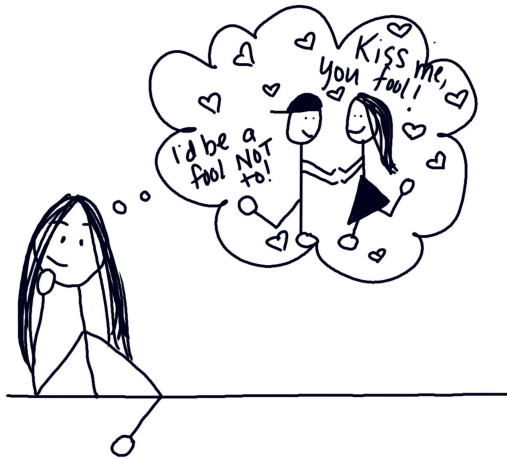
We watched a movie, but he sat a little closer to me than he normally does. I don't think he was actually watching what was happening on screen, either. I kept asking him really random questions about the characters that had nothing at all to do with the plot, and he just would pat my knee and smile and nod.

I started getting sleepy and might have woken up with my head on his shoulder, but that's happened before. We're close, and it's never been weird, but tonight he made it weird.

When I looked up at him to re-orient myself, the credits were rolling and he was just staring at me, and I swear to you it looked as if he was thinking about kissing me.

We've never crossed that line, and it was really scary, but in an exciting way. I've dreamt of kissing him so many times, but it never felt like that was something he wanted, too.

Until tonight. I actually leaned forward, thinking I was finally getting my wish, but then I realized how high up on his leg my



hand had worked itself to while I slept, and I felt something new from him.

Lust.

I've never felt lust from him the way I did tonight. Usually, lust has a sticky, sweet feel to it and it's something I want to be around, but I'm always walking through the invisible clouds of it unscathed.

From Adam though, it felt like it was pulled to me specifically, and when I inhaled, I felt it settle on my skin like a fine mist, which I've never experienced before, and I was actually able to absorb it for the first time ever.

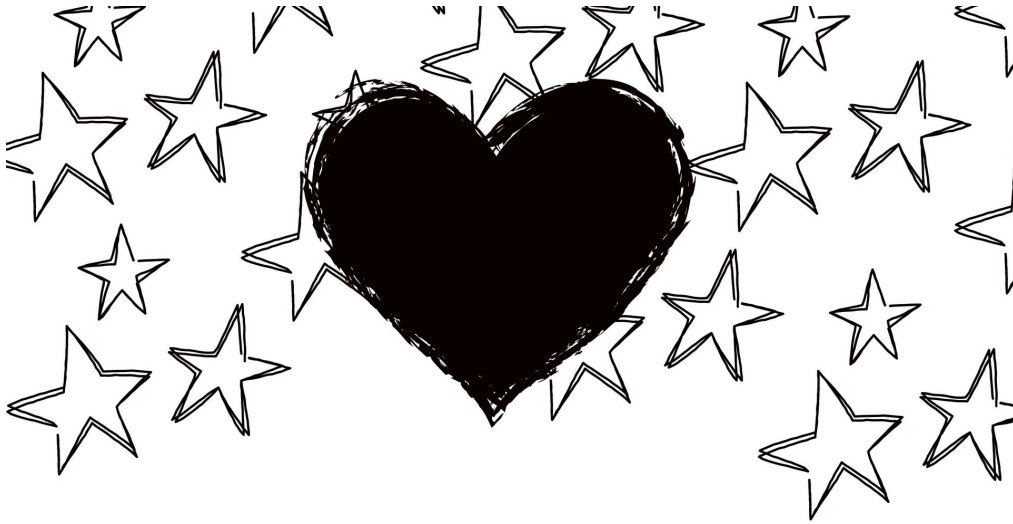
It definitely made me moan a little bit, but it just felt so damn good.

When I looked back at Adam, intending to ask him about it, he jumped up off the couch and ran to the bathroom, then locked himself in. He turned the fan on, and I might think he was just trying to discreetly take a shit, but I can still feel the lust coming through the walls, and now I'm fairly sure he's actually in there touching himself.

Fuck, I want to watch.

He's got to have an incredible dick, right? He's kind of got this nerd chic look to him with his glasses and his floppy hair, but I have a feeling he'd be a freak in bed.

Oh fuck, I think I'm high.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Adam

I scrub and scrub, my hands turning red and raw, but I still feel dirty. How the hell am I supposed to walk out of this bathroom and confront Delaney after what I just did?

Things became real tonight. She looked so excited when she was talking about some of the opportunities that might be possible after this trial run with her new security detail, but I have a feeling they're in it for more than the pay and the respect guarding the princess would earn them.

They looked at her like they wanted to fuck her, and I know that look well because honestly it's how I felt when she fell asleep on me earlier.

I've always kept Delaney in this neat little box within my head, because if she was stuck in isolation, I didn't have to share her with the world. She'd be mine, and I'd know exactly what her days looked like. Maybe that's creepy, but it's just how my brain works when it comes to her.

She's been my best friend so long, and I'd have to be blind, deaf, and dumb to not understand she's fucking extraordinary,

but if she couldn't really date or achieve her potential, it was like dynamite without any explosive power. Harmless.

If she's planning on leaving the sanctuary of the mansion though, and chasing her dreams, then I have to quickly be okay with the fact that I have to share her. Am I ready for that? Can I watch her meet men and find mates and wow the entire campus of Hemlock without having any sort of claim on her?

I guess I have to, because I'm not ready to try anything else with her yet. I think if I gave in to the secret way she makes me feel, I'd completely cease to exist. Being with her would be so potent that I don't think there'd be anything left of who I am to go around with anyone else. She'd completely annihilate me, because loving a woman like Delaney would be soul consuming.

You can't half-ass it with a woman like that.

I've made myself numb to her charm and appeal over the years, but I accidentally scraped that layer of numbness away when I saw her dancing with the twins last night. They offered her something I couldn't, made her smile in a way I've never gotten from her, and I scratched and I scratched until I started bleeding internally.

I still crash at the mansion when I'm away from school because it's my home as well, but our rooms are in completely different areas, so I still had to go through the process of getting myself ready, convincing myself it wasn't a date, and walking across the property to her room.

So what if I splashed a little bit of cologne on my neck this time?

Something shifted in my chest when she fell asleep on me, because she looked so soft and vulnerable, and without her awake, I was able to look my fill. I think this is the first time I've allowed myself to acknowledge the fact that I have feelings for her, feelings that go far beyond friendship.

I can't be with her like that right now because of all the crazy circumstances surrounding us, but I let myself imagine for a few minutes.

I let myself feel.

Then her hand flopped onto my thigh, and I felt myself get hard. For her.

I let my imagination run rampant for about ten minutes, thought of every way I could take her within the walls of her room, thought about how incredible she'd feel around my cock, and it drove me fucking mad.

Then she woke up and blinked up at me with those ridiculous lavender eyes, she curled a few fingers in reflexively, so close to my dick that I thought I'd explode, and I had no other option than to run into her bathroom and jerk off into the toilet, because otherwise I'd have to find somewhere else to stick my dick if I wanted my sanity to stay intact.

That would have ruined pretty much everything, so here I am, trying to scrub all traces of my dick and my cum off my hand, but I just feel dirty because I'm not supposed to want her that way. She trusts me to be her friend, and if I told her wanted her in a filthy, sexual, romantic way, she'd assume I've been faking my friendship all these years.

I've never machinated to get her into bed, being her friend has been a vital part of my upbringing; but I don't know what to do with these new feelings. Now that that layer of numbness is gone, I don't know if I can get it back.

I just need to leave. I need to go back to school tonight instead of in the morning as I planned to do, because if I have to sleep in this house with her again, I'll probably sleepwalk my way right into her bed and accidentally fuck her.

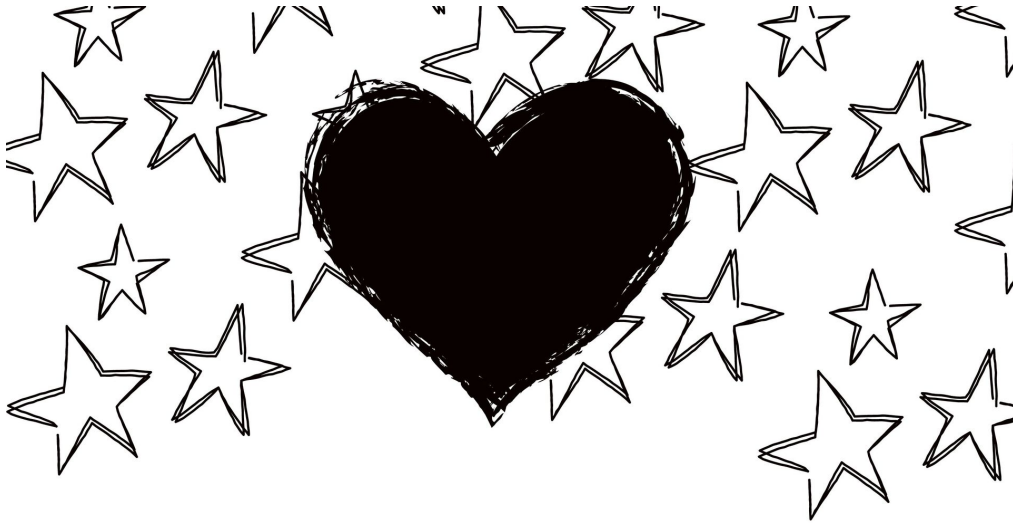
Ignoring the fact that the orgasm I just gave myself was one of the best I've ever had, I flip off the light switch to the bathroom and get ready to confront her, except she looks as if she...fell asleep again?

She's flopped onto her bed now, cradling some sort of journal that's still half open, but I won't invade her privacy. I flip to an open page without reading anything else in the book, which should win me a fucking medal, and hastily scribble a note

telling her something came up and I have to head back to school tonight.

I know it's a totally shameful way to leave her, but it feels relieving to avoid the confrontation for now. She looks so serene lying on her bed, a relaxed look to her forehead without any of her usual wrinkles of concern that she normally carries even into her sleep.

She's breathing deep and even and her skin has a healthy sheen to it, so I tell myself I'm being the bigger person by not disturbing her. She clearly needs the rest, and I clearly need to get the hell back to campus and find a better distraction.



CHAPTER NINE

August

We've been on Delaney's detail for two weeks now, yet she hasn't once left her home. Granted, her home is absurdly big, but I don't know how she doesn't go stir crazy; we asked some of her parents about it and they assured us that's pretty normal. Jackson and I were a little concerned that maybe she was staying home so much because she was uncomfortable with us, but now I just think she's so set in her routines that she doesn't feel the need to branch out.

There's a part of me that wants to push her out of that circle of comfort and make her experience something new, to show her how much she can do or accomplish if we are there to shield her magic, but I'm also naively hopeful that we'll be able to solve a puzzle that no one else has been able to so she can properly feed her magic.

At least she has a reason to leave the house today, and zero reasons to skip the event.

There's a meeting of sorts that happens twice a year between all the leaders from the different species councils, all of which

report directly to the queen of course, but a lot of them will have their children with them in hopes of matching them with someone of note.

We'll also be meeting Delaney's brother for the first time, who's travelling from the academy to attend, girlfriend in tow so no one gets the idea he's available. Which means, there will likely be a lot of pressure and attention on Delaney and we're a little anxious to see how everything pans out. We're hoping for another zero-orgy night, though Delaney has been telling us all week to be on guard in case it does happen.

I keep telling myself it's not a date as Jackson and I arrive at the mansion, but Delaney doesn't even notice us walking towards her. She's curled up on the couch, phone in hand, watching some show; she's wearing a sun dress that has her mile long legs on display, though I hope for our sake when she stands it will cover them up some, because it's going to be incredibly difficult to guard her if my eyes are stuck to her legs.

It's red as a fire engine, thin spaghetti straps and a black belt sitting on her waist, strappy black high heel sandals strapped to her feet, and big movie star sunglasses perched on her head. She's braided her hair and has silver nail polish on, and it's refreshing to be able to really take her in without her trying to hide from us.

Jackson stares at me out the side of his eye, and I think he's asking if we should disturb her or keep checking her out, but I get the feeling we might come off as creepy if we just stand in her living room and watch her...

I mean to talk, I do, but I start imagining my hands gripping that braid, tilting her head back, and kissing the lips that are so perfectly covered in a matte red a few shades darker than her dress. I feel my body start to heat up, and I think about that weird electric tingle that happens when we touch her. Would being with her be akin to sticking my dick in an electrical socket? I really shouldn't want to try that...

Fuck. Now I have to think about something else to get my boner to deflate; like that odd, framed collection of bookmarks

the family has on the wall next to the bookcase. I step closer, confused by their choice of décor.

I hear an inhale and she snaps her head up, finally noticing us. “Oh, hey. Sorry, have you been standing there long?”

She stands up and smooths out her dress, grabbing a small black purse and sticking her phone into it. Her eyes look slightly dilated as she takes us in, and it looks like she’s sniffing us...oh shit. The lust thing. I forgot.

“What’s with the bookmarks?” I ask her to distract her from the fact I’m sitting here getting all randy.

Delaney snorts and steps up to them. They’re erotic. Like, penises in various art styles, in a collage format, with a gilded gold frame. “Please don’t tell me you were getting off on those weird-ass bookmarks.”

Jackson laughs and answers for me. “They’re...interesting, but I’m pretty sure we’re both a bit er, excited, by how great you look.”

“What, this ol’ thing?” She does a spin and bats her eyes exaggeratedly, flaring her dress about her before linking her arms with ours. We start heading out to the foyer where we’ll be meeting the rest of her family, and yes, I’m sort of still getting used to the fact that I’m in with the royal family.

“Mom! We’re going to be late!” Delaney yells up the grand marble staircase.

“Coming!”

“No, she already did that five minutes ago— she’s just picking out which earrings she wants to wear,” one of her dads says as a horde of them start walking down the staircase, followed by the queen herself and the rest of her mates.

“Gross. Really, dad? We have guests over,” she says, gesturing to me and my brother.

“They’re not guests, they’re your guards, and I’m pretty sure they want to take you to pound town,” the queen says as she pats Delaney on her cheek that’s very pink from embarrassment. Delaney just stands there rubbing her

forehead, fighting a smile, as her mother keeps walking out the door.

“Come on Delaney, we’re going to be late!” the queen yells over her shoulder, cheekily.

“Oh my gods, I am so sorry. Please ignore everything my parents say that references the myriad ways they have sex or that refers to sex in any way. You’ll get used to it soon if you stick around. I don’t even think anyone calls it pound town anymore.”

She starts walking, but I can’t let the opportunity be wasted. “She’s not wrong,” I whisper in her ear as I help her into the car that we’ll be riding in, following the massive limo containing her parents.

A squeal from Delaney has me jumping into the car, only to see her with her arms thrown around a guy with a headful of black curls. I’m defensive only as long as it takes me to identify it as her brother, Adler.

“I thought you were meeting us there! What are you doing here?”

She stays seated by him in our much smaller limo, buckling in as Jackson and I take a spot by the door.

“Wanted to surprise you. How’d I do?” he’s got a big smile on his face, and it’s only then that I notice there’s a woman by him, because it took me that long to take my eyes fully off Delaney. This could be a problem.

“Almost peed a little you surprised me so good! And you brought Rachel! Hi!”

I snort at the overabundance of information but keep myself removed from the conversation like my brother is doing as well, because we’re just the guards. There’s a twist in my chest that tells me I want to be more, want to be someone she wants to introduce to her brother, but I need to get those delusions out of my head. We’re the help.

“Hey Delaney! I love your dress— thank the goddess you’re not wearing pastel. Five bucks says every other heir there will be in pastel.”

Delaney giggles. “It’s a pastel theme, actually. I didn’t know you could make a color palette a theme, but apparently they’ve done it.”

Rachel swats Adler on the arm, through the sport jacket he’s wearing. “You didn’t tell me that! I’m going to look ridiculous!”

“You look hot, babe. Not ridiculous. And we never dress to their weird little party themes. Last one was garden party themed, and Delaney and I wore leather instead. It was great.”

Rachel looks to Delaney for confirmation, who nods. “It’s true. We’ve sort of made it a game to be just rebellious enough that they don’t think we’re being purposely disrespectful, even if that’s exactly what we’re doing. These things are so lame though, we have to have fun where we can. Oh, let me introduce you to my friends. This is August and Jackson. Though I’m not sure why they’re sitting so far away...”

Hm. Friends. Not guards.

“Hey, good to meet you,” Adler says, extending a hand for a handshake. “I hear you’re basically walking miracles. Thanks for helping out my sister. It’s good to see her out of the house without all the stress that usually goes with it.”

Jackson and I nod our heads. “Seems to be working out well for all of us,” Jackson says, eyeing Delaney fondly. Okay, I guess we’re just openly demonstrating our intentions now? I guess we sort of got the green light from her mom, but we’ve still got a job to do.

“Oh, it’s like that, is it?” Adler asks, teasing his sister.

Delaney just shrugs though, a little smile tilting her lips.

“Maybe. Still deciding.”

Rachel throws her head back and laughs. “Oh girl, you are bold today. If this new confidence is from having them around, we full-heartedly support this. Whatever it is.”

My brother and I give each other a fist bump, allowing a small smile to breakthrough.

The three of them chat and catch up as we drive, but I can feel Delaney's eyes on us as they do it. I'm trying to maintain a professional attitude here, but every time she looks at me, it gets a little bit more difficult. Wish I knew what she was thinking.

We were briefed on what to expect at this event, and there will be plenty of security around, so we shouldn't be the only line of defense for Delaney. We're still the first ones out of the car, making sure to look around before we motion for everyone to come out. Adler crawls out first, followed by his girlfriend, and then at long last, we pull Delaney out.

Delaney made it clear she didn't want us to really look like we were her security guards today, that she wanted us to blend in, so we are unfortunately dressed for the pastel theme with khakis and blue gingham button down shirts on. We took time to get our hair styled back, but I'm sure it won't take long for some of it to escape the gel and annoy the shit out of me by getting into my eyes.

For the first part of this little tete a tete, we're supposed to stay close to the royal family while the queen makes her big address to the group gathered, but about ten minutes into her speech, I start to get the feeling Delaney feels like causing trouble. Her and her brother seem to have a language of their own, making weird faces at each other when no one else is looking, then giggling uncontrollably as discreetly as possible.

Rachel elbows Adler in the ribs to get him to stop, but even she seems affected by their attitude, holding in laughs herself. Adler whispers something to Delaney that has her in fits, and I find it impossible not to smile as well, because when she's happy, it feels impossible to be anything else. What is that?

When I remember I'm actually here to do a job, because apparently I'm the world's worst security guard today, I scan the crowd for anything that I feel might be a threat. Delaney's antics didn't go unnoticed, and I see more than a handful of men staring at her instead of the queen.

I haven't seen a lot of footage of Delaney at events with her mom, but anytime I have seen her in public, she pretty much

keeps to herself and looks very uncomfortable. And then disappears. It's dawning on me that with us around here to block out her magic, she's suddenly opening herself up to a more public visage.

We figured we'd be trying to keep her safe at the event, but now I'm thinking we need to figure out how to wade through a sea of suitors that are going to suddenly realize how devastatingly beautiful and unattached she is.

Delaney and Adler finally get their laughter under control right as the queen finishes up her welcome speech, and I wasn't sure if I was expecting the queen to turn and scold her children for their ridiculous behavior or what, but all she does is walk up to them and smack them both on the back of their heads, then smile at them. Pretty sure she calls them idiots, too.

Well then.

We're in one of those big white event tents, and there were more dotted around the event space, but then there's also a big open garden centered around a large fountain. Most of her parents trail out of the tent to mingle, but the big scary one with the reddish hair, Foster, walks up to his children. He greets Rachel kindly and hugs Adler, then studies Delaney for a moment. "Do try not to make too many people fall in love with you today. Best to space it out a bit," he says with a wink and a nod to me and Jackson, and then he's catching up with the rest of his group.

There's a legitimate line of people waiting to talk to Delaney, and as the first approaches her, she motions that she wants to walk outside to be in the sun. She takes his proffered arm and hooks her wrist around it, letting him lead her to the edge of the fountain where there's a wide cement brim to sit on. We stand a few feet behind her, keeping an eye on the surroundings, one ear tuned to their conversation so we know she's safe. I can tell she's bored with him almost immediately, but she's polite enough. She does a good job of brushing him off and creating an opening for the next suitor to step up, her smile getting faker with each consecutive one that steps up.

There is one guy standing off to the side watching this all play out, and I see Delaney's eyes flick to him a few times, so she definitely knows he's there, but he makes no move to join her queue or approach her. I don't get any menacing vibes off him, but I keep my eyes on him, nonetheless.

When Delaney's been socializing for a good hour, she stands and begs off from the people waiting to talk to her, telling them she'll have to come back later like she's a character there to sign autographs. Her hands tremble a little as she wraps around our forearms, so we guide her to the royal tent now, thinking she could probably use a minute of silence. As we walk, I continue to sense the same guy following us from a distance. He won't make it past the security to the tent, but I still want to know what his game is.

Delaney collapses as soon as we get into the tent, plopping down in a chair and throwing her head back, legs loose in front of her as she groans. "Socializing sucks" she says. "They were all so stuffy."

"What was it that last lady was offering you if you married her son? Did she actually tell you she had prize winning goats?" I ask.

"That was actually my best offer," Delaney says, rolling her neck. I automatically step up behind her and start kneading at the muscles there, gently pushing her hair out of the way so I can get to her skin without tugging at it. Her head flops forward and she groans in a much different tone, letting me work out some of the kinks in her neck.

"Maybe I should start an orgy," she says. "It'd give me a good excuse to get out of here."

Jackson snorts. "How long are you expected to stay?"

"I can probably leave, actually. It's just that this is the first time I've been able to stay at an event, and I've always been curious." She closes her eyes and hums as I continued to work her neck and move on to her shoulders, closing my eyes against the flow of electricity I get from her.

“Oh, fuck it,” she finally says. “There’s food in here, and air conditioning somehow, we should just hang out here for a bit. It’s not like I’m going to meet anybody out there that understands me.”

“What exactly are you looking for?” Jackson says smoothly.

She stills my hand with a gentle squeeze and smiles up at me before standing and approaching Jackson slowly. She doesn’t say anything until she’s right in front of him, mere inches away from him.

“Are you asking because you want to know? Or are you asking so you can help me find it?”

I watch my brother think about this very carefully, then his hand slowly lifts up to tuck a piece of hair behind her ear. His fingers linger down the side of her neck and tease the strap of her dress before landing gently on her waist. “Would it shock you if I told you I was asking for me? For my brother too?”

Her head turns to look at me, measuring my face. “Shocked? No.”

“Then what?” Jackson asks.

“My life...” she trails off, “it’s kind of complicated. With parents as famous as mine, it would make anybody second guess trying to get close to me. A lot of people over the years have wanted to use me for that alone, a good handful of others for my abilities is a bodysmith, still more wanting to press their luck knowing I’m a conduit. Aside from Adam, not many people have taken the time to get to know me and have wanted to spend time with me for the sake of it.

“I know that I’m just a job to you, but maybe—”

“You’re not just a job to us,” Jackson cuts in, pulling her an inch closer to him. “We feel drawn to protect you because it makes us feel important. We feel drawn to you, because there’s something about you that’s unlike anybody else we’ve ever met. Sometimes I feel like there’s a charge between us, but it doesn’t make any sense.”

“My mom said when she started looking for mates, she always knew who was destined to be hers. It was a gift from the

goddess that she recognized them, because obviously the goddess knew what my mom was destined to become. If she didn't find the right men to support her, the perfect matches to her soul, things likely would have turned out much differently than they did. High stakes, and all that.

“With the goddess no longer an active part of our world, the magic has changed a bit. Fated mates exist to some extent but finding them is a bit trickier. Maybe it sounds stupid to hope that what we feel means something, because I don't have experience with relationships or anything like that, but I'm also scared to hope for something with you when the only reason you're hanging around me is because I desperately need you to live any sort of normal life. Maybe I'm just infatuated with you because you're around me all the time, you know?”

“Infatuated?” I ask, walking up behind her. I purposely put her between my brother and I, hoping to show her one of the many things we could offer her if she chose to get to know us better. “If we were only into you because we were around you all the time,” I start, “then tell me why that first night we met you, and that idiot friend of yours was spouting off shit, I wanted to punch him? Tell me why that night, I felt protective over you and angry over his treatment of you when I didn't even know you?”

“Adam? We're just friends. I know that he's a little rough around the edges, but he's always been there for me. I know he comes off sounding a certain way, but he is a non-negotiable part of my life.”

“We understand that, and we wouldn't chase him away from you, I'm just really trying to illustrate a point. There's nothing in our contract that says we can't get involved with you romantically, but I guess on our end, we want to make sure you don't date us simply because we're your only option. If you want to date us, it needs to be because you're curious to see what could happen. Because you're interested in us, and genuinely like being around us. Wouldn't hurt if you were dying to kiss us, or do other terrible things to our bodies either,” I joke, trying to lighten the mood.

She smiles, then shivers a bit between me and my brother. “I’ve never really dated anybody. Hookups, sure. But nobody stays around long enough to date me, because I’m far too complicated to be around and not nearly interesting enough to hang out with. I only look interesting on paper.”

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” Jackson demands. “You’re not going to say stupid things like ‘you’re not interesting’, because it’s patently untrue. If nobody else has stuck around to date you, it’s because they weren’t meant for you, and they didn’t deserve you.”

“Thank you,” she says softly. None of us talk for a few minutes, tension building as we all try and figure out what to do next. Eventually, she clears her throat. “So, was my mom right? Do you want to take me to pound town?” She puts air quotes around the words. Even though it’s such a ridiculous thing to call it, it still makes my dick harden in my pants.

Trying my best to keep a straight face so she knows how serious I am, I try my chances. “Could we take you out tomorrow night on a date? Dinner, perhaps?” I boldly step closer and push my lips to the back of her shoulder. It’s just a faint kiss in a pretty non-erogenous zone, but I hear a little gasp fall from her lips anyway.

She swallows hard. “Yeah, I would like that.”

“And if we happen to accidentally kiss you...” Jackson asks, eyes zeroed in on her mouth.

“No,” she says, shaking her head. “Any kissing has to be on purpose. That’s rule number one.”

“Oh there are rules, are there?” Jackson asks with a lift to his voice.

“I am a Princess, you know.”

I know it’s coming, but still, when he takes her mouth in his, guiding her face with a finger under her chin, I still get a little shaky in the knees. It isn’t weird to see my brother kissing a woman I’m interested in, because we’ve always done everything together.

We always date the same woman together, because it's important to us that nothing comes between us. This would be true even if we weren't twins, by virtue of being brothers who are close, closer than best friends. We've known for a while that whatever woman we found and would want any sort of future with, would have to be on board with marrying or mating both of us. Everybody knows we're a package deal before we get into anything, and the fact that Delaney is a conduit and already is expected to settle down with multiple partners, makes us a little bit more comfortable with the situation because that means she's potentially open to dating both of us.

When Jackson pulls away from her, he spins her around slowly, pushing her forward until my arms are forced to snap out and pull her into me. "You know if you let me kiss you, then I'm going to want to do it again, right? I'm going to feel like I can do it whenever I want to."

She blinks at me a little dazed, her lips puffy from Jackson's mouth. "That goes both ways. You guys make me feel like I'm allowed to do fun things and be a little reckless. Not that getting involved with you is reckless, but I feel safe around you guys; and even though it kind of scares me, I see pathways opening up to me. But you have to promise me something. If you ever start to feel like I'm using you for what your magic provides me, you need to tell me."

"That's easy," I assure her. "Let me ask you this. If we couldn't block your magic, if we were just regular security guards with abilities that were useless to you, would we still be having this conversation?"

She cocks her eyebrow up in confusion. "Obviously," she says. "The fact that you can block my magic is convenient, yes, but it's not what gets me excited around you. It's your energy, and how gentle you are with me and that weird connection that seems to follow us."

I nod, satisfied. "Only one other thing I need you to promise us. And this might sound like a silly thing to make you promise, but it's really important to us."

“Okay...” she says slowly. “What is it? You going to make me promise not to fall in love with you? Because that would be dumb.”

I roll my eyes. “No. I wouldn’t be averse to that down the line, at all.” I look at my brother and meet his eyes, making sure we’re still in this together. Of course we’ve talked about trying to see where things could lead with Delaney, because she’s sent us enough subtle messages over the past few weeks that had us hoping she was into us. Gentle touches here and there as she walked by, glances that lingered a little too long when she was across the room. Jackson and I have had several conversations with the hope that we could take the leap and ask Delaney to date us if it felt like it was something that might be well received, but she also needs to know that she has to say yes to both of us, whether or not that’s implied.

“The thing is, we don’t want you to come between us,” I say, motioning to my brother. “We’re two different people, with two different sets of needs and wants and desires, even if we look the same. But if you don’t want us both equally, then we can’t do this. And if we start something and you start to lose interest in one of us, we have to break things off, because him and I won’t be separated.”

“Oh, that’s it? I thought you were gonna say something really weird like you couldn’t have sex unless you could hold a light saber or admit that I’d have to be okay with you continuing to sell pictures of your feet online for money.”

Stunned. I try to talk, honestly I do, but nothing at all happens.

“But that I have to date both of you? I can do that.” She nods to herself, accepting our request without any pushback.

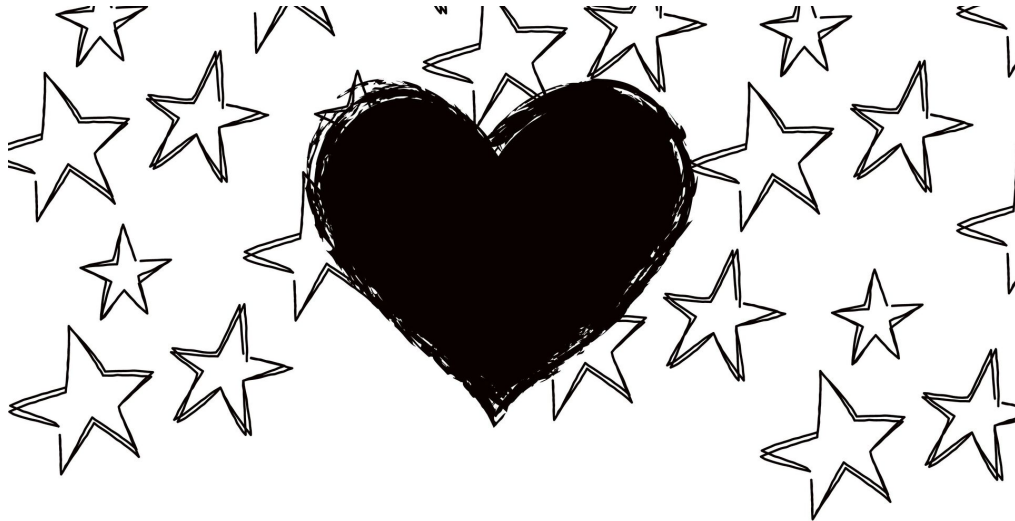
“Cover your bits Delaney, I’m coming in!” Adler suddenly yells, shaking the tent flap to make sure we know he’s there, then he walks in, not opening his eyes until he’s taken several steps into the room. “Good job, that was quick,” Adler commends her when he finally opens them to see us all fully clothed. Is her whole family just like super chill with talking about each other’s sex lives? Is this what living with a sex

goddess does to you? I get the impression that Jackson and I are in way over our heads.

“Mom wants you over at the main tent, and I promised I’d check to see if you were still around. The headmaster for Hemlock is here, mom wanted to introduce you. I’m pretty sure she’s trying to get him to give you the spiel about enrolling. If you’re not into that, then I will totally walk back and tell her you already left, though.”

“I should probably go and see what he has to say. I reserve the right to spontaneously start an orgy though if I get bored—this is my cue, guys,” she says to me and Jackson, using her hand to mime sucking a fucking dick. “You see me do this, and it means to back far enough away or shut off your shield so I can cause chaos and make a getaway, okay?”

My brother and I stare dazedly after her as she walks off with her brother, and I send a prayer up to the goddess that I can keep up with this woman, because holy shit.



CHAPTER TEN

Delaney

“Adler, tell mom I’ll be there in just a second. I just want to duck into the bathroom really quick.”

He gives me a salute and walks off towards the direction of the main tent, while I take a right to go use the bathrooms in the outermost wing of the headquarters building. This event is being held outside where my mom and dad’s all work, running the government and all that, and I’ve been here so many times I could probably navigate it with my eyes closed and my arms done up in bondage.

But I have to stop my guards. “Yeah, you are not following me in there; in fact, go stand at the end of the ramp. It’s way too early in this thing for you to hear me pee.”

As the door shuts, it’s a bit of a relief to be completely alone for a moment. Most of the guests will be using the bathroom on the other side of the fields that are easier to access. But I knew these ones would be empty, and I felt like I could use just a moment of quiet. Plus, this place has better soap. It smells like gummy bears and who doesn’t want their hands to

smell like gummy bears when they go to meet their potential future headmaster?

When my hands are dry again, I take a minute to lean on the sink and stare at my reflection. I undo my messy braid and fluff up my hair, reapply my lipstick, and try to fake my confidence before walking out the door. I kind of feel like a bad ass trailing behind my two hot security guards, even if they don't necessarily look like security right now. They're pretty cute in their preppy little clothes, so I'm glad I didn't tell them I wasn't going to adhere to the pastel theme myself.

I'm just staring at the twins' behinds as they walk slightly in front of me through the tents, when somebody grabs me and yanks me inside one of them. Their hand covers my mouth while their solid body is plastered to my back, rolling, and pulling me a few tents over until we're so turned around that I have no idea which direction we just went to.

We end up in a tent that seems to be used mostly for storage, since these tents stay up a lot of the year for all the different events held here. There're boxes of napkins and who knows what else along with some chairs, but I find myself underneath a folding table covered in a black tablecloth, one edge of it tucked up onto the top of the table so that just a sliver of light peaks through.

My heart is beating out of my chest as this guy sits there staring down at me, completely on top of me and pinning me down. I can't figure out how to make any sort of response to my current predicament happen. Even when his hand disappears from muffling my mouth, I can't scream or do anything that might remedy the situation, because he's so beautiful that I think he actually puts a spell on me. I feel very stupid. And reckless. Ten out of ten would be the one that gets killed if we were in a horror movie.

"Sorry for the theatrics, Princess," he purrs.

"You were watching me earlier; I saw you." Hey, look at that, I figured out how to use words again.

He nods, his golden eyes only inches away from my face. "We seem to find ourselves in a bit of a pickle, and other than

grabbing you in this manner, I don't know how else to get out of it."

"You could have not grabbed me and hid me away for starters. That would have prevented the pickling completely."

His lips, the soft pink that they are, force my eyes to stare at them, nearly at gunpoint as they spread a little bit in mirth at my stupid response.

"If my pickle was gherkin-sized, then not grabbing you certainly would have solved this problem. But unfortunately, this particular pickle is like one of those big ones you get in warehouse sized jars? You know—"

"Wait, I'm confused. Did you just say your dick is the size of a gherkin? Or are we talking about something else now? Not that I'm judging, because it's definitely how you use it, but..."

His eyes widen like I just completely said something inappropriate; but all I did was mention the size of his dick.

"Let me start over, Princess." He clears his throat and shifts his hips away from me, like he's scared for me to feel what's there. Or what's not there. I repeat, I'm not here to judge. "My name is Wilder; my dad is the pride male of the lion clan."

I take in his appearance, finding his features resemble the creature he's claiming to be. His skin is a deep golden brown, chocolate colored hair falls in waves past his shoulders, and then there's the golden eyes that seem to twitch around and take in every detail. "I've always wondered," I ask, "do all cat shifters play with laser pointers, or just some? My brother and I have this bet going."

"This is serious, Princess."

"I'm sorry. Apparently I'm chatting because I'm nervous. Why aren't I angry right now? Did you do something to me?"

"Wow, you are very easily distracted, aren't you? Look. I heard a rumor that you're able to shift into a lioness. And if I've heard that rumor, there's a good chance my father's heard the rumor. Lucky for you, I seem to have found you first."

"I can neither confirm nor deny that."

“Being who you are, I have no doubts that you know how hard up the lion shifters are for females right now.”

“And now you’re talking about being hard. Honestly Wilder, if you want to talk about dick, you should have just started with that. I am a bodysmith; do you have an embarrassing sex question you need me to answer?”

“Oh my gods, it’s like I’m talking to a child. Okay, so you know there’re hardly any female lion shifters; and as lion shifters... our beasts are very picky. They will not mate with anything other than another lion. Tends to make us males that aren’t attracted to other males a bit crazy.”

“You don’t say,” I tell him completely deadpan.

“Ever since my mother passed away years ago, my father has been trying to get his hands on a new lioness. It hasn’t been easy.”

I gasp. “Are you trying to pimp me out to your father?”

“No. I was trying to warn you about him.”

“Thanks? Can I go now?”

“You don’t understand, Princess. He won’t stop until he gets you. You may have security, but if I was able to get to you, he will be able to, also.”

“So this is an altruistic kidnapping then... what do you suggest?”

“Aha. So you are a lion the shifter?”

“I didn’t...” I bite my tongue because what I just said pretty much confirms that I am. Damn it. It was the sneaky penis talk; get me to talk about one of my biggest interests, then slip in a concern that makes me reveal personal information. He’s good. “Fine. But I’m a polyshifter, actually. I can learn new forms, but it takes a lot of time, and it’s difficult to do. I only have two forms right now, but my main form is a lioness, yes.”

“I’ll bet you’re beautiful,” he whispers reverently.

“Yes, well, we can’t all be blessed in our human forms, apparently.” Does he know anything about women? Can he

not tell how he kind of just said I'd only be beautiful in my lion form? "Now can I get up? You removed me from my magical shields, and you're probably about five seconds away from making me start an orgy around us. Are you feeling an increased sexual appetite at the moment? Because I've got to tell you, being this close to me, you're at high risk."

"You're the one at risk, Princess. If you let me mark you, no other lion will be able to claim you. Once females are spoken for, other males respect that without question."

"Of course they do. Because women saying we're not interested is never good enough. We need the claiming of a male, is that it?"

"Lion shifters are a little bit wilder than some of the other shifters."

"Name pun, I like it."

He exhales, clearly exasperated with me. But come on; he's the one that kidnapped me. "Some lion shifters would respect you declining their advances, but not the pride male. He's going to take what he wants, and the only way to prevent that is for me to mark you before he can. Because if he gets ahold of you and marks you? I don't think you want to know what that's like. It literally killed my mother being mated to him."

Well that talk just killed my boner. "I can't let you mark me though, that's nuts. I don't even know you. I gotta go. I think I'll take my chances."

Wilder lets me crawl out from under the table, even lets me take a few steps, but I should have known to never turn my back on a cat, because he pounces at me and pins me down to the dirt floor, and his teeth are instantly in my neck, sinking into my skin. The pain is immediate, but it's almost like it has a calming effect at the same time, preventing me from fighting back at all. He licks at the wound with his spiky cat tongue until he's satisfied with the care, and then he pulls me to a stand and brushes me off. "Forgive me," he says. "If I felt I had any other option, I would have taken it. You won't even see the mark, only lions will know it's there, I promise. I just

wanted to protect you.” His voice is now a pained whisper as he disappears.

He slips out of the tent, leaving me standing there alone and completely confused. I lay my hand on the side of my neck, and while it’s still tender, there’s no blood or even any raised marks I can feel with my fingers. His tongue seems to have healed me completely. But my chest feels a bit hollow.

I need to find August and Jackson before they tell somebody important that I’m missing; that would be a mess. I pull my phone out of my bag and dial up August, and obviously he’s frantic.

“Where the hell are you?”

“I’m sending you a GPS pinpoint,” I say before hanging up. I make sure he has my location before sitting on the table, trying to make sense of what just happened. I don’t feel any different, and I thought that biting like that makes you somebody’s mate, but I guess I don’t actually know much about lion shifter culture. Maybe it’s possible to be marked and not mated?

Do I even tell the guys what happened? There’s no proof on my neck, but I take a photo of myself just to be sure. Even with the flash on, my skin looks unmarred. If I tell them I was basically attacked by a lion shifter, it literally could start a war.

It’s not long before I hear August and Jackson running around frantically, calling for me, so I find my way out of the tent and flag them down.

They grab me and check me over, looking terrified. It would suck for them to lose a charge two weeks after a new assignment. Seeing that I’m okay though, Jackson seems to get a little irritated. “What, did you just wander off? Was there somebody in the tent with you? Why is your dress so dirty?”

I look down at my dress and brush off what bits of dirt that I can. Then I pull my hair over my neck just in case, because it’s throbbing and that makes me too aware of it. I feel like I need to protect it, but as upset as Jackson and August are, I can’t tell them what happened. They’re only visible to Wilder apparently, and I don’t even know if he’s the bad guy or not.

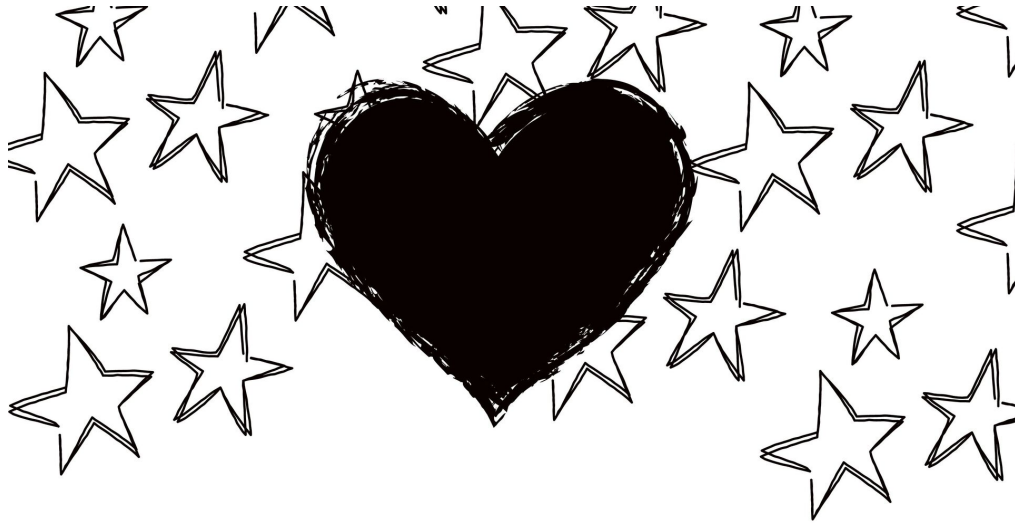
“No, I did not just wander off. Someone grabbed me and pulled me in there to give me a very aggressive hello. I’m fine.”

“Did they touch you? Are you hurt?” They start scanning me head to toe again, with slower eyes this time, as I shake my head and try and orient myself to the main tent from here.

Not feeling chatty, I follow the sound of the fountain and go from there, my arms folded around my middle.

“That was our fault,” August says. “We thought you’d be safe enough here with all these people, felt like it was alright for you to walk at your own pace. We won’t make that mistake again; you’ll stand in front of us where we can see you. Are you sure you’re okay? He didn’t hurt you at all?”

“At the moment, I think I’m okay, but maybe we’ll talk about it more later. Let’s just get this little meeting over with so I can go home.”



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Jackson

Delaney is acting a little bit off after the encounter she just had, and I'm dying to pull her aside and demand to know all the answers; the problem is, I haven't really earned the right to do that yet. I'm here to guard her, and maybe part of that is knowing what's going on with her so I can keep her safe, but if she doesn't want to talk about what happened, there's not much I can do.

She stumbles her way back to the main tent, and I can tell that her mother is picking up something off of her too, because the queen's eyebrows raise at Delaney's approach and she does a little sniff in the air like she smells something odd.

Delaney's all wound up in herself, her mind clearly elsewhere, and all I want to do is just fold her up into my arms and tell her it's okay if she's not okay, because whatever happened clearly shook her up a bit. I want to be able to hold her and comfort her, and I don't know how long I'll be able to last not doing that. My arms are actually aching not being able to touch her.

I can tell my brother is as surprised as I am when we meet the headmaster of Hemlock Academy, because he's much younger than I thought he'd be. Delaney's grandpa was headmaster there for years, but after he retired, they had a few headmasters that only gave the job a few years before leaving. Now this guy. I try to read him for any sign that he sees Delaney as anything other than a student, but he's nothing but polite. Maybe a bit too polite.

The only time I'm too polite is when I'm trying not to reveal something, and I have no idea what's wrong with me, worrying about this. I know she's a conduit, that she's going to be dating lots of men and mating lots of men, and apparently that might be hard for me.

The queen motions to me and August to talk to her off to the side, but she makes sure to not pull us too far so our shields will still work for Delaney's magic. That would be a hell of a first impression on that guy, huh?

"What's going on with her?" the queen asks. I'm flustered, and I'm embarrassed that somebody got the drop on us.

"We were just walking over here a bit ago and somebody grabbed at her and pulled her into a tent. We found her right away, but she's a little shaken up from it, I think. She promised us she wasn't hurt or anything, that he just wanted to, in her words, 'say an aggressive hello', but she hasn't said anything else. We came straight here."

"You don't know who it was? Or what he looked like?"

I swallow probably a little bit too loudly. "No, your majesty. We didn't see him; he was too quick."

"And how exactly is that supposed to make me feel when I've put you in charge of my daughter's safety? How can we trust you to keep her safe, if at the first big event you bring her to, she's grabbed in the middle of the day? What if her assailant had meant harm to her?"

"We just felt too comfortable at this event, your majesty," my brother says. "She was walking right behind us, but we should

have known better, and she'll always be in front of us from now on."

"Yes, you should have known better. You're not accustomed to guarding somebody this high profile, and I understand that, but shield or not, you two make another misstep with my daughter's safety, there won't be a third chance. We clear?"

We nod and I stare over at Delaney, who's still chatting with the headmaster, but is also watching us with a frown on her face. I watch as he says something that makes her laugh a little, then his face warms up in a quick smile before going back to his placid sense of politeness. Then Delaney excuses herself and walks over to us.

"Mom, it wasn't their fault, OK?"

"Yes it was. They're your security. It's their job to keep you safe. They failed."

"They didn't fail, and we're all going to be more cautious from now on. If anything had happened, you know I can take care of myself. Dads have taught me everything I need to know to stay safe. And I'm fine, really."

Queen Gabriella pulls her daughter into her arms, still smelling her like she's a damn dog. "You're sure you're OK? You smell... different."

"Fine. Promise," Delaney says with a fake smile, but she steps away from her mom and holds herself again like she's cold even though it's a balmy seventy-five degrees out. "Is it okay if I go though? The noise is getting a bit overwhelming for me. I would really love to just go home and get some sweats on."

"Of course. Thank you for coming; you might want to talk to Adler before you go though, you know he'll be upset if he hears it from somebody other than you what happened."

"Do you know where he's at?"

She points off to the right as somebody comes to speak with the queen, and Delaney kisses her mom on the cheek before following her directions.

We find Adler sitting in the food tent with his girlfriend on his lap, chatting to somebody else. Delaney walks up behind the both of them and hugs them together, putting her head between theirs. I can't hear anything she says to them, but they both whip around to stare at her with concern, so I assume she tells them about getting grabbed. Then she shakes her head and reassures them with a pat on the shoulder and another hug, and after a kiss to their cheeks, she's pulling away and telling them goodbye.

We've already told our driver we were ready to go, so the car is ready when we get to the pick-up location. Delaney is quiet all the way home, staring out the window, and I'm not sure what she wants us to do now, so we're just following along behind her.

We walk through the front doors of her house, and she winds her hand with mine and another with my brother's, holding both of our arms in front of her in a vice grip. Our kiss earlier, though brief, has been on replay in my mind, and being alone with her in this giant house makes me a bit nervous, but in a good way.

She directs us up the stairs and down hallways, using a thumbprint scanner to access her bedroom. Her room is more like a small apartment, with a sitting room and a kitchenette separate from the bedroom.

She kicks off her heels the second we're through the door, and August and I stand there kind of awkwardly as she proceeds to walk towards the bedroom and what looks like a massive walk-in closet.

"Can I get some help in here?" she calls out after a minute. My brother and I look at each other, then immediately instigate a shoving match, but I'm the victor, getting to the doorway of her closet before him. "I think my zipper's stuck," she informs us, spinning around with her hair pulled out of the way.

"Can't have that, can we?" I let my fingers trail down her upper back before attempting to fix the zipper, tugging on the delicate piece of fabric that's gotten in the way of the teeth

before lowering the zipper all the way down. My fingers linger on her low back, grazing the skin through the opening in her dress, relishing her nearness. “Anything else, Princess?” I ask in a low voice.

She pushes the straps of her dress over her shoulders and lets the entire thing fall to her waist, and my jaw nearly drops to the floor. She stands there in a red satin strapless bra, all her gorgeous skin on display, then shimmies the dress over her hips before putting it in a laundry chute.

“Do you guys want to change? I have a drawer of sweats and T-shirts in here for you.”

Staring at her body on display, I ask, “You do? Why?”

She shrugs. “Figured it might come in handy if we’re spending so much time together. I know you guys aren’t required to stay the night, but I figured it wouldn’t hurt to have some stuff for you here, just in case.”

She opens a drawer full of new-looking men’s sweats and T-shirts, socks, boxers, everything. “Help yourself,” she says. “I’m going to take a quick rinse off shower. Walking around in sandals outside always makes my legs and feet feel gross after. I want to be clean before I get comfy.”

She grabs the clothes she wants and struts out of the closet, heading towards the shower. She leaves the door wide open, almost as if in invitation. She doesn’t acknowledge that she’s walking around in front of me and my brother semi naked, but my brother’s eyes nearly bug out of his head when she walks by him.

She starts humming to herself as she gets the shower going, apparently just very comfortable with her body, because she shucks everything else off before grabbing a hair tie and throwing her hair up in a messy bun. The dress was beautiful, but with nothing on, she’s a damn masterpiece.

I’ve never in my life seen a woman with curves like her; thick, solid ones made for hands to grab onto for leverage. She’s soft in all the right places, round in even better ones, and it’s going

to be damn hard to keep to myself while she washes off the grime from the event.

“Do we....” My brother trails off.

“Yeah, I don’t know. I mean...she left the door open. That’s kind of an invitation, right?”

August peeks his head around the doorway, hissing a breath at whatever he sees. “Definitely naked. Definitely in the shower.”

“Fuck. Where’s the rule book for situations like this? When the girl you’re kind of dating, but not quite, brings you into her bedroom and steps into the shower, leaving the door open? Maybe we should just get dressed...”

“Yeah. Let’s do that,” August says. It feels a bit awkward to get naked in Delaney’s bedroom, but the clothes are comfy enough to make the awkward feeling worth it. I feel like stomping on the stupid gingham shirt suddenly, maybe trashing the khakis, but I fold them instead and congratulate myself on making a very adult decision.

Delaney comes back into the room, wearing a big t-shirt that barely covers her ass. Guess we don’t have to make a decision about what to do after all.

“What do you need, Delaney? We don’t want to step over any lines here, but we’re getting some signals...” I trail off.

“Do you guys have anywhere to be? What am I saying, of course you do. You’re off the clock. You can go home if you want.”

She tries to turn away, but I grab her arm and pull her back. “I asked, what do you need?”

“I...would it be too much to ask you to stay with me for a bit? Or maybe longer?”

“Where do you want us?” Jackson asks immediately with the program.

“I don’t know. I feel like going to bed, but it’s only late afternoon, isn’t it? Is there anything you guys want to do? I just want to like, chill.”

“Movie?” I suggest.

We follow her over to her bed, and she makes no fuss about pulling back the covers and inviting us in with her. Then with the press of a button, a big screen pops up from the foot of the bed, and she’s ready to pick something. Or rather, have us pick something, because she tosses the remote to me.

“Here. Pick whatever you want so I can zone out and not over-analyze everything that happened earlier.”

I throw on the first movie that pops up, then pull her into my arms like I’ve been dying to all night. “You ready to talk about what happened?”

“I’m scared that if I do, it might cause an incident; if I tell you, it has to be as a friend that needs you to help me make sense of it, not as someone that needs you to report it to my parents because they sign your checks.”

“I…” my brother starts, clearly conflicted.

“Okay, I’ll keep it vague. I won’t give you details, I guess, until you’re ready for this to be more about us and not about the job; basically…he told me…hmm.” She leaves the sentence hanging, unable to give us details…without the details. Or something.

“Okay, let’s just get this sorted. We’re your guards, but I kind of want to just kiss you. Does that clear things up?” I ask, more than a little confused myself.

“Not at all,” she says before she grabs my face and kisses me.

It’s heat, and it’s completely encompassing, and unlike anything I have ever felt. The tingle is back, making me breathless and maybe a little concerned.

“Okay, can we talk about what that is?” Delaney asks as she pulls away, gasping.

“It’s there, it feels good, and I think I want you,” I tell her.

“What are my limits?”

“Fuck the limits.” She straddles me, then leans over to kiss August, making me groan when I let my hands wander to her

hips, and under her t-shirt. Maybe she's using us as a coping mechanism, but I'm here for it.

"I don't want to set any expectations here; I just want to enjoy being with someone that likes being around me; is that okay?" She's panting as she tries to talk, about as gone as we are.

"Only if you understand that this isn't going to be too casual for us," I clarify. Because I think I might want it all with her.

"Cool, now kiss me," she demands, done talking, apparently.

She grabs my hand and forces it under her shirt, showing me exactly what she wants from me. Her skin feels insane, and something I'm apparently done with, is her wearing this shirt.

I pull it over her head, forcing her mouth away from my brother as I trust the 'fuck the limits' edict. Fuck. I don't think I've ever seen breasts this... Yep, I need to lick them.

"Delaney..." I say in warning, trying to figure out which one to start with.

"Just pick one," she says, understanding my plight.

My mouth opens automatically when a nipple gets shoved towards it, and her skin tastes like cherries. Fuck yeah.

"You've been driving me crazy for the last two weeks, Delaney." I take in the glazed look on my brother's face as I admit this, feeling like this is all a bit surreal.

"Then do something about it." She grabs my dick through my pants, and it feels for a moment like I experience a glimpse of the lust that she pumps out for everyone else. I concentrate on lowering my shield and fall flat on my back, curious to know what we're blocking for her.

Yeah, that might have been a mistake.

"Fuck. That's potent. I can see why everyone just jumps right into orgies around you."

"What did you do? You took away your shield?" August asks, intrigued.

Then he gasps, so I assume he does the same.

It's like...I'm on drugs. All I can think about is getting my dick into this woman in front of me and getting that nipple back on my tongue.

I pull her on top of me and latch on, pulling off the tiny panties that she just put on, exploring her bare skin. She's completely flush on top of me, and I still have way too many clothes on. I shove my sweats down, work my t-shirt up, and with a bit of finagling, I find myself as bare as she is.

Her legs straddle my hips, hot center rubbing all up and down me, getting me all wet. "Need a condom, sweetness," I rasp out, bracing myself for the loss of warmth.

"Drawer. Left."

I reach blindly without losing her breast from my mouth, vaguely aware of my brother pulling his clothes off behind her.

I grab two, tossing one to him, and do my best to open up the wrapper, somehow finding the dexterity to get it on my dick. The second I'm wrapped, I angle myself toward Delaney, who's already raising up on her knees so she can sink down onto me.

The way she feels as I disappear into her body is like, whole other level. No words do it justice.

"Fuck, you're so fucking big. Please tell me you guys are identical everywhere because I can get down with two of these."

I watch her raise herself up and sink down again, over and over again, using my body to make herself feel good. Egotistically, I tuck my hands behind my head to better enjoy the show, my body rocking from the rhythm she's setting. I'm not emasculated at all to let her take the reins, to let her absolutely just fucking wreck me.

"Fuck...you're doing something extra, aren't you? Can't say I've ever been with a bodysmith before..." I trail off. Sleeping with a bodysmith is on some people's bucket list because of all the crazy shit their bodies can do; beings that survive on sex energy and are other worldly appealing? I'm not one to chase after that, and honestly it's the heart of this woman I'm more

interested in, but when I allow myself to really feel what's happening right now, I'm seconds from coming.

Delaney smirks down at me, slowing down her hips as her breasts bounce and her hands brace themselves on my chest. She leans down and licks a stripe up my neck, then teasingly bites into the flesh there, just hard enough to feel the sharp points of her teeth. "We've got muscles in places most people don't." To illustrate, she squeezes me internally in a way that feels like there's a fucking fist wrapped around me, jacking me off. I nearly bite through my lip in an effort to prevent myself from ending this now, so I do the only thing I can to prolong this.

"Tapping you in brother," I tell August. "She's trying to get me to come before she does. We can't have that, can we?"

August slides in behind her, pulling her against his chest as he wraps his arms around her and tries to palm her breasts. They're bigger than his palms so he doesn't succeed too well, but the way they look as he squeezes at them is going to be a fucking tattoo on my brain, especially when she tilts her head to the side and releases a moan.

I watch his fingers skate down her soft stomach, parting her so he can slide a finger in and play with her clit. "You want to see if our cocks feel the same?"

"Y-yes. Please."

"So fucking polite," my brother chuckles as he pushes her forward a bit roughly. She gasps as her forehead lands right next to my head on the pillow, and she lifts her hips up enough for me to slip out of her, then her hips fall right back down, pinning me against my own stomach. The friction is nearly as torturous as her heat, so I use her hips as a handhold to try and ground myself. I can't thrust, because if I do, it's game over.

"Love the way you tackle all your problems sweetheart, but in here, when it's us, I think its best if you let us tackle you. I want you to stay bent over like the good fucking girl you are and let me fuck you while we're on top of my brother. We're going to drive him absolutely feral, and you're going to show

me all those tricks you just pulled on him so I can ruin you for any other partners.”

She moans deep and slow at his filthy mouth, her hands attaching themselves to my head to bury in my hair. She kisses me again, lips teasing and enticing me to play with them, so I test the waters by wrapping a hand around her throat, squeezing gently as I take her mouth for myself. I slide my tongue in deep so she has to widen her mouth, our teeth clacking as her and my brother bounce on top of me.

“Hold on tight, princess.” Fuck. I know that warning is for both of us, because one thing my brother does really fucking well is ride hard and fast like it’s his goddess given right. He wasn’t lying when he said he was going to try and ruin her, because there’s an intensity to August once he commits that I can never quite match.

“Please, August, show me how good it can be. Never felt like this before.”

I want to stop everyone and dissect that; is she saying she’s never felt like this before for someone, or is she saying that sex has never felt like this before? Because there’s a big difference.

August laughs. “You just wait. You ever taken two men together, sweetness?”

“No, but you did say you wanted to ruin me,” she immediately quips back.

“You come for us, and we’ll give you everything you’ve ever wanted.”

“Don’t make promises like that; you’ll ruin everything, and not in a fun way. Please, just make me feel good. Even if this is all I get, I need it to matter.”

August stares down at me, and a shiver runs down my spine at the determined look to his eyes. It might have been me trying to talk him into shooting our shot with Delaney originally, but she’s showing her belly, being vulnerable and making him want to fix all the things in her life that are lacking. She better

be fucking careful or she's going to get herself a mate much faster than I think she was planning on.

"Fuck, baby. This fucking body on top of me, I never want to be anywhere else." The truth rings like a toll in my head, narrowing my focus.

August raises up a bit higher on his knees, leaning back slightly to watch himself sink into her body, then he wraps his fingers more securely around her hips and starts his rhythm. The first ones have her whimpering with each thrust, just hard enough to jar her. Slowly, he removes himself, and even though it's fucking sick because he's my brother, his balls drag against mine while he does this, and it makes me need to push up into Delaney just a bit because everything feels too good right now. I'm pretty sure I'm straight up pressing into her clit, and her knees tense on either side of me while my brother starts going a little faster. Judging by the way Delaney is escalating her vocals, it sounds like she's really fucking close.

Fuck, I can't wait for her to fall apart while she's lying on top of me and my brother is plowing into her from behind. He must have a hell of a view.

"That's it Princess, let us take you there. Stop thinking; just be here with us, let us make you feel good."

She nods against me, and relaxes a tiny bit, right before my brother just fucking goes for it, pushing Delaney so hard onto my dick that there's no way I can keep my shit together.

"Right there, please...yes! Oh fuck, I'm going to come. I'm going to fucking come," she whimpers, wrapping her arms around my neck to hold on.

As she starts screaming into my skin, I let go, filling the condom with the most intense orgasm I've felt without actually being inside someone. It pulses on and on until I'm sure I must be leaking out of the condom, then my brother eases out of her and guides her down gently, somehow still not done himself.

"You doing okay, Delaney?" August leans over her, sweeter now, brushing her hair away to make sure he didn't hurt her in

any way.

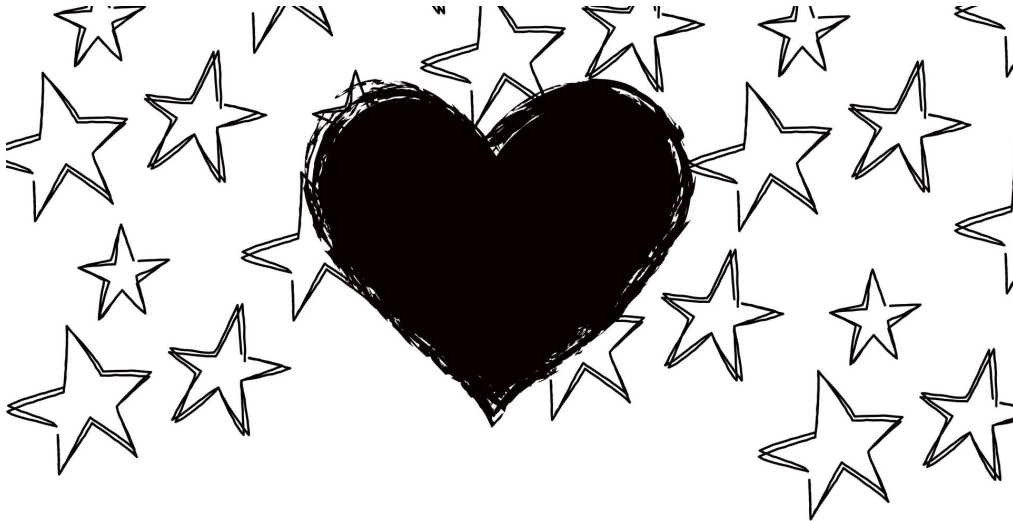
“So...fucking good.” She turns to look at him. “Did you...”

August shakes his head. “I’m not done with you yet. Just give my brother a second to get himself there again and we’ll stretch you out.”

“You guys do this a lot, don’t you? Be with someone... together?”

I feel the need to reassure her that it’s not always this intense, because this first encounter is important. It’s going to set the tone for our relationship going forward, going to give her expectations and understand how we operate.

“We don’t really like to fuck around, Delaney. We just meant it when we said we don’t want anything to come between us. We date together because it’s better for us, but whatever is happening here? It’s never been like this. You need to feel that truth deep down, because it’s not going to change, no matter how many times you try to belittle what we’re building.”



CHAPTER TWELVE

Delaney's Journal

Alright. I am a self-proclaimed ho bag. Think what you want, you side eyeing piece of judgement, but I slept with my guards.

It was in no way pre-meditated, but holy shit am I happy with my decision. Let me give you a bit of advice, journal. If a pair of twins ever approaches you and tells you that they want to share you between them, you say yes. You don't think, you just accept.

I felt very run down after the whole debacle with getting bitten by a lion shifter, something I'm still concerned with, but like in a 'it's on the back burner' kind of way, and I felt withdrawn, but that damn current between me and the guys is getting harder by the day to ignore. I'm terrified to admit out loud what I'm thinking it is, so maybe I can admit it here; because after what went down yesterday, and what I learned afterwards... well. I think admitting this might be the first step to acceptance.

I've scoured all the conduit posts I could find, trying to find any sort of similar experiences, and everything I read said the same thing; a sort of pulse when you get into contact with someone you're attracted to almost always means they're meant to be your mates. You won't always feel that pulse with someone meant to be yours, but if you do feel it, it's irrefutable evidence that they're something special for you.

Holy fuck, I just wrote that.

Short of tearing this page out, I can't take that back; it's out there in the world, and now I'll have to look at those words or think about them every time I look at my journal.

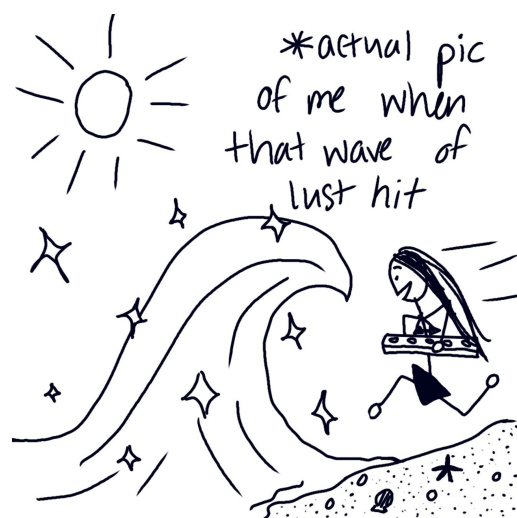
I think...August and Jackson are meant to be my mates.

They say things happen when you least expect them to. Can confirm. It's exciting, but it's also terrifying, because the potential between me and them is daunting.

They said they want me, they told me all kinds of big things relating to how they felt about me, but nothing really hit hard until they left my house after double stuffing my cunt with their twin cocks, and I had the revelation to end all revelations.

And no, it has nothing to do with the elasticity of my vaginal tissues, or how thirsty I be for a repeat of that particular endeavor now.

I was drifting off to sleep, my body satisfied in more ways than one, when a niggling thought hit me; after they



both came, a wave of the sparkliest, most delicious lust hit me, and it absolutely overwhelmed me. Combined with my own release, it was almost too much for me to process, but it reminded me of the way I felt after that weird afternoon with Adam.

I felt his lust hit me and then I felt sleepy and satisfied in a whole new kind of way, and for once in my life, last night, I felt completely in control of my magic.

I was shaking when I told them goodbye, because I was starting to suspect something after that same sort of satisfied sleepiness hit me. It's similar to how you feel after a good meal. My thoughts spiraled and spiraled until I could only come to one conclusion; my magic can only feed off lust from people that have some sort of strong romantic affection for me.

A lightbulb went off in my head, then I had dreams of myself in a hazy, cloudy place where a snarky bitch in a ball gown patted me on the head patronizingly and told me it took me long enough to figure out my magic. I knew it was the goddess; who else would wear a ballgown covered in dick-shaped tassels?

Plus, there's the fact that she told me she was the goddess. Cleared up any lingering doubt. Also, she told me that she assumed I'd fall in love before now. She didn't mean for me to have to starve myself magically, but Adam and I are a bit more stubborn than she accounted for, and she blamed him for all my troubles. That might actually be a really good call.

Anyway, I have answers.

All these years, I needed someone to love me or nearly love me romantically in order to feed off their lust.

If you're applauding me right now, just know that I feel like a great injustice was done to me; what kind of shit is that?

Do you know how this complicates things?

I can't tell the twins that I think they're starting to develop love-like feelings for me, and I sure as fuck can't tell Adam that I know he has them as well, but I think maybe I see a light at the end of the tunnel.

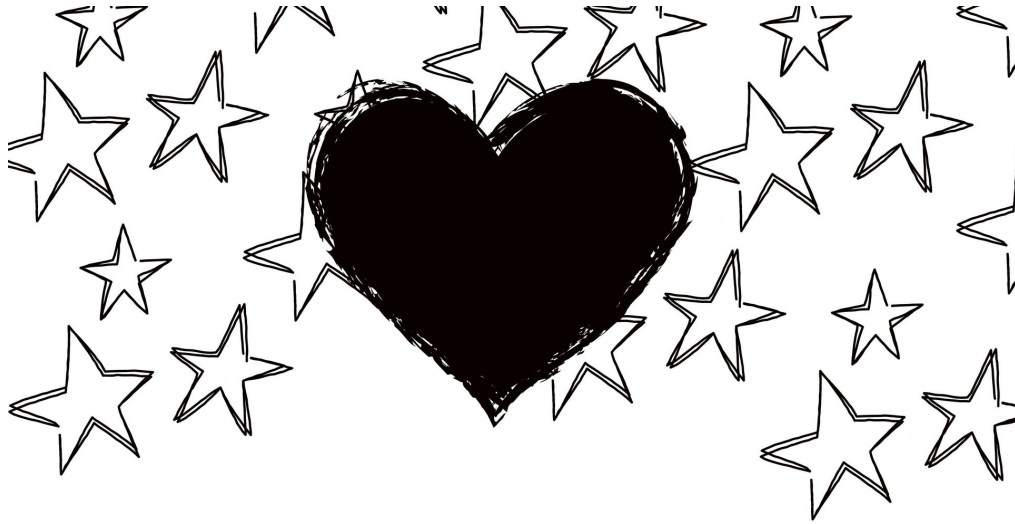
The more comfortable I get with August and Jackson shielding my magic, the more excited I am to enroll in school. I've always wanted to go to Hemlock and hang out with other conduits, to see where my mom met most of my dads, and to get the whole experience of learning more about everything that makes our world magical.

Now I just need to see if the twins are up for going with me, because if they aren't? I'll have to rely on some other way to make it happen; maybe....

If Adam loves me, maybe...maybe he can keep me fed. I went out to get coffee today on my own, because I needed to see what happened. My magic felt full for the first time ever, and I was confident in leaving the house unaccompanied.

Nothing even slightly orgy-related happened. I was able to tap into the part of me that usually feels out of control, and I was able to feel how tightly packaged it was, and I just knew there were zero leaks on the horizon.

I don't know how long this feeling is going to last, so we're going to have to do some experimenting. Sex experimenting. Sexperimenting?



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Adam

“Hold on Cory, Delaney’s calling.”

I settle onto my bed and hit accept while Cory steps back inside my dorm and plops into my computer chair, spinning around. They look so fucking cute sitting there in their crop top, their hair down...focus Adam.

Delaney’s face takes up my screen and I feel the smile on my face widen. “There she is. What’s up?”

Things have been a bit awkward since I left her place after the gala, and I’ve definitely been avoiding her, because I didn’t want to talk about what happened; but she’s still my best friend. We just need to re-affirm that.

“Hey Adam! I have some news.”

Delaney’s cheeks are flushed and I know she’s excited about something, and I really hope she’s about to tell me she’s moving to campus and enrolling.

“I’m sorry I’ve been a bit out of touch lately; a lot has been happening over here. I was hoping you’d make it back some

weekend so I could tell you everything in person, but I can't wait any longer."

Well shit, now I feel guilty. "I meant to make it back, but school is just a bit intense right now, plus things have been happening here, too," I tell her, making eye contact with Cory.

They smile back at me, the way they have been for the past two weeks since I ran from Delaney. I meant to find a distraction so I didn't give into the confusion surrounding Delaney, not expecting to find Cory.

They were delivering a message to one of my classes and got their shirt snagged on the handle as the door closed behind them, tearing it. They were so embarrassed, face turning red, and without thinking, I rose and gave up my hoodie because I couldn't stand to see them looking so embarrassed.

They were waiting for me after class and we had lunch together, and while we're still mostly just friends, we've been eating lunch together for two weeks and I finally worked up the courage to kiss them last night, and now...I can't stop smiling.

"I get that. You know I understand how busy school keeps you. But I'm hoping that things are going to change; I've just finished submitting all my paperwork, and I'll be joining you next semester! It's too late to enroll for this semester since you're halfway through it already, but it's only a few months until then; I'm so excited!"

"Oh my gods, that's amazing! Do you have any idea how many times I've hoped you'd be able to say that? Delaney, you're seriously coming here? Like we always talked about? Where are you going to stay? Oh my gods, I can't wait. This is going to be epic."

I make eye contact with Cory again so they know I didn't forget they were waiting for me to eat dinner with them, but they're just giving me a thumbs up, happy for me. I've talked to them more than a few times about how much I hoped my best friend could come here, and while I haven't told Delaney about Cory yet, I know she's going to love them. I know they're both going to get along well.

“So that means the guards are coming with you? It’s working out well?”

Delaney giggles, making me tilt my head to the side. “What?” Have I ever heard her giggle like that before?

“Well, that’s part of the news,” she tells me. “I’m kind of... with them. Like, we’re dating. And before you ask, parents are cool with it. They know we’re together, and it’s all good. Yes. They’re down for coming to school with me to continue guarding me, they’re just going to room with me since I’ll be getting a connector suite; there’s room for all of us since I don’t have any mates yet.”

A ripping sound has me looking down to see I’ve pried a hole in my blanket, straight through the seams. “Oh yeah? That’s great, Del.”

“Yeah. I just...things are really good with them. They’re intense, but I always know exactly where I stand with them. I think...they might be around for a long time, Adam. You should get to know them better.”

This last part she says quietly, and I’m trying to read between the lines. What does she mean by that? And why the hell does it turn my stomach sour? My last interaction with the guards didn’t go so well, but it was a stressful night; there was a lot happening, so maybe I wasn’t fair to them. “It’s a date. I have someone you should meet, too.”

Cory is batting their eyes at me now because they know I’m a little protective of Delaney— I only want the best for her, so if I want to introduce Cory to her, then that means things between us are a bit more serious.

“I just can’t believe it’s actually happening,” she admits as she falls back onto her bed.

Her hair fans all around her and I get an image in my head of how gorgeous she looked at that ball, and for a moment I’m terrified that when she does get here, I’m going to be fighting for her attention. I just know that everybody’s going to want to get close to her, and I’ve never actually had to share her before.

“Do you know what room you’re going to be in?”

“No. I met the headmaster though. Now that all my paperwork has been submitted, I think I’m supposed to hear kind of soon about room details and start building my schedule.”

“Well I’m sure they’re going to give you the best of everything since you’re the princess,” I snark.

She leans in close like she has a secret. “Do you think everyone’s going to know who I am? I don’t want it to be like that. I just want to go to school, and meet your friends, and I don’t know, make some of my own, I guess.”

“You’re going to be great,” I tell her. “You know I’ll be here for you, and Adler works here too, so you can always hang out with him while he’s working and you don’t have class. You’re not going to be alone.”

She bites her lip. “Yeah, that’s true.” A door opens near her then, and I hear some low voices. Her attention switches from me to whoever’s there, and her face smiles in a way I’ve definitely never seen. It makes me go a little rigid, but I try and hide that, because I have no right to feel jealous over her. She’s my best friend, and that’s all she can ever be.

She squeals, and the phone goes flying onto the bed so that I’m staring at her ceiling instead of her, her laughter echoing through the room.

“Wait! Stop,” she wails amidst laughter. “I’m talking to Adam, hold on!”

Another face comes on the screen, the one I remember from the gala. “What’s up, dude?” he asks with a smirk. “You don’t mind if I take our girl, do you? She’s got a couple of dicks to sit on, so she’s about to be very busy.”

“Don’t talk about her like that,” I snarl.

He just laughs. “Oh, she loves my dirty mouth, don’t you baby?” He turns to presumably face her, sending a wink. I don’t know where she is in the room anymore, but she’s still laughing and squealing like she’s getting tickled or something. My jaw clenches, and I don’t want to be a part of this scene anymore. “Call me later, Del,” I say in a flat tone.

“Gonna be a bit, bro zone. We got plans with her.” And he hangs up.

I stare at the phone that’s now connected to nobody, waiting until it goes back to my home screen, which is a picture of me and Delaney from last summer when we camped out in her backyard. She was too scared to go too far from the house because of her finicky magic, but I’ve been determined to give her any experience I can, making sure she felt comfortable and safe.

We had a campfire and set up a tent and ate peanut butter and jelly out of a cooler, the whole shebang. We took this picture on our third day before we packed up, right as it had started to rain. There was mud everywhere. I slipped when I was trying to take down a tent stake, and then when she tried to help me, she slipped as well, and we ended up rolling in it and cracking up while we made mud angels for ten minutes. We had to spray each other down thoroughly with a hose before anyone would let us back inside.

“Are you okay?” Cory asks me.

I snap my attention to them, ashamed that they have just been sitting here quietly. “Yeah,” I say, thinking about it, but then I feel like I need to amend that. “Actually, I’m not sure. Don’t get me wrong, I’m thrilled that things are finally happening for her, she has struggled so long... but I’ve never had to share her before. It’s always felt like we had this tight knit friendship, that anything could happen to us and we’d be fine, but now it feels like things are changing, and I don’t like it.” I look back down to my phone and put it to sleep so I’m staring at a dark screen that slightly reflects my own face in it.

“Well, I don’t know her obviously, only what you’ve told me in the past few weeks, but if she’s important to you, then you should support her. She’s happy, from the sounds of it. Is that what’s bothering you? Or is it bothering you that it’s not you making her laugh like she was?”

“Look, I really like you, but I’m not about to get involved with somebody whose heart lingers elsewhere. I deserve better than that, and I’m kind of getting that you have feelings for

Delaney. I'm sorry if that's overstepping, but I have to look out for myself here. You and I have been getting along really well, but I can't compete with the bond you two have."

I feel like a piece of shit. I toss the phone next to me and open my arms, inviting Cory to come sit with me. They study me for a moment before getting up carefully. Once they're right in front of me, I give a light tug to their hands, making them fall into my lap. They smell clean and masculine, but in a subtle way, not like they bathed themselves in cheap body spray. "I want to be with you," I assure them. "I won't lie to you, I have thought on a few occasions that I had feelings for Delaney, but that's never going to pan out. Mainly because I know she doesn't see me that way, and because I don't want it to work out that way. She's a conduit, and a bodysmith, and the daughter of the queen. Do you have any idea how much attention she's always going to garner? Her life is always going to be the center of the media, and of society, and anywhere she goes. That's not the life I want. I enjoy being her friend because I love her as a person, but romantically? That's a bridge I will not cross.

"You though, you make me feel giddy, and I never thought I'd find somebody that got me so quickly. You make me feel like I'm somebody important and somebody special, and when you stand next to me in the halls, and you slide your hand into mine, I always have to bite a smile off my face.

"Any time you touch me when we're together in public, it makes me feel so damn smug. I think you're beautiful, and I think you're kind, and I adore how shy and flustered you get when you're around a lot of people. I love the little swath of skin above your waistline I want to lick that seems to be an accessory to your everyday wardrobe.

"I've never been with somebody like you before, but that doesn't scare me. I want you, Cory. Wherever this takes us, I'm all in. You are my person right now, and I don't know how long it will be until you get sick of me, but I'm going to hang on to you as long as I can."

They're biting their lip, looking like they're fighting off tears, but we can't have that. I pull them in and press my lips against

theirs, dipping my tongue inside their mouth as they gasp.

“I swear to the goddess, if you make me believe all that and then break my heart, I’ll never forgive you,” they mumble.

“If I break your heart I’ll never forgive me, either.”

They stare at me until a smile blooms on their face, their slighter frame tucking into me closer. “I wasn’t expecting you Adam, but since that first day, you’ve been my knight in shining armor. When people make fun of me for how I choose to dress, or because I’m different than them, you become my safe harbor. I know the second that I’m in your arms, I don’t have to worry about anybody else, because they fade away. I know it’s only been two weeks, but this feels so good to me. I want to see where this goes.”

“Well then, I’m going to call you mine, and you don’t have to worry about anybody else blipping on my radar. Delaney’s amazing, and she’s going to love you. I hope you guys will get along, because I need the two most important people in my life to enjoy being together. Do you think you could give her a chance?”

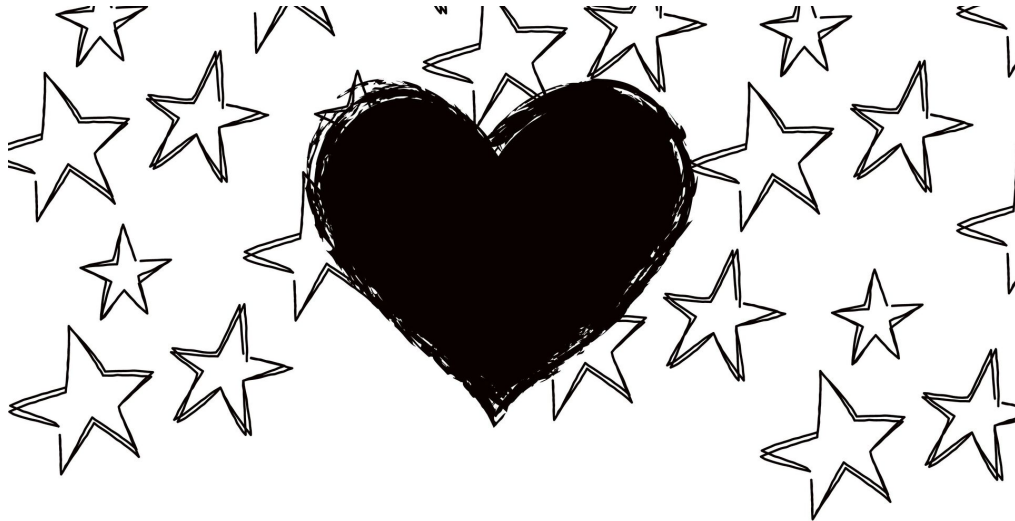
“Of course. Do you think you could stay honest with me, and not pretend like you’ve harbored no romantic feelings for her? If you feel it, then it’s a natural progression of what you are to each other; but promise me that if you feel like you need to act on it, I get the respect of a conversation first.”

I shake my head. “Baby, I’m a one-person man. She’s a bodysmith; pretty sure everybody’s half in love with her, but she’s going to come here, and she’s going to find her mates, and our lives are going to continue to be parallel and not intersect in that way. You’re what I want.”

“Okay then,” Cory says before pressing another kiss to my mouth. They throw a leg over my hip and straddle me, bringing our bodies flush against each other. Just having them there and smelling them, it’s making me hard. I can feel their dick hardening as well, and I’m dying to know what it would feel like sliding over my tongue.

“You want to go grab dinner and then make out with no shirts on?”

I groan. “Baby, you just read my mind.”



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

August

“Can I open my eyes yet?”

I nod to my brother, who pulls off her blindfold. She looks around our trashed apartment, completely confused. “Um... this is our date? The one you’ve been setting up all day?”

Jackson smirks. “Yes. You see, we’ve been listening. Press the play button, brother.”

With a tap of my finger, our sound system blares to life, rattling my chest. Jackson hits the lights and with just the corner lamps and the hall light on, it’s the perfect ambience for our house party.

She still looks hella confused and I like it. I get behind her and plant my hands on her hips, encouraging her to move to the beats.

“I don’t get it!” she yells over her shoulder. “Are more people coming? What is this? Do you guys not know how to clean?”

I push my hips against hers, grinding into her while the music says very nasty, very explicit things about what they’re going

to do to their woman. “We did this on purpose—just for you,” I shout back. “We’re actually sort of neat freaks!”

Jackson hands her a red plastic cup, which she sniffs questioningly. “What is this?”

“First rule of house parties is you don’t want to always know what’s in the drink. Jungle juice is rarely the same thing twice. It gets you drunk fast though. Cheers!”

He takes a big swig and then gets into the dance with us, sliding a thigh between Delaney’s legs. We told her to dress for a club, then brought her here. So, she looks fuck hot and we’re the only ones that get to see it. I think I might use this tactic again sometime.

She’s staring at the cup still, so I pause the music. The sudden quiet is far too loud, so I decide to just lay it all out there. I spin her around, wrapping my hands around her waist. “You told us last week that you’ve always wanted to go to a house party, remember? You’ve missed out on so much, Delaney. You’ve wanted to be a part of so much and experience things that everyone else your age takes for granted. This is such a small thing, but we wanted to give you one normal experience where you don’t need to worry about someone recognizing you, or worry about how you’re affecting everyone around you. So we planned a house party for us, where we can do all the stupid shit young people do, and no one can ruin it for you. Unless you, if you want to keep pretending like you don’t absolutely love this. Now drink that nasty shit in the cup and fucking grind on me baby.”

“Well shit. Okay, I can do that. Bottoms up!” She chugs the whole cup and my good brother is there to immediately replace it with another.

Then we get the music back on so we can really get into it. I don’t give a fuck about my neighbors tonight; I just want to show my girl a good time and get wild.

After the second cup is gone she starts to slow down a bit, wrapping her arm behind her to curl around Jackson’s neck. He’s holding her like he’s never going to let go, rocking to the

beat with his dick basically dry humping our girl. Fuck, they look good together.

I get hard as I watch them, sloppily kissing with their tongues only half in their mouths as only freshly buzzed people can do.

Well, my mouth can do something, too.

I sink down to my knees and push her skirt above her hips, dropping my head against her stomach on a groan when I see she's not wearing any fucking panties.

This so wasn't what tonight was supposed to be about, but there's no way in hell I'm letting this moment pass up without eating her right here and now. I throw her leg over my shoulder and watch up the line of her body that's been squeezed into a black dress with a crinkly texture like crepe paper. Now they're both looking down at me, so I give them a show.

Her breathing is quick to find a new pattern as I lick her, and I can feel the sway of my brother's hips still moving to the beats. Fresh cherries overwhelm my palette as I take my treat, bobbing my head to the music as I do.

It's like a painted portrait of the three of us, all intertwined and caught up in a moment of music and intimacy. I rest my right hand on my brother's ankle to complete the circle, stroking up his calf so he can share this moment with me more.

I don't pull my eyes away from them until she's arching her back and coming on my tongue. Then I stand and fix her pretty dress, purposely wiping my face off on hers so I can spin her around and let my brother lick it off. She doesn't complain that we're ruining her makeup, even though she has every right to, she just lives in the moment like always, making me fall harder.

We dance until we're all sweaty and in need of something that will actually hydrate us, so I lead them over to our breakfast bar and pop behind it like I'm a goddessdamned bartender and pull a few bottles of water out of the fridge to pass around.

"I can't believe you guys trashed your place for me. The first time you bring me here and it looks like this? It's kind of

funny, actually.” I smile, watching her throat work the water down to her belly. “How wild we going to get? You guys down for a little truth or dare?”

My brother and I automatically look at each other, wondering where the hell this is going.

“Good!” She claps, leaving her mostly finished water behind as she goes back to the living room that’s a whopping fifteen feet away in our apartment. She throws her arms up and starts dancing all by her bad self, having the time of her fucking life and satisfied with answering her question for us.

I immediately reach into my pocket to pull out my phone, and I take a video of her dancing like this for us. She’s tipsy but not drunk, free and uninhibited. Her wide hips are swaying and her hand is stroking the side of her own face in an enticing way as she spins and dips, winking at us and silently begging us to come touch her.

Jackson follows suit, leaving his water behind. He walks into the kitchen with me and grabs the tray of jello shots we made earlier, bringing them to the living room and leaving them on our side table for easier access. She squeals and downs one immediately, then pulls Jackson in by the collar of his shirt.

She whispers something that has his ears turning a bit red. But he nods and kisses her before she musses up his hair and undoes a few buttons, then sends him away with a smack to his ass.

He walks out the front door and is gone for almost ten minutes. I have no idea what’s happening. I try to ask Delaney but she just giggles and shakes her head, not in the mood to share what she dared him to do.

We aren’t super close with any of our neighbors because work keeps us pretty busy and we just don’t fucking care about getting close with any of them. I’m anxious about what he’s doing, but then he eventually comes back. He shuts the door and inhales roughly before throwing the deadbolt, then he stalks over to Delaney and reaches into his pocket.

“Five. Count them.”

He starts tucking condoms into her dress, right in the middle of her cleavage, all different brands that apparently he scavenged from our neighbors. That was his dare?

Fucking genius.

“My turn,” I announce as I tuck a shot into her cleavage, right along with the condoms. It’s positively lewd and it needs a picture. But before I do that, it needs a big fat hickey on her throat right behind it. I’m buzzed enough that this feels like a great idea.

I use teeth to ensure maximum marking, pulling her skin into my mouth with the same hunger I gave her gorgeous pink cunt earlier.

When I’m satisfied with the size and the obviousness of the hickey, I position my brother’s hands under her breasts and make him frame them and squish them together so I can get them in the shot as well. That picture is fucking going to life in infamy on my phone.

I catch just the corner of her grin with my handmade still life, snapping the picture before I lean down and suck down the jello shot I made her hold for me. “Truth for you, Delaney. Does it bother you that my brother and I like to have sex together? Like not, together together, but with the same woman? That we like to touch each other sometimes and dance along the line of too far?”

Her eyes dilate and her breathing changes. “No. Fuck no. What you’re into is what you’re into. Lucky for you, it is directly in line with what I’m into as well. Works out for all of us, really.”

“Good answer,” I praise before kissing her again.

We dance for a bit more, the game nearly forgotten until she dares me a little later to take a body shot off my brother.

We keep drinking, and I don’t hesitate to complete my dare, and at that point I think we are too drunk to be able to think of anything else to really do, but then she gets the idea to have a naked dance party, so we do that.

The night turns into a blurry forever kind of memory, every whim given into. I feel like it really sort of cements the relationship the three of us are in, putting us on solid ground by virtue of just having fun together and not worrying about anything outside the room.

A mini vacation from all of our realities that goes way too late into the night.

When I wake up the next day, I make a mad dash for the bathroom before my bladder explodes, then brush all the foulness off my teeth and take a fast shower to rinse off all our bad decisions from the night before, wincing when the hot water hits my hip.

I nearly scream when I look down to see a hideously bad tattoo that definitely wasn't there yesterday before the date night.

Honestly don't even remember telling my brother to get his tattoo gun out, but judging by the shaky lines, I really don't think this is even from him. It says 'free' but the letters are all different sizes and the second 'e' is very nearly backwards. I know, you're probably asking what 'nearly backwards' even means, but I legitimately don't know how else to describe it.

My brother comes stumbling in the bathroom next, smelling like the bar we turned our place into, going through the exact same steps I just took and in the exact same order. He doesn't acknowledge me through the haze of his hangover, and I wait until I hear him hiss in the shower to smirk and open the door to check out his tattoo.

"Why the fuck does my hip say Willy? Did you do this shit?"

"Don't think so. I've never in my life made an 'I' and dotted it with a heart."

When he's done with his routine, we walk to check on Delaney, who's naked in my bed that we all shared last night, right smack in the middle of it.

"Fuck both of you for getting me this hungover. This shit sucks," she whines.

“I’ll put an order in for food and coffee, because I’m definitely not cooking right now. Hey Delaney?”

“Mmf?”

“You remember tattooing the words ‘free willy’ on me and Jackson?”

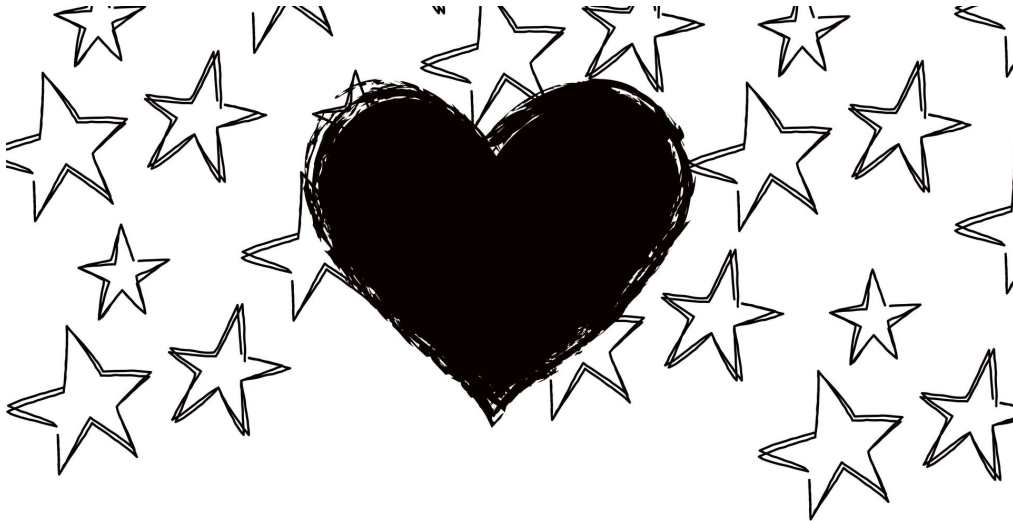
“Love that fucking movie,” she says all groggily but without actually answering the question.

I jump on the bed and yank the blanket down, wondering if she got any sort of tattoo. It goes to reason that if Jackson and I both got one from her, that she got one from us.

Sure enough, in the same spot, on the same hip, there’s a planet with two small moons on either side of it. That sort of jogs my memory; I vaguely remember having a conversation with Jackson about what we’d give her, and thank the gods we let him do the work, because he’s actually had at least some training with the thing, and has a fair amount of artistic ability. She’s clearly the planet and we’re just the moons stuck in her orbit. Fitting.

“My bad,” she says on a yawn, unabashed. Then she starts giggling at our tattoos, because they look awful but it is kind of funny and she got to have a truly authentic drunk experience. I’d say we were successful last night.

“Wish I didn’t have some unknown dude’s name on my hip with a heart, but I’m going to rock the fuck out of this,” Jackson announces.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Delaney's Journal

Dear Journal,

I haven't forgotten about you. I realize you're only a stack of paper bound together with glue and bits of string and leather, but surely you must have feelings too, right?

I bought you so I could try and journal my way into understanding why I start orgies. And whereas you weren't implicit in figuring out that bit, I still appreciate the support you've been giving me.

August and Jackson have become basically perfect boyfriends. I know this is exactly what you want to hear about, which is why I'm telling you, obviously. They keep planning cute dates and taking me out, and when they're needed elsewhere for other tasks, it's no big deal because for once I'm actually able to do what I want to do without worrying about other people's genitals misbehaving. Having full magic stores is truly wonderful.

Adam drove down a few days ago to go shopping with me, because I figure having a couple new things for school might

help me feel a little bit more comfortable. I'm leaving the house more than I ever have, so my wardrobe has been changing greatly.

Whatever weirdness started with Adam after the gala seems to have gone away, and he was his normal goofy self that I love.

For now, I'm deciding to just focus on me and the twins, and I'm hoping that once I get to Hemlock, maybe Adam and I can take the next step. I'm still scared he's gonna turn me down even though I'm definitely still feeding off of him, but he doesn't know I can do that. We'll let him continue to love me in secret for now.

I'm counting down the days until I move out of this house, and it's kind of hitting me right now how big that is. For a long time, I wasn't sure I'd ever see that happen. I hoped one day I'd figure my magic out, but it happened so quickly that I feel like I'm still catching up to the discovery. I have yet to talk to anybody about it because me and the twins haven't used the 'L' word. I don't want to curse or jinx what we have, so I'm just enjoying the benefits and trusting in the fact that when the time is right, all the details will settle themselves.

I haven't decided if I'm going to take you to school with me, but maybe it could be helpful. Unless you're opposed to hearing more rants from an unhinged conduit that's finally coming of age. Fingers crossed there's some serious boning in my future.

Since I'm going to be using you less for your original intended purpose and more for just sorting out my own feelings on general things, I've gotten you a companion to keep you company. I found another pretty journal I thought you might get along with. I'm going to lock you in the drawer together to see if you can get to know each other better. I'll even lock it so you don't have to worry about anyone walking in on you suddenly if you decide to start mixing pages.

In less than a week I'll be at Hemlock, and every time I pack up another box I have to reflect on how much I struggled over the past years to get to the point I am now. Which is happy.

Okay, you convinced me. You're a tough negotiator. I'll bring you to school with me, and I'll bring your new little plaything, too. Maybe I'll even get some lacy bookmarks to dress you two up a bit.

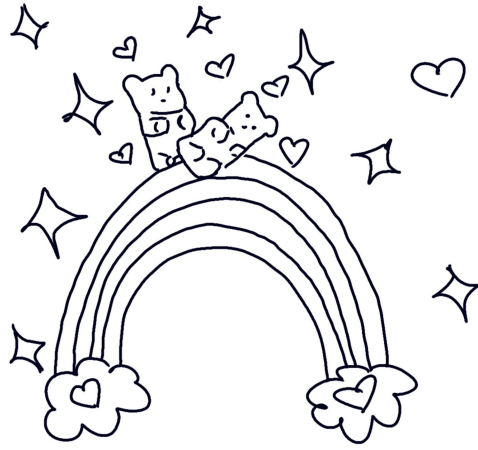
Time just seems to be flying by now that the plans have been made for college, and it's going to be really weird living away from my family.

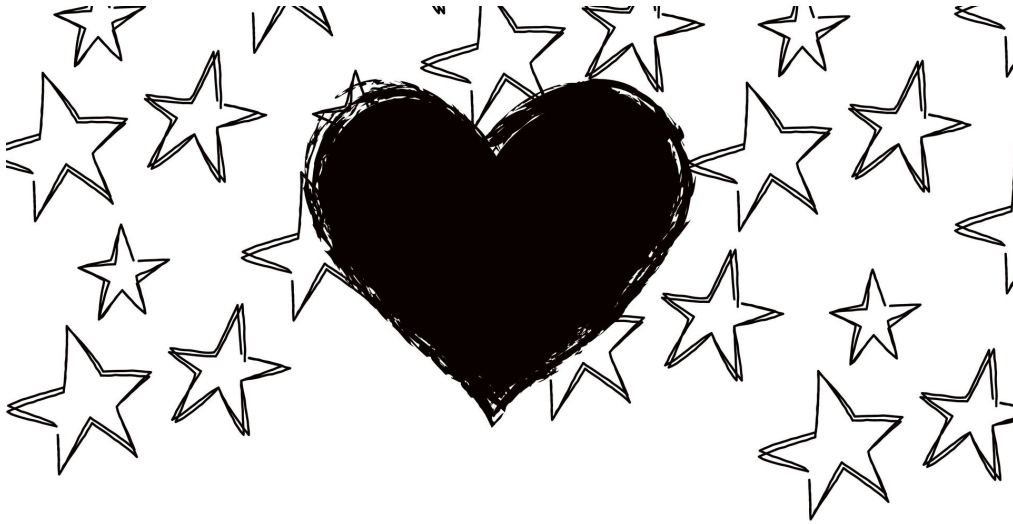
I caught my dad's high fiving each other the other day that they were going to be empty nesters at last, and there were a few bottles of champagne left out with labels over them on which somebody had hand scrawled the words 'In celebration for being able to do it wherever we want again' on it. Naturally, my mom thought it was adorable and fawned all over them for the 'super romantic gesture.' They even made a new trophy that they award each other for being able to last the longest with my mom.

Okay, my home life is disgusting. I see that now. Maybe I should seek out more counseling. These are probably all details I shouldn't admit freely to new friends at school, huh? I bet you when people ask me what it's like to live with the queen and the voice of the goddess, these are not the things they're going to want to know. I'm just so not used to being social that I need to figure out where those lines really lie.

I guess my assignment until I get to school will be how to figure out boundaries. Yours, dear journal, is to continue being this steady presence that I didn't realize I needed.

Thanks journal. To reward you further, here's a picture of some gummy bears banging on a rainbow. Just to perk you up.





CHAPTER SIXTEEN

August

Getting paid to hang out with your girlfriend all day is probably the best job anybody has ever had.

I should maybe feel guilty that this is how I'm using my on-the-clock time, but I don't. As I lick her from ass to clit while my brother fucks her face, with the taste of tart cherries on my tongue and the rasp of her neon purple nails digging into my scalp, it's quite difficult to manifest anything negative.

I slip two fingers inside of her and curl them over the spot she loves, then I work another one into her ass because our girl loves to be stuffed full. I'm getting really good at multi-tasking, so I lick my tongue lightly in circles around her clit while my fingers work independently, and then count down until she falls apart.

I love that she's a freak in bed, that she's always hungry for us, and that she always knows how to tell us apart. I love that not once has she accidentally called me Jackson. I love how it doesn't matter how many times we rail her so good that any other person would be passing out, whereas she could just as

easily roll over and go another round. In fact, she'd likely initiate it.

She starts screaming around Jackson, her plush body squeezing down on me in every possible way, and if my fingers weren't so thick, I'd be scared that they're in danger of being broken the way she's clamping onto them. If I hadn't spent so many hours in the gym, I'd be nervous that my neck was about to be thrown out of alignment completely from the way that her legs are squeezing it. I know the strength of my body, and I know I can handle whatever she throws my way.

I'm leaking all over her sheets, dying for the second that she comes down from her climax so I can shove myself inside of her from behind and then ride her as hard as she'll let me.

I love that I can be rough with her and give her everything we have, and that fifteen minutes later, she's still the sweetest thing that will snuggle right into us and pepper kisses on our face. I love how even when she's been plastered with cum, she can clean up and then go about her day in a pretty dress, acting like she's not her mother's daughter. She's borderline demure at times, and I thank the goddess we were at that event that night, and that our original location assignment got switched, because I know that we were meant to be in her life.

I watch my brother's ass flex and flex until he twitches and groans out loud, gagging her and making her look like she doesn't even need air to survive. Then he collapses next to her, looking completely ruined. But now it's my turn.

I love that she doesn't care how dirty me and Jackson get, and that she doesn't judge us at all for the kinks we have in the bedroom. I love that she doesn't think Jackson and I are too close, or question why I love to kiss her so much after she swallows my brother's cum. In fact, I'm hard pressed to find a single thing about her I don't love. Maybe how mushy I get when I'm around her?

I'm about to reach for a condom so I can touch the promised land, but her hand stops me as she peers up at me with her eye makeup completely trashed. "Do you feel comfortable going without?"

“You... want me to ride you bare? Sweetness, are you trying to get me to propose already?”

She rolls her eyes at me. “We’ve been seeing each other for months now, and you are the only ones I’m with...”

“Don’t insult us by asking if we’re with anybody else, because you know that we couldn’t keep up with another person. We can barely keep up with you.” I smirk at her when she smacks my arm; I joke, but she knows that our hearts are with her.

“I’m clean, you’re... clean also?”

I nod, waiting for her to continue her thought.

“I can’t get pregnant unless I trigger my fertility, which I am in no risk of doing. I know I’m in control of my body and that’s not something we have to worry about. If you guys feel safer with condoms on, then we can keep using them, but I’ve never gone without, and I kind of feel like I want to put that trust in you. I want to experience it with you guys for the first time.”

I lean down and kiss her again, running my tongue along her gums, and around her tongue, and around the soft palate of her mouth, chasing any remnant of Jackson. She sucks my tongue down, knowing exactly what I’m doing, and I can feel heat waves practically coming off of her hot and ready cunt, begging me to feel its warmth directly on my skin.

“I know we haven’t talked about where this is going,” I tell her, “and I know you’re not ready for that conversation, but when you are, I think you know what you’re going to hear back from us. The way you just absolutely make us feel like we’re on top of the world every time we’re with you is insane.

“Frankly, I don’t know what the hell you’re doing with us when you could do so much better, but we’re not going to question your sanity if you continue to look at us the way you do. You will not hear complaints from me about bare backing it with you. The last few months with you have been incredible Delaney, and every step forward is one step closer to ideal.”

She widens her legs in invitation, and I feel as if I might faint.

“You know what I want to see, sweetness,” I tell her as she

tilts her lips towards my brother, getting a kiss from him to seal the conversation in. Then she twists onto her stomach and leans down on her forearms, sticking her ass up in the air. Dreams do come true, and she's proof.

Now I have a glorious view of both of her holes. "You've never had anybody fuck you without a condom?" I question again, just to make sure.

"Nobody," she huffs out, wiggling her hips in anticipation.

"You ever had somebody fuck your ass before?"

"Once," she admits, "but he must have just gotten a brand-new dick, because he sure as hell didn't know how to use it."

I bark out a laugh at the imagery, loving how she can be sassy even while she's sitting here silently begging for me to fuck her.

Now that we're dating a bodysmith, we've done research, so we know a lot of the things her body is capable of, but we've been treading water, trying not to jump all in until we knew we had some sort of place in her future. This may not be some grand proclamation of devotion, but telling us she's comfortable enough with us to let us inside her with no barriers? That's all the commitment we need.

I grab my long dick in my hand, running the tip of my thumb up and down the top side, teasing the tip and watching a bead of precum start to drip out. It wells out of my body, so I place it right on her ass hole, like some sort of fucked up kiss. "I'm going to fuck you," I warn her, "and then I'm going to fuck you here also. You think you can handle that, sweetness?"

"Please, yes. I want that, I want it so bad," she whines.

The first push inside her is decadent.

Fucking Delaney is typically a religious experience, but without the latex barrier?

My thighs give out and my eyes roll back inside my head.

Balls deep, with her curvy fucking hips up in the air and her whimpers perfuming the airspace, I'm thinking I'm in love.

So damn hot and tight and just...perfect.

“Don’t take this the wrong way baby, but you’re going to have a hell of a time getting rid of me now. Do you have any idea how fucking amazing your body feels wrapped around me? My dick is forming a permanent bond with the inside of your body. He won’t give this up easily.”

Unable to talk, she reaches behind her to grip onto me in response. Every wet smack of my thighs hitting her body sends me spinning harder, faster, higher, and wanting to make her feel so damn good that she’ll be thinking of this exact moment for days or weeks.

I feel kind of bad that her face looks like it’s getting friction burns from being pressed so hard into her sheets, but then those muscles I love so fucking much start up, suctioning me into her body and squeezing me with every thrust, and nothing else matters.

In an absolute blind rage, I lift her entire lower body off the mattress and anchor her to me while I pound into her, air a non-essential as I focus all my attention on our connection.

This time with her is different on so many levels— there’s a deeper emotional connection forging as we share this, knowing that there’s absolutely nothing separating us.

“Oh fuck, August. You’re hitting me so damn good. Fuck!”

Her screams turn incoherent again as I continue to make us both feel good. I desperately want to pump her full of cum so I can watch it drip out of her, but I need to claim her ass more.

I feel her tighten impossibly more, then her screams go silent and I know I’ve got her.

Eventually she falls limp and lax, so I pull out and give myself a breather, chasing my orgasm away so I can keep playing with her.

I watch as my brother takes us both in, a dazed expression on his face I can’t read, and I hope to hell he’s feeling the same way about this woman that I am, because I’m fucking gone.

We're already following her to Hemlock so she can finally pursue something she's wanted for a while, but she's got to know she holds the power in her hands to make us chase her just about anywhere.

I run my hand down her back, soothing her as she processes her overused nerves, my brother smoothing her hair away from her face.

Does she think about wearing marks for us on her arm? Am I absolutely crazy for hoping this thing between us is big enough and real enough to become permanent?

I've never thought too much about getting mated or married or anything, just assumed my brother and I would know what we'd want when we got close to finding it.

"You did so good, Delaney." I keep running my hand up and down her back a few more times before I gravitate towards her ass.

Soft and grabbable, it's so much fun to play with. I squeeze her ass cheeks and then move in, running a finger gently over her hole so she knows what's coming.

"You going to take me again baby?"

Her head turns enough to see me better, her eyes unfocused. "Only if you promise to make your cum drip out of me, because I feel a little bit jipped right now."

I smile crooked at her, wondering why or how that could possibly have sounded cute under the circumstances. "I've got you, Delaney."

I dip inside her body, testing how much I'm gonna need to stretch her to take me.

I don't want to hurt her or mess up the moment, and I wasn't sure if I could believe what my very educational research said, but all she does is moan her enjoyment of my touching her there, her skin allowing me to not only squeeze another finger inside, but providing lubrication as well.

Bodysmiths are built for sex of any kind, to give and receive pleasure of the highest degree, so I shouldn't be surprised

when she reaches behind her again to grab onto my dick and notch me inside her. I slide in like buttah.

She's thrusting back into me before I have any sort of say in the movement, choking me.

It's been a long time since I've taken anyone in the ass, but once again, the no condom thing elevates an already surreal experience. Every thrust has her squeezing my body tightly, but it's the idea of this dirty act I'm doing while she lies there vulnerable and shaking that's the cherry on top.

"You able to lend me a hand, brother?" I grit out.

He smiles, likely knowing what I want him for. He lies on his back and opens his arms, his hard cock standing upright once again.

Without losing my connection to Delaney, I manhandle her hips up enough to straddle Jackson, letting him position himself against her cunt when I release her hips. We're all silent as she takes him into her body, tapping into that sense of connectedness that only comes when the three of us are together like this.

With both of us in our snug spaces and holding our girl, I feel him slide along me through her body, pushing me into action.

"You doing okay, Sweetness? Because I'm ready to fucking rail you. Is this too much?"

"N-no. It's perfect. Oh gods, how the hell do sensations like this even exist? Fuck, my body feels so full, so impossibly full of you both. Are you guys about to move?"

Jackson and I link hands over her shoulder and over her hip so we can anchor ourselves while we sync up, and I try to read his expression, but can't. But that's not important right now.

"We can move. Going to wreck this perfect fucking body."

Jackson and I get our rhythm set up, him thrusting up while I pull out, taking turns stuffing her full while she whimpers and begs for nothing at all, screaming nonsense.

I hope my brother is ready, because it would be impossible and painful to make myself wait any longer to fill her up. I can feel

my release just sitting in my balls, drawn up and tight. I want to shout at her that I'm falling in love with her, that worshipping her body like this is everything, but I give her the next best thing. I push myself inside of her over and over, then I throw my head back and let my whole body go. The tension escapes every part of me as I pump my cum inside of her, my cock swelling as the orgasm threatens to make me black out.

Too late, I wish I would have lowered my shields so that I could have felt every bit of power she emanated while we took her, but that just gives us something to try next time.

I keep thrusting inside of her until Jackson groans and twitches underneath her, rubbing against me as I will myself to soften. I feel raw from taking her body so long, raw emotionally from the journey that I just went through, and naughty as hell when I scoop her up to take her to the shower so I can clean us both up and hold her.

Everyone's a bit quiet as the water beats down on us, the ridiculously large shower proof that her mother knew this would happen someday. But then again, it's not like her family is weird about sex or anything. For them, because of what her and the queen are magically speaking, having multiple partners, and having a high sex drive to satiate is like needing to put on a sweatshirt when you're cold.

Although this is much more fun.

Once she's got fuzzy socks, soft panties, and an oversized T-shirt on, I pull her back in the bed because I need to hold her longer. There's too much coursing through me right now to process on my own, and I want to try and see where my girlfriend's head is at, to test the waters and see how she feels about us.

"I don't know how I made it this long without the two of you," she admits as she lays between us. I don't ask why my brother is on top of the covers instead of underneath them, but I assume he's just too warm.

His hand rests on her hip, and his smile is still a little bit off. "Because you're strong as hell," he tells her. "You don't actually need us."

Brow furrowed, she turns to look at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He shakes his head. “Nothing. You guys hang out, and I’ll go get some of that sparkling water you love so much from downstairs.” He kisses Delaney on the forehead and slips out, fully dressed.

“Well that was weird,” she mumbles, snuggling back into me.

She’s not wrong, but I don’t want to sow any sort of animosity between my brother and me. “He’s right you know, you don’t need us; however, we’re thrilled as hell that you want us. I know you’ve struggled with your magic for a long time Delaney, and I think it’s incredible that after such a short time of being around us, you’re comfortable enough to try something new and enroll at school. I know you’re scared, but we’re going to take such good care of you there, okay?”

She bites her lip a little and nods, tracing the hem of my T-shirt with her fingers. “You guys like Adam, right?”

“We like that he is important to you,” I respond. “We don’t really know him well enough to have an opinion on him as a person, but it’s not our job to. We’re with you, he’s a part of your life.”

“We haven’t really talked about the fact that I’m a conduit, or how we’re going to handle that.”

Her eyes stay focused on my chest and my neck, and it kind of clicks where this conversation is heading. “Are you into Adam? The same way that you’re into me and Jackson?”

“I... it’s tricky. We’ve been best friends forever, and I’m so scared to upset that balance, but—”

“How do you feel about him, Delaney?” I make sure my tone is nice and soft so she knows that whatever she wants to say has no bearing on me and my feelings for her.

She finally looks up at my face, her stunning lavender eyes locking onto mine. “I’m in love with him, but I’m so scared he doesn’t want me that way. We’ve had so many obstacles until now preventing anything romantic from forming; him away at school, me unable to really leave the house... but things are

changing. He's always talked so much about how much he wants me at school with him, and it kind of feels like this is important for my relationship with him, too. Like if I'm there, maybe we can finally try something, you know? Do you think that's stupid?"

I shake my head no. "Delaney, he'd be crazy to turn you down. Bonkers in the head, stupidest man alive, hands down." Her mouth tilts up in a smile.

"I wouldn't go that far, but... I can't even believe I'm telling you this. I've always thought he would end up being one of my mates."

I knew it was coming, and yet it staggers me a little, because I still don't know where I stand. Even though she doesn't owe me any sort of insight about that, I still want to push my luck. "I can't really tell you how to be a conduit, because I don't know how it feels. If it's advice you're looking for, I'll tell you to trust your heart, and we'll trust you. If you are just looking for somebody to listen and validate how you feel, then anything you feel is valid."

"Is that... something you guys might want, too? I know we've only been dating a couple of months, and I'm not trying to rush you into anything, or you know, push things along or whatever. But you have to know that dating a conduit is going to be different than dating somebody who isn't. With everybody I meet, I'm constantly thinking about my future, wondering if they're a good match or not. I don't really have the luxury of dating for fun; because of what I am, my magic insists that I need to find mates at some point. I guess I just kind of want to know where I stand before this gets too much deeper, because if that's off the table for you guys, if you're just here to be casual, that's something I need to know."

My brother bursts back in the room then, breathing a bit heavily. Not sure if he heard what we were talking about or not, but he needs to be a part of this conversation, too. "Mom just called," he explains. "She said that dad's being stubborn again and is trying to get rid of that big stump in the backyard. She's worried he's gonna throw his back out again and wants to know if we can come help."

“Now? Can’t you tell her we’ll be over later?”

He flashes us a contrite smile. “You know how stubborn dad is. It’s in his head that he wants to do it, so he’s going to do it regardless of what you, or I, or Mom says. Unless we show up and make him stop, we both know it’s going to end badly.”

“Why don’t you—” I start to say, thinking we could split up so that Delaney isn’t alone after we just went through an emotionally intimate session.

But his eyes harden because he probably knows what I’m thinking. “Don’t. It’s you and me, right bro?”

I look down at Delaney, completely torn. I don’t want to leave her. Not for my dad being a stubborn ass. If he wants to hurt himself, then that’s his own fault.

The promise my brother and I made to each other all those years ago weighs heavily on my chest, and I find myself wishing I knew if it was really better for us to stick together.

“If your family needs you, you should go,” Delaney insists. I can tell she doesn’t really mean it, that she’s just too scared to ask us to stay when it’s kind of clear my brother doesn’t want to.

For the first time in my life, I feel torn between duty and what I want. It’s not the first time my brother or I have flashed the twin card, demanding blind obeisance, but I don’t have the mental fortitude to cause a rift between us.

“Are you sure?” I ask, knowing that she’s not at all. But it eases my guilty conscience a little if I hear her voice tell me I’m allowed to go, even if my heart knows it’s bullshit.

“Of course, family is important. Just... call me later?” She looks at both of us as she asks this, and I hate the uncertainty in her voice.

“Of course baby,” I reassure her, leaning down to kiss her. She starts to crawl out of bed so she can say goodbye to Jackson, but he tells her to stay where she’s comfortable and walks over to her instead.

“Sorry to leave so suddenly,” he tells her. “If I didn’t think it was important, I’d be here; you know that, right? Here’s your water.”

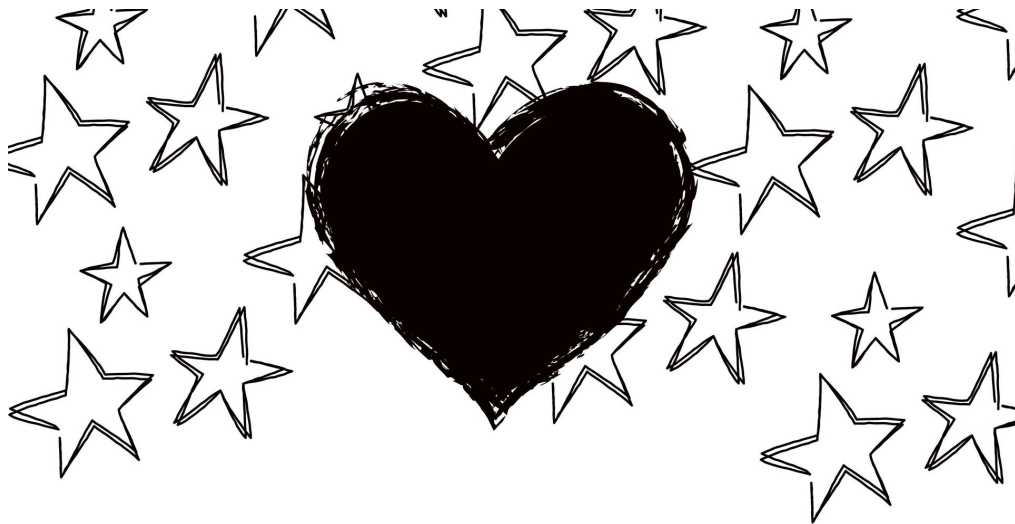
She tilts her head as she accepts the can, clearly reading the same signals I am, choosing not to respond to that. She’s not going to lie and tell him she doesn’t believe him when it’s so obvious he’s just in a weird mood.

“Text us if you need anything, Delaney. Sorry you’re going have to stick to the house for the rest of the day.” That extra bit makes this worse, knowing she can only really go anywhere if we’re there to block her magic.

She replies to me a bit cryptically, and more than a bit annoyed. “We’ll see. If you guys are going to go though, just go. I’m sure I’ll find something to entertain me around here.”

At that instant, a small crack forms between us. I hate it, but I walk out the door anyway, needing to have a conversation with my brother so I can fix this. She needs aftercare as much as she needed us to fuck her, and denying her that makes me feel dirty and cheap.

A small crack is fixable, but anything bigger than that, and things might break.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Delaney's Journal

We're trying something new today. It's you and me, buddy.

I had to get out of the house and away from my bed, because everything I just did was too fresh there. Their scents were too strong, and the sheet that had their cum stained on it too harsh to be around with them gone.

We're going to avoid the fact that I feel awful right now and focus on the fact that my guys are sweet to their family and are good, reliable sons. It's invisible red flag day, which is perfect. Means I can ignore those suckers.

Gods, I sound so whiny. I don't want to be the clingy girlfriend that can't handle being alone; I've spent so much time alone and I know I make excellent company.

I'm doing something brave, and I'm proud of myself. I took myself out for coffee again. I can feel my magic is full to the brim after my afternoon with Jackson and August, and I feel really good about that. I even sent a silly selfie to Adam because I know he'll be proud of me, too.

I don't even know if I should vent in here what I'm feeling, because that feels like it's getting dangerously close to manifesting problems that aren't necessarily there.

Now that I know what it feels like when my magic fills up, I feel like it's easy to distinguish helpful, filling lust from stale and nutritionally deficient lust. In fact, the whole appeal of generic lust has completely lost its charm for me. I used to find it sticky, sweet, and pleasant, but now that I have something better to compare it to, it's gods awful. It's sort of like flat soda with artificial sweetener. The real thing, from someone that wants me, is glittery and effervescent, a natural high that I can't get anywhere else.

Can you keep a secret? It kind of felt like August was filling me up much stronger than his brother.

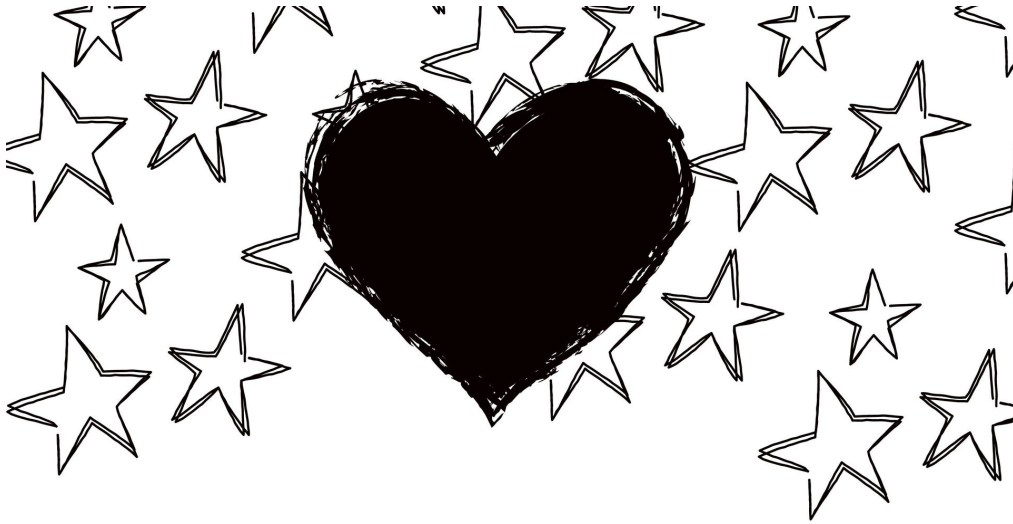
If you want me to be brutally honest, it kind of felt like Jackson was only barely tripping my weird, built-in love sensor. But usually, they're damn near equal.

Everyone is entitled to off days though, right? Right. Thanks, journal. You really know how to reassure a girl.

No, you're right. I'm going to focus on how I feel about them right now and not obsess over all the out-of-character things that just happened with me and Jackson. Things are on track for me to finally become the conduit I've always thought I could be, and in just a few days I'll get my room assignment, and next week I'll get to drive my shit to campus and move in with my guys.

I've got a bomb cup of coffee in my hand and a snickerdoodle cookie as big as my head to munch on, and only one security guard hiding behind a potted plant to ignore.

I don't even want to fuck this one's brains out. That's progress, right?



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jackson

All good things must come to an end. That's the line, right?

Well we got our good thing, so I guess I cannot say the goddess never did anything for us.

I don't know how to tell my brother that I'm freaking out. That first night we met Delaney, I thought there was nothing in the world that could keep me from getting closer to her. Other than her consent, of course. And all the time we've spent with her, the approval of her parents, it's all been more than I imagined. So why the hell am I trying to fuck it up so badly?

I see the way my brother looks at her. I'd like to think it's the same way I was looking at her. But a few nights ago, the last time we saw her, we had her, and things took a turn for the serious.

It made me need to step back and reevaluate where things were going, what I wanted, and where my brother and I go from here. He's going to hate me for the way I feel right now, but I'm sure he'll thank me later.

The thing is, I know that this is a better choice for the both of us. I was just confused before, thinking that the night we met her I could see us mated. That's completely crazy, and it should have made me re-think the pull she has on me sooner. I know that if I simply tell Delaney that we need to cool things off a little bit and slow things down so she can focus on moving into school, then me and my brother won't have such tangled heads. Because lately? All I've been able to think about or focus on is her.

I used to have things I'd want to do on my own, but now it seems all I do is plan time to be with her. And sure, maybe most of that is because it's literally my job to guard her, but guarding her and dating her has made this serious so damn fast.

I remember actually wanting that in the beginning, but it's not as glamorous as I thought it'd be.

I know I'm falling in love with her, but I know if my brother and I go all in right now, that's it for us. We won't be dating anybody ever again, and it feels as if that option has been taken away from us. We chose Delaney, but I was blinded by how badly I needed to get close to her, and all rational thinking flew out the proverbial window.

I'm not even sure I want to break up, I just feel like I need a little bit of space to think. A little bit of space like my friend Natalie suggested. Maybe it was a bad move to turn to our ex for dating advice, but I needed a female perspective. I'm pretty sure I got what I needed.

We're looking over the plans in a minute for Delaney's new room at the school, going to get some pictures of it so that we can figure out security, and I feel twitchy and unsettled. Like I shouldn't be here.

She's giddy and flushed as she walks towards where we're standing by the front door, immediately pulling our hands to the dining room. A kiss on the cheek that somehow makes my toes tingle like a fool, and she's just gesturing wildly with her hands as she goes on and on about all the things she's looking forward to at Hemlock. She's talking about how she was up all

night talking to Adam and all the plans they're making and the things he's gonna show her, and I just hope it's everything she's ever wanted.

I still get ragey when I think of that first night we met her best friend, because I want Delaney to stand on her own and be able to talk for herself and defend herself. I'm not sure Adam realizes how strong she is, so it's good that me and my brother will be around to insist upon it.

Delaney is quick to sit August and I next to each other on stools so she can sit half on my lap and half on August's, but I don't need proof that she fits well between us. We've tried that on several occasions in several different arrangements, and I know it works great. That's not the problem.

Pretty sure the problem is me. I do this; I like to ruin good things before they ruin me. No matter how optimistic I may be at the beginning when everything is sunshine and rainbows and unexplored worlds, when I get comfortable with somebody, I flip out and sabotage it.

"Okay guys, here we go. The headmaster offered to move some of the other conduits so I could have their room, because apparently the other rooms are better, but don't worry, I shut that down fast. Not only do I not need to make any enemies by stealing somebody else's room, but I'm the one coming in the middle of the year. He said there was only one room free and it wasn't as great as the other ones, but that it was spacious enough."

She opens her e-mail and clicks on some pictures, enlarging them. I tilt my head to the side, trying to figure out what I'm even looking at.

"Is that... green shag carpeting? Oh my gods, they still make that stuff?" It's basically the color of vomit.

"Errr...it's not that bad, right? We can totally make this work." I do admire Delaney's optimism.

"Oh my gods, the fridge is green too?" Okay good, my brother is repulsed as well.

"It's quirky."

My brother scowls. “No wonder this one is unoccupied, I’d imagine most people would rather take a single occupancy room and deal with the lack of space, than have to live in a rainbow of olive and baby shit.”

“Let’s look at the floor plan at least. You guys have to live here too, and the headmaster did say this room would be really well suited for that.”

She pulls the floor plan up and without all the ugly green to take away from it, it actually does look like it’s a good space. A master bedroom removed from three other bedrooms that are closer to the front door, a full bathroom that me and my brother can share, separate from Delaney.

There’s a small workspace off of the living room in a little alcove, which would be a good setup space for security equipment and whatnot, with an open kitchen right next to the lounge area.

“Oh look,” she says pointing, “it looks like there’s a tiny little balcony too. I think Headmaster said this was the only room with one. Now it makes sense that nobody wanted it. It is a little off putting, isn’t it?” she says as she clicks back to the pictures.

I honestly wouldn’t blame her if she decided to pass up on this room and make do somewhere else, especially since off-campus living is absolutely an option for her, but she’s determined to live like a student and get the full experience since this will be her first time living away from home.

“Let me call Adam and see what he thinks.” She puts her phone on speaker as my brother and I poke through the pictures again, trying to match them up with the floor plan so we can figure out where everything really is and how big the rooms actually are.

“Hey Adam. Yeah I just got it, it’s room 312... what do you mean am I sure? Yes, I’m sure. Why? ...here, I’m gonna put you on speaker, one sec.”

She taps the button and his voice comes through. “Are you there, Del?”

“Yeah, I’m here. I’ve got August and Jackson with me, too.”

Adam mumbles out a “Hey,” and I do too, but only after Delaney elbows me. My brother is nicer and gives him a, “Hey man”.

“I asked if you were sure that was the right room number because I didn’t realize that was the only unoccupied suite for conduits. It makes sense, but I don’t go over to that part of the dorms. I’m not that close with any of the other conduits, so I just assumed there was— anyway, it doesn’t matter. I did ask somebody in one of my classes about conduit rooms, and I’m pretty sure that’s the room they said gave off weird vibes. She said everybody avoids it, and nobody will move in there because it’s like haunted, or something.”

Delaney starts cracking up. “Ghosts aren’t real, Adam. The only thing that room is probably haunted by is the decor of decades past. It’s pretty bad. The headmaster made sure I knew that school rules were strict and I couldn’t alter the room with magic in any way, so I unfortunately can’t make it much prettier, but it’s going to be mine. I’ve never had that before.”

His voice softens some. “And you’re sure you want the guys to live with you? Don’t you think that’s a bit soon?”

My brother cuts him off. “Would you prefer her magic sets off group sessions all over the place? Can you imagine how bad that could get at a college campus? And no, it’s not too soon, we’re in this, man.”

Bile raises to the back of my throat, because I hate that me and my brother are on different wavelengths right now. Maybe I should try harder with her, put in the effort so I can make my brother happy. He’s done enough for me over the years, maybe I can suck it up and try and quell all the insecurities.

“You know I’m just waiting for you both to fuck up, right? There’s no way this is all as fucking perfect as she makes it out to be. I think you’re taking advantage of her being your charge. I bet you brag to all your buddies about the job perks.”

“Adam! What the hell?” Delaney screams.

“No, Delaney. This whole situation is fucked up. They’re supposed to be protecting you, not shoving their hands in your pants. Don’t you think that’s a bit of a conflict of interest?”

Delaney grabs her phone and stomps out of the room, taking it off speaker so we unfortunately can’t hear the other side of the conversation anymore.

“What an asshole. Probably has no idea she’s in love with him and ready to start something. He’s going to drive her away.”

I stare at my brother. “What?”

“Don’t play dumb. She said it the other night when you were being a jackass and getting water in the kitchen. She’s been in love with him for a while; my guess is he’s feeling like we’re threatening his place with her. We need to get along with him, Jackson. He’s important to her. I know he’s fucking stupid sometimes, but we need to find a way to get along.”

“Why?”

August pinches the bridge of his nose as he hunches over a bit. “Why are you being so thick headed?” Then his voice gets quieter so no one can overhear us. “She asked me if we could see this moving towards becoming mated— that girl is my world, Jackson. Can’t you put yourself in Adam’s shoes? He’s had her to himself all these years and then in one fell swoop we insert ourselves into her life and give her what he’s never been able to; the ability to live her life without worrying about her magic.”

“Mating? Are you serious? We just started dating her, Auggie. How are you there already?”

He keeps watching me, seeing something that I’m not sure I’m ready for him to see. “Are you telling me you aren’t? After all the things she’s done to us and for us and all the ways she’s let us in, you’re seriously going to sit here and tell me to my face that this isn’t serious? This shit’s been serious since the first touch with her. I know I’m not crazy, so don’t gaslight me into thinking it’s been one-sided. You’ve daydreamed with me on multiple occasions about how we were going to be with her

forever. Don't do the thing, Jackson. Please. I thought we had worked past that."

"I'm not going to do the thing; I just think we need to think about this before we start making promises." Fuck. He sees right through me. I shouldn't be surprised; I can't really hide anything from him. We're too close.

"Sorry about that," Delaney says as she comes walking back into the room. Her eyes are red and leaking a little, clearly upset. "I don't know what got into him. I feel like you guys have only seen the bad sides of Adam; I shouldn't have to defend his character, and I shouldn't want to because of the way he just spoke about you guys, but I've never seen him act like this. He's usually sweet and... I'm so embarrassed. Maybe you guys should just go. That kind of killed all my excitement about the new room. I don't think I'll be good company the rest of the day, and I need to pack some more, anyway."

My brother is out of his seat and across the room before the next tear falls down her face. "That whole conversation seemed like absolute bullshit, but we're not going to lecture you on the treatment you deserve from your so-called best friend, because I think you know what that entails. Just promise me you will keep standing up for yourself and not let him talk you into anything you don't want."

She waves him off. "He can't persuade me to stop being happy, because that's what I am. He hasn't seen us together, so he doesn't really know how great things are or how much lighter I feel. I hope when we get to Hemlock he'll be able to realize..."

"Realize what?" I ask, daring her to name what we are. There's a challenge in my tone, and even though I'm not proud of my lack of control right now, I feel the need to provoke her. Needle her until she says it so I can berate her for it.

It's like there's a beast in my chest, driving me to cause damage and tear this whole thing apart, because I'm getting complacent in my happiness after just a few short months of everything being absolutely perfect with her. I feel cruel and mean and I don't know how to not feel this way.

She stares back at me, brow furrowed. Then she sighs, like she's given up on diving into the topic any further. "I just want all of you guys to get along, but maybe that's too much to ask. Do you need to pack more?"

"It's not too much to ask, Sweetness." My brother kisses her, and I watch as she completely wilts against him. "We're going to get it figured out. Promise. It will be easier once we're all at the school and can hang out. I bet you by the end of the semester, we'll all be best friends." He winks at her, trying to joke, but it feels like another nail in my coffin.

I've always liked the idea of dating conduits because it meant that they would be more willing to date my brother and I simultaneously, but we've never been this far in with one, where I have to realistically think about what life would be like if we bonded one and all the implications that come along with it. We wouldn't get a say in who we live with; we'd be dealing with pricks like Adam that for some reason make Delaney happy too, and she's going to want to fuck them and...I think I'm having a panic attack.

I fall off the stool as my mind starts spiraling, blackness creeping in. I can't get air into my lungs, can't seem to remember how to get them to even work. I feel feet nudging me, hands trying to roll me over, but I can't understand any of the sounds they're making. If they're communicating with me, then it's not in a language I know.

The thing that pulls me out of it is a warm palm to my face and lavender eyes blinking at me, and the delicate scent of cherry blossoms soaking into me.

"Jackson? Are you with us?"

Her voice doesn't get loud or panicky, it stays calm and warm, reassuring. "You're okay, babe. I want you to focus on the floor under your face, on how it feels. You're doing so good. Can you feel my fingers on your skin? Playing with your stubble? Can you hear my parents fucking upstairs? That would be Papa Bal yelling down the hall that the play wasn't good, and the hot batter he's discussing is actually my mom's

snatch. I know it's terribly disgusting, but I promise you it becomes normal after a bit."

I start coughing. "Was that supposed to make me feel better? Fuck. That's your parents? I thought someone was watching some weird sports station and...that's fucked up, Delaney."

She shrugs, not phased.

August sits behind me, pulling me against his chest while his legs frame me. I feel his big hands on my chest, further soothing me. "You've got me, brother. I'm right here."

I let my head fall back, trying to figure out what exactly just triggered all of that, but I'm surer than ever that my head is not in the right space to be with Delaney right now. At least not with the way things currently are. How do I do that though, separate her from us? My brother is in love with her; I can't fake it. "Yeah, sorry about that. Could you give us a second, Delaney?" It's selfish to ask, but right now I only need my brother.

I can tell my brother is worried by the tension I feel in his hands as they run over my torso, trying to stay connected to me and tell me that we're still together. He can try and pretend he doesn't know why I just flipped out over practically nothing, but he knows me too well to feign ignorance. His next words prove it, spoken quietly so that Delaney won't be able to hear from the room she stepped into. "You need to work past this, brother. This is our future. We promised each other that it's you and me, no matter what. I can't do that if you keep choosing yourself. Don't take this way from me, because I might not forgive you if you do. I know she makes you happy, I've seen it up close. You just need to tap into that part of you that understands you're allowed to be happy and stop fucking punishing yourself for nothing. Be as kind to yourself as you are to me; you like to take care of me so much, well it's time to take care of yourself. I need this from you, Jackson. I need you to human up and find that heart that I know thrives in your chest when it's just us. I need you to go back to how you felt that night we met the girl and remember all the little feelings that blossomed into what we're building, because I know she's our future like I know that you're mine. She can't get between

us if you reach for what you really want but are too scared to take. Don't make me have to choose. I'm begging you."

Agony washes through me, and I'm right back to square one, wondering what the hell is wrong with me. Why can't I just accept something good and enjoy it? "August—"

"No," he immediately replies. "I can be the nice guy until you force me to be otherwise. You're going to do a hell of a lot more than simply try to make this work. You're going to make it work, for the both of us."

Tears start to build in my eyes, but for some reason it seems like if I let them fall, it'll amplify and project how weak I actually am. "I'll do whatever it takes, brother. I promise."

He hugs me to him tighter, pressing a kiss to the side of my neck. "Good man. Once we work past this, everything is going to be great. She's the other half of us, I know it."

I can't even tell him he's wrong, because some part of me knows how right everything he's saying is. That doesn't mean I can just open myself up and accept it and then simply go about my day, though.

I pull myself up off the floor slowly and look around the room, needing a few more permanent objects to help ground me. I know what's coming next, but it's no more terrifying when it happens.

"You need to spend some one-on-one time with her. I'll go bring that paperwork to the office that the boss wanted." He stands as well, but his shoulders are hunched now as he stares at the ground. I killed that light of excitement in him, and I feel sick about it, but I still don't know how to fix it. "If you... I'll understand. I would never ask you to force yourself into a situation you didn't want to be in."

"I didn't mean it, what I said a minute ago. For this one time, do this without me. You know I'm always going to choose you, no matter what. If you don't want this future the goddess has given us, then that's your right." Then he approaches me and puts his hand on my shoulder, meeting my eyes for his

final blow. “I don’t understand the processes you put yourself through, but you know I’m still going to love you.

“I want this so bad, Jackson. If I don’t get to keep her, I know that I’ll never get over her. I don’t know if I’ll have it in me to try and do this with anybody else again, so know that if you sabotage us against her, it’s for us to be alone.

“I know you were texting Nat, and that pisses me off because you’re always the one reminding me that we’re all each other need— you’re putting her between us and that needs to stop. You should have spoken to me about what you were feeling.”

“I didn’t want to be the reason you stopped being happy. I needed to hear from somebody outside us that what was going on between us and Delany is crazy for how fast it’s moving.”

He sighs, removing his hand, and I feel the loss of its warmth immediately. “Texting our ex-girlfriend about concerns regarding our current girlfriend was a dick move, and you know Nat would never offer an unbiased opinion. If you wanted advice you could actually use, you could have gone to mom. I know you’re just looking for reasons to throw in the towel, to prove you tried without doing the work.

“So I’m asking you to do the work. I’m begging you, Jackson, to see that woman the way I do, because Delaney? She’s the only one we’re going to get that accepts what we have, that will love us the way we deserve, and the only one that’s going to be everything we need. Bend into whatever angle you need to see it from a different perspective, but don’t you dare walk away without giving this relationship more effort than you’ve given anything else in your life.”

I feel like I need to roll my eyes. “You act like we married her or something.”

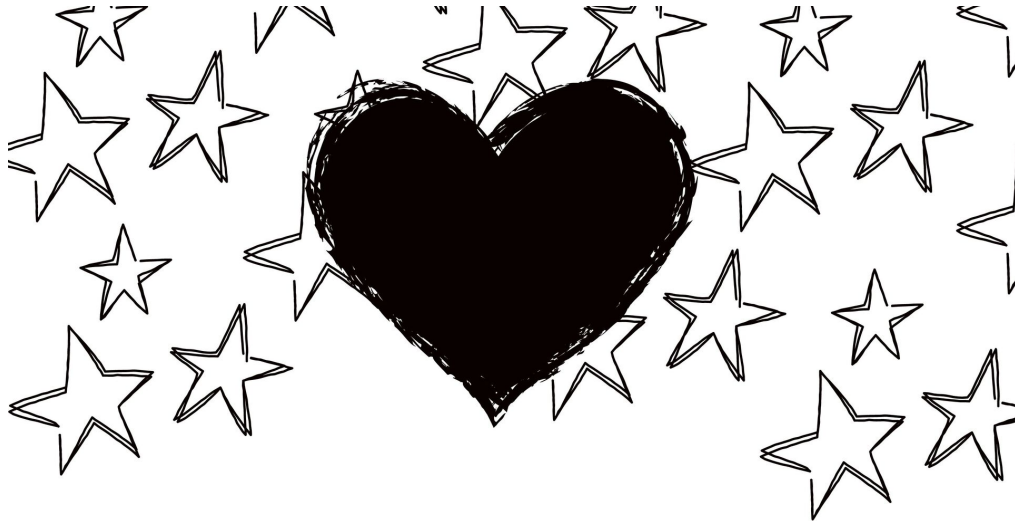
“Marriage can be ended, Jackson. That’s what I’m trying to get at. You didn’t want to acknowledge that invisible feeling that’s been there between us and Delaney from day one, so I will. I know we’re fated for her, to be her mates. The goddess created us specifically for her, and she needs us. Almost as much as I need her. I can’t even fully explain the way it feels in here,” he says, rubbing his chest, “when we’re lying with

her, and she looks at us in that way she has. She's our fate, the mate we've always needed, and if you choose to walk away, you're depriving us of that. Just think about that. If you can't..." his voice drops low, like he's ashamed to say the next part out loud. "If you can't do this with her, then you know I'm going to choose you. Just like I always have." I hate how sad he sounds as he admits that, but it's the reassurance I need.

I wait a few minutes after he walks off, knowing he's going to make his excuses to Delaney so he can force me and her to spend the afternoon together, hoping we'll bond.

Nothing he said actually shocked me. He was correct in that I knew that that's why it feels so good when she touches us. But my head is a fucking mess for absolutely no reason, and I just want to run and run until I'm out of ground.

I think about my brother again though, and how much I love him, and I know that I have to do exactly what he says— give this everything I have and squash all the negative thoughts, because we all deserve that effort.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Delaney

“If you can’t do this with her, then you know I’m going to choose you. Just like I always have.”

Try.

Try.

Try.

Why should he have to try with me? Am I honestly so unlovable?

I should have given them space like they asked instead of eavesdropping, but if they’re dumb enough to have a conversation like that, in my house, then they deserve for me to hear everything.

Because Jackson and August are so close, I’ve been concerned from day one that it might feel as if it was them against me, and I’m seeing that fear realized now.

I knew that they were a package deal; it’s both of them or nothing. I almost think that’s worse to think about than simply letting them each go their separate ways, because it means that

August is deciding to let me get away from them if his brother wants out. I was never going to be their top priority.

I don't understand why Jackson wants out, or why it all flipped so suddenly, but since he started acting weird the other night, I've felt this coming.

Something happened in his brain that made him look at our relationship deeper and with a more critical eye, and he's not going to get over it until he loses absolutely everything.

I'll let him try. Only because I'm selfish though and want everything I can get from them before I lose them; because make no mistake, I am losing them.

I hate that my mind is already made up, but this is what I need to do to protect myself and put myself first. They're not going to put me first, and I deserve someone that will.

When I hear August's footsteps getting louder, I tiptoe back to the counter and finish cutting up the apple I got out as a prop to make me look busy, smiling at him like there's nothing at all wrong. It's manipulative, sure, but bodysmiths are known for faking it.

"There she is," he says with a crinkle to his eye. "Jackson's feeling better now. What you saw in there has happened before. Change is just difficult for him, and there's been a lot of that happening. He wants to spend the rest of the day with you though, so I'm going to head to the office so I can catch up on paperwork and get us all set up for the move. I'll see you when I pick him up later."

I turn to him and wrap my arms around his waist, burying my face in his chest for what feels like the last time. I can't cry right now, can't let him know the inside of my head is completely at odds with my actions, because I will maintain my dignity. I won't beg, I won't demand they choose me independently, because I won't win that battle.

August lifts up my hair and rubs the ends between his fingers before tucking it behind my shoulder. "It's fast, but just know I love you, Delaney. I'm sorry that Adam upset you, but I do want to make things work with him. I'm trusting your

judgement on him, because I know there's a reason he's earned such blind loyalty from you. I hope you and him work it out though, I hate to see you upset."

It's so difficult to not laugh out loud at the irony of that statement, because it's entirely his fault that I'm about to enter into a terrible depression. But I slap on a smile and fake it some more, because that's what this situation needs. "I know everything will work out the way it's meant to."

He nods, then kisses me.

The rush of lust I feel from him charges me up from the inside out, because he's not at all lying when he says he loves me. This kiss proves it. I will lay all my cards on the table so he can't claim ignorance, even though I know it won't make a difference.

"I love you, too. I think you already know that, though."

He nods, then wraps me up again. I feel safe, untouchable even. "Doesn't mean I'm not happy to hear it, sweetness. I know my brother and I can be...difficult, but I believe in us. I'm excited to move in together, to be with you for the next part of your journey. We'll make the room work. I know it's not what you were envisioning, but we'll be comfortable there, regardless. And we'll be together, so nothing else will matter."

"You're being awfully sappy," I tease, knowing exactly what it stems from but unwilling to call him out on it.

"Well I've got my girl in my arms, and she just told me she loves me. I think I'm entitled to be sappy."

This time when he kisses me, I pull all the lust he'll give me into my body so it will last longer, because I don't know when I'll get more. My magic is nearly full anyway, but after being magically starved for so long, I'm desperate to hold onto this satiated feeling.

His mouth is sweet as it works with mine, his lips sliding against mine perfectly. I let him lift me and put me on the counter so he can step between my legs, giving in to the kiss even more. It quickly turns into a make out session, and I'm tempted to pull off my shirt so we can keep going, but instead

I settle for the way his tongue slips into my mouth and play with it. I simply exist, breathing in all that he is and the way I feel about him, ignoring everything else.

He pulls away far too soon with the evidence of his arousal in his pants, but I force myself not to cling when he takes a step backwards. "I'll see you later. Text me if you need backup," he jokes.

I hop off the counter and let him walk away. "Will do."

I find Jackson back in the living room, and I watch him for a second before announcing my presence. "Are you feeling better? Do you want to talk about what happened?"

His head tips over to me and he hesitates only a second before he approaches, folding me into a hug that nearly feels normal. Even kisses me on the top of my head. "Yeah, sorry. I get in my head sometimes and over think things and psych myself out. Thank you for trying to bring me back."

"You're so warm and cozy."

He snorts. "Literally the same body as my brother."

I shake my head. "There's a difference; you guys hold me differently."

"We do? How?"

He sounds curious, and I'm happy to prove to him that I've been paying attention, that they are individuals to me. "Your hand always rests just a bit higher on my back, and you usually use your left arm to do it. My head hits your shoulder just a little bit different because of it. Plus this other hand of yours likes to wander to my side, nearly tickling me, and it keeps me in this constant state of awareness."

He looks down at me, only pulling me closer. "Do we do other things differently?"

I get an idea in my head, and I act. "Might have a secret sex spot we could go test my conjectures in, but you're going to need to catch me first."

"A secret what now?"

I kiss him on the cheek and shove him over onto the couch, and then I'm off. It doesn't matter that I don't have shoes on, I'm gone.

I spring for the back door, crashing down the hall on my way there, and when I'm out, I leap off the deck and use the momentum to run faster. My arms are pumping and I can feel my hair streaming behind me and I feel so free that it's hard to imagine everything might be crashing down around me soon.

I shriek involuntarily when I hear him storm out behind me, but I still have a head start. I head towards the trees, bare feet stinging, but I'm having too much fun to stop.

"You brat! You seriously going to make me catch you?"

I cackle. "What's wrong, baby, can't handle a little primal play?"

"Fuck Delaney, I don't think you want to wake up that part of me."

"I really, really do!" I yell back, still making my way through the trees. Advantage is on my side because I grew up running through these trees, so when I know to leap over a nearly invisible fallen log that trips him up, I whoop and congratulate myself.

Okay, so it's not really a secret sex spot, but it is a bit of a secret spot. That could be used for sex.

There's this place out here where trailing plants completely cover up the entrance to a secret clearing next to this cute little pond, so I dive through the leafy curtain, wondering if he was close enough behind me to see where I went. I'm not safe yet.

There's a massive tree that marks the edge of this spot, but I've been too in my head to notice Jackson made it through just fine and is now right behind me, zero qualms with tackling my ass to the ground.

Nearly get the wind knocked out of me, but I sort of deserve it I guess.

Jackson pins me to the ground, face down, his breathing heavy and excited as he uses his legs to keep me in place. "Why you

trying to make me work so hard for something we both know you want so badly?"

I wiggle my ass underneath him, relieved to know I can at least still turn him on. I feel him start to harden against me, which only encourages me more. "No risk, no reward." I smile, but when he looks back at this later, he'll understand I meant it to apply to us in general, not just this solitary moment in time.

He wraps my hair around his fist and pulls my head back, rougher than I've experienced with him, making me realize another thing about him and his brother that differs; I always sensed he had a little bit of darkness inside of him, and I'm thrilled to find out I was right. "What am I supposed to do with a naughty girl that runs away from me, hm?"

I could totally dislodge him, but I'm playing. "Oh no, you've caught me. I guess it's time for me to be punished."

He snorts. "You want that too badly. No, I think I'll do something else. Up you go."

Fuck, I love being manhandled.

I risk a taste of his lust and tell myself not to be disappointed when it's as stagnant as it was before; none of the bubbly, decadent stuff I've gotten addicted to.

"This tree looks like it was made to bind you to it, we just need to get rid of all these pesky clothes, first."

He pulls off my t-shirt and unhooks my bra, pulling down the shorts I threw on this morning along with my panties. He tuts when he sees my banged-up bare feet, brushing them off and pressing a kiss to the top of them in a way that's in direct contrast with his surfacing darkness.

"That's more like it. You going to walk around our new room naked for us? Show us what we get whenever we want?"

I roll my lips in to avoid answering because he's playacting a little too well. He sounds genuine, but there's a metallic ring to his words that prove they're fake. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?" I finally answer.

He stills and looks at me, stopping his motions. He's using the vines growing around the tree to try and tie my arms and legs to it, mostly successfully I might add. Arms spread, feet bound to opposite sides of the massive trunk, which means he has unfettered access to my body. "What's that supposed to mean? Why'd you say it like that?"

I shrug one shoulder, letting some hair fall forward to hide part of my face. "I've never lived with anyone besides my family, I guess I'm a bit nervous."

He finishes his work but doesn't say anything for a few moments. "You don't have to be nervous, Delaney. August and I will keep you safe. Do our best to make you happy."

I nod, then take in the look on his face. He licks his lip subtly, eyes dilating when he sees his vision realized. "You look really fucking good tied up like this. These breasts might actually kill me."

His fingers run along the side of my neck, brushing right along the spot that Mr. Mysterious bit me. I've since discovered that it's a straight up shortcut to my clit. There's something about the magic Wilder used to give me the mark that makes me really damn sensitive there.

My head thunks against the tree and I moan, then I can't help but squirm when Jackson's mouth soon follows.

I feel his hot tongue tracing over the spot as if he knows it's there, following all my cues while his other hand starts trailing down my side, exactly like I described to him earlier.

"You're more sensitive here today," he says tapping along Wilder's spot again.

"Not just today you, just haven't spent that much time kissing my neck, I guess."

"That can't be true, can it?"

He continues his work as if to prove himself wrong, and I'm growing wetter by the second.

"Fuck. I can actually smell how turned on you are right now. Is that all for me? Did you know that when you need us, you

smell like cherries, dark and sweet from the sun? Makes me want to taste all of you so I can satiate the craving.”

“You couldn’t p-possibly.”

“I so could. But I’m too impatient for that right now. You made me chase you all the way out here, so now you’re going to take what I give you. You’re not going to come until I tell you you’re allowed to, am I clear?”

“Or what?” I ask, challenging him.

“Or I’m going to get a switch from this tree and I’m going to smack your ass red enough that you’ll have to think twice before you sit on any sort of surface for the rest of the day.”

“Ass splinters don’t sound pleasant. I’ll take my dicking like a good girl.”

“You think you’re a good girl? Do good girls run through forests and make their boyfriends chase them down?”

“Oh shut up, you liked it.”

He pauses a minute to think. “Yes, but how did you know that?”

I shrug up my shoulder again. “Lucky guess.”

He moves his mouth from my chest to kiss my lips. “No, I think it’s more than that. You kind of are perfect for us, aren’t you?”

I hang my head, suddenly exhausted. “Then why don’t you want me anymore?”

Sure, I could have chosen a better moment than now, one when I maybe wasn’t tied to a tree and naked in the middle of the woods, but like I told him already, no risk, no reward.

He stills. “What are you talking about? Were you listening in on a private conversation earlier?”

“Can I tell you something? I figured out my magic.”

Jackson shakes his head, confused. “What? When? Have you been lying this whole time about not knowing how it works?”

Was it just a ruse to get us to guard you?” He steps back, unsure.

“For fuck’s sake, Jackson. No. You seriously think I would lock myself in my house for years while the world keeps moving forward without me? No. I figured it out recently, when...things started changing between us.”

“Changing how?”

“Are you going to use this against me later if I tell you more?”

“I wouldn’t do that, Delaney.”

I narrow my eyes at him but decide he’s probably right. “It started happening the night after I went to the gala with Adam. We hung out longer and watched a movie—”

“Did you fuck him?”

“Can I please fucking talk? Not that it’s any of your business, but no. We didn’t. He started to think of me differently though because I...felt it. There was this brighter, new kind of lust, sort of like popping candy, which hit me when I dozed off on his shoulder. Maybe it sounds crazy, but the goddess came to talk to me. I’ll save you the details, but my magic hasn’t been able to feed off anyone else before, because apparently it only feeds off of people that have strong romantic feelings for me. Love, or almost-love type feelings.

“Adam leaked those kinds of feelings before he cut and ran, clearly terrified, and it happened with you and your brother a few weeks ago. Since I’ve been with you guys, I’ve been able to analyze it and compare it to other lust I feel when we’re out somewhere and someone else is lustful for whatever reason. I’m not starving anymore, Jackson. Not with you two around. I’ve actually been able to control my magic now that I can tell my stores are full. I finally understand how to care for myself now, to find what my body needs and use it for sustenance.”

He’s breathing heavily, but I haven’t even gotten to the hardest part. “And then what?”

“And then a few nights ago...it stopped. From you, anyway. You don’t love me, do you?”

“What kind of—”

“Please don’t insult me by lying to me.”

“I’m fucked in the head, Delaney. You’re perfect for us.”

“And that sounds like a line.”

“It’s true though!” He yells now, clearly frustrated by the situation. Then he gets up close, gripping my jaw with his rough hand. “You. Are. Perfect. Too perfect, maybe. Everything with you has been so damn easy. The falling, the getting closer...and then you had to go and fucking ruin it by talking about making us your mates!”

“I figured that’s what triggered you.” I pull out of my vines, because much like this pair of twins that can’t see past each other, they were never strong enough to actually hold me. I reach for my clothes, needing to be covered now. “I’m not going to filter myself to make you more comfortable, Jackson. You knew going into this I was a conduit. You felt that weird electricity from the get-go. I know it made you excited; what I don’t know is what about vocalizing it made everything crash and burn for you? Because up until that very moment I know we were on the exact same path. You saw a future with me, and you pursued the hell out of me. You promised me things that actually made me hope I was done being alone. You made really fucking happy. At least I know it’s not something I did, because I’ve been transparent. I just wish I knew why, because it feels really unfair to hope for something so much, and then need to scramble to find another way forward.”

He pulls at his hair, looking more manic by the second. “I don’t...I don’t know what triggered it. I have a track record of sabotaging things that are good. I can’t...I’m unable to let myself be happy. I’m not a good partner, Delaney.”

“But you’re the one I want!” I scream, matching his intensity. “I’ve never asked you to be anything other than exactly what you are. How is that not enough?”

He pulls me into a rough kiss, like he’s trying to force himself to feel. He pushes me up against the tree and fumbles with his

pants until my back is arched over a split in the trunk and he's thrusting inside my body without any prep.

It's tight and uncomfortable, but so raw that it feels wonderful. "It should be," he whispers into my ear. "I want...I don't want to lose you, because you're perfect for us. August can't function if I take you away from him, and I need to make sure he gets everything he wants. He matters to me."

I already know I've lost, but I keep going anyway. "But what about you, hmm? Can you function if we end this? Or am I always, as your partner, going to be expected to take backseat in your relationship to your brother? Because your words just implied I don't matter to you."

He stops all movement and stares at me. "End? You want to end this?"

I feel the tears start to flow, but I don't make a single move to wipe them off my face. "I couldn't want that less if I tried. However, I also don't want to be with someone who's only with me because he wants his brother to have what he wants. I know you guys said you came as a pair, that I couldn't come between you, but I don't think I realized that that was to the detriment of what you guys wanted individually, or how self-sacrificing you both can be. He loves me, but yet he'll give me up to avoid a conflict with you. What kind of hold do you have over him that he will do that?"

He starts thrusting harder, and I hate that I enjoy it so much. It feels good, him pumping into me, punishing me for airing all his dirty secrets. For seeing inside his head. Maybe I crossed some lines, but this is my life we're talking about, just as much as it is his.

"You don't get to talk about my brother and me like that. You have no idea—"

"But I fucking do! That's what you don't get." I use my bodysmith muscles to force him to completion, sucking him hard into my body until he stops trying to resist and gives in. I feel the warmth flood me as he comes, but as expected, it leaves me hollow, just like any hookup I've had in the past. I don't want a release from him anymore, so I unwrap my legs

and get dressed, using my fingers to comb through my hair, completely ignoring the fact that I've got cum already soaking my panties.

"You guys win, okay? I'm not going to be a consolation prize."

"But you— what is happening?"

"I know how it feels now when someone that cares about me touches me. That lust feels good, like I want to wrap myself up in it. This though? What you can offer me now that you've decided you won't commit? This feels like rancid chicken noodle soup. It's not nourishing, it's a little slimy, and I can't handle more than a few bites of it." I gentle my tone, needing to make sure we can still work together after this. "Look, I'm not going to lie about the fact that I'm in love with you, because words are important. I love you, Jackson. For you.

"I get that that doesn't mean anything to you, and I can accept that. You chased me, you had your fun, and now it's time to step back. You can tell your brother you tried to make it work with me, and I'll make sure he knows that it's on me that we're breaking up, okay? He doesn't need to know that I know you stopped caring about me, because that will only cause a rift between you, and I refuse to be that.

"So blame it on me, and I'll tell him I changed my mind about you. Gets you off free and clear, and you're free to go about your guard duties with a clear conscience."

I start walking off towards the house, just wanting to crawl into bed now.

"What about the new room?" He calls, jogging to catch up with me. "We're supposed to be living together, Delaney. How are we going to manage that?"

I spin to face him. "Do you still want the guard job?"

"Of course. I still want to help you, and we already committed to going to Hemlock with you."

"Then we'll just be roommates," I say, lifting a shoulder. "We have separate rooms anyway, so we'll make it work. If you're uncomfortable with that, we can figure out something else."

“I don’t know what to do here, Delaney.”

Fuck, it hurts. All the giddiness of knowing I found some mates, the excitement of being able to live with them and start a new chapter, fades away, leaving me with the obligation of going to a brick-and-mortar school without any of the fun.

“You thank me for making this easy on you, for understanding where I stand, and you go home to pack for the move. You call your ex again if you want and tell her her advice panned out exactly as she hoped, and that you’re single. Congrats.”

I don’t wait for him this time; I just forge on ahead.

The second I get through the back door, I grab my phone where I left it on the counter with shaking hands, and I dial August.

“Hey baby. What’s up?”

“Can you come get your brother? We need to talk.”

“Fuck. He did the thing, didn’t he?”

He can’t see, but I shake my head anyway. “I don’t know what that means. I guess I was only into you after all. He’s a good guy, but I think me and him are too different to make this work... you really want to do this over the phone?”

“Please, don’t do this to me, Delaney. I fucking love you.”

“I love you too August, don’t doubt that. I just wish I were enough for you.”

“What? Of course you’re enough.”

“No, I’m not. But your brother is. I know you’re a package deal, and I’m sorry, but I just can’t...I can’t be with him. He says he still wants to guard me, but if you’re uncomfortable with that I’ll figure out something else. I don’t have to be your responsibility. “

“Why are you trying to end this when it’s working so well? I don’t understand! Please, I’ll be right over. Can we please talk about this?”

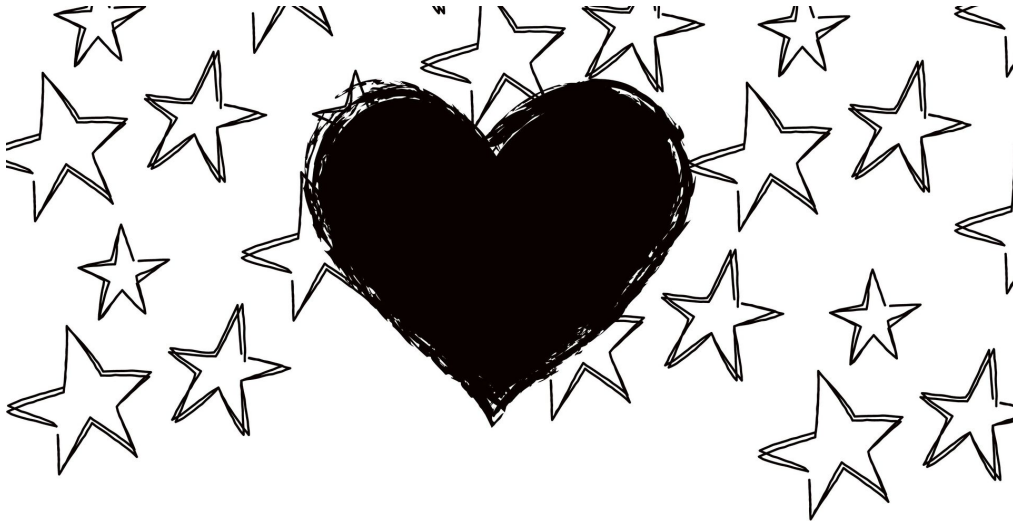
“One question. Would you date me if your brother and I weren’t together?”

I'm met with silence, which is answer enough. "I think he's going to be waiting outside. Take a few days August, and if you don't want to come to Hemlock with me, I understand. It might be awkward if we're together but not together, and I don't want that to be the case. You both— you matter too much to ruin the friendship we've been building."

"Fine."

And then he hangs up on me.

Now that I've successfully alienated both of them, I think I am allowed to go to my bed and cry.



CHAPTER TWENTY

Adam

“Are you expecting someone?”

I pause mid-homework assignment to stare at my door that was just knocked on, trying to remember if someone told me they were stopping by.

“Who knows?” I tell Cory as I jump up to answer.

I’m tackled and forced to support the body that flings itself at me, but I’d know this human anywhere. “What the hell are you doing here? I thought you were coming tomorrow? Damn it Delaney, I had a whole surprise planned for your arrival tomorrow and you ruined it!”

She laughs and grips onto me tighter, and even when the initial shock of seeing her earlier than expected wears off, she doesn’t let go. She keeps squeezing, and soon starts to shake. She’s fucking crying.

“What do you need?”

“Just my best friend. Sorry, I’ll stop being gross in a second,” she sobs into my neck.

I turn and start walking towards the couch, where it looks like Cory is packing up their stuff so they can go back to their own room. Damn it. This is going to be tricky—they were planning on sleeping with me tonight since it was my last night before Delaney got here. I had a surprise planned for them, too.

When I sit us onto the couch, Delaney finally untangles herself from me, falling sideways onto the couch, which puts her head directly in Cory's lap. She gasps and flings herself off the couch, clearly not having realized there was someone else with me.

"Oh my gods, I am so sorry. I just came in here and... intruded...and...I should have called. Yep, I'll leave. Fuck, I'm so embarrassed."

I grab her hand as she tries to run off, laughing at how awkward she just got. "You're fine, Del. This actually good. This is Cory. My partner."

Cory freezes, eyes moving back and forth between me and Delaney for a moment before they recover from the shock of having a stranger show up and basically lie down on their lap. "I've heard so much about you, Delaney. We were just studying, it's no bother. I should get going anyway."

"Please don't leave on account of me." Delaney's face is bright red as she sits across from the futon we're sitting on, taking up a spot on the floor that isn't full of books. "Please stay. I'm the one that just completely charged in here, disrupting your plans."

"I'll stay if you stay?" Cory counters, a small smile on their face.

Delaney looks at me, gauging if I want her here or not, but when would I ever turn her away? Other than the time I left her, I guess. That was stupid. "You have any idea how long I've been waiting for you to get here? No, you're staying. Where are your guards?"

She waves me off. "They're still coming tomorrow. I think. Well, I guess we'll see, actually. I was supposed to travel with them, but I needed some space. I plan on texting them bright

and early tomorrow that they don't need to pick me up, because I am so not dealing with that tonight."

"That sounds like there's a story there," Cory suggests as they goes to my mini fridge to pull out some drinks. They hand me a beer and offer Delaney a seltzer before opening one for themselves.

Delaney chugs most of the can before nodding. "There definitely is. But...I didn't know you were seeing anybody, Adam. That's exciting."

I can't help but let that dumb happy smile poke through, because Cory is so good for me. "It is. Kind of unexpected; I didn't mean to blindside you. I wanted you to meet them in person because they're pretty great."

"That's so cute," Delaney says quietly. She crawls toward Cory and holds out a hand. "Sorry for my rude introduction. It's lovely to meet you."

I study the two most important people in my life meeting for the first time, space out as they make small talk, trying to pinpoint what's off with Delaney. Her sweats and oversized hoodie check out, she hates getting attention, and that would have allowed her to slip through the dorms unnoticed, but I think it's the way she's smiling at Cory. She looks...sad, in a way that feels unrelated to whatever's going on with the twins.

"So, story? You want to hear it too, right Adam? Or is that being too nosy? I don't care, I'll be nosy. You offered, right?" They ask Delaney. Cory loves listening to other people's drama.

Delaney giggles and settles back into her spot, then throws her hair up into a messy bun. She covers her face up with her hands and exhales rather angrily, and I get the feeling she's filtering out what she's going to tell us and what she's going to keep to herself.

"Maybe we should just start with the worst of it," Delaney mumbles as she grabs her phone out of her pocket. She swipes some notifications away with a grunt, then passes me her phone. It's a gossip website with a whole article on Delaney

and her love troubles, a big, messy headline suggesting that time is running out for the reclusive princess to find her mates, and then it goes on to bash her for an interview she apparently gave late last night.

“Apparently getting drunk leads me to do bad, bad things. Last week when I was out with August and Jackson, I may have given a soundbite to a reporter that I didn’t realize was a reporter, but nothing ever came of it, so I figured that I was okay.”

“Until your drunk self had to make sure you were okay, right?” I ask, because I know this woman like I know myself. Her drunk thinking processes are truly horrifying and awe-inspiring at the same time.

“Spot on,” she says, nodding and chugging the rest of her drink. “I thought it was important last night, while I was out by myself, drinking away my troubles, to look up the website the reporter I talked to last week worked for. I tracked down contact info and they responded to my DM with a video call. Clearly she sensed I was completely unhinged. Don’t worry, I had on one of Daddy Bal’s rune bracelets that will scramble my identity for a few hours, so no one at the bar knew who I was while I sat at there being pathetic.”

“And we’re going to get to the reason you were at a bar alone in a minute,” I inform her.

She nods. “This really is a great introduction to me, Cory. You’re definitely going to love me after this. I just know it.”

Cory’s eyes are bright and moony, and I can tell they already see the weird quality in Delaney that makes me so obsessed with her. She’s fantastic. You can’t help but want to be a part of the stories she’s telling, because they always sound so exciting and magical.

“Oh don’t worry, I love you already because you’re Adam’s. Anything you tell me is just going to make that problem worse,” they assure her.

She wipes imaginary sweat off her brow and tells me to read the article out loud.

I clear my throat. “An exclusive interview with the reclusive princess reveals how lonely and desperate she actually is for love. One of our staff members met up with this poor thing at a nightclub last week and said she was there with two men who seemed to be her bodyguards. ‘She looked really desperate between them, and it’s kind of sad that the daughter of Queen Gabriella has to resort to hooking up with paid bodyguards to get any action from a man. They’re basically like paid escorts,’ one club-goer offered.

“‘What struck me,’ another club goer offered, ‘was how she still doesn’t have any mate marks, yet we’re still supposed to believe that she’s a conduit? It smells like a sham to me. She’s obviously beautiful, but all I’m saying is there has to be a reason she hasn’t had a serious boyfriend yet, when most conduits her age have their group of mates mostly arranged. She must be such a disappointment to her parents.’”

“Delaney, this is absolute trash. How the hell do you deal with this?” My eyes are wide, jaw dropped at the incredibly negative narration. Cory looks just as blown away that somebody would speak like this about the queen’s daughter. “Oh shit, I just thought of something. Your parents are going to hunt these idiots down and annihilate them. I hope they enjoyed their two minutes of fame, because...yikes. I bet they’ll get creative in how they deal with this.”

She’s sniffing again, rolling her hand to tell me to keep reading. It infuriates me that people that don’t even know her can have such strong ideas about her character and home life.

I skip over a few more unsavory remarks, until the articles’ author continues with, “...and our staff member, after flagging down the supposed conduit that refuses to take her designation seriously, had a heart to heart with the woman. Tearfully, the princess admitted her concerning preferences about being with multiple partners at once, and we got the opportunity to follow up with her tonight.

“Last week, the Princess told one of our reporters that getting railed by only one person at a time was for weak ass bitches (we apologize for the unsavory words, we just felt it was our duty to let the public read the actual words used by this so-

called leader of the community). During a video call with the reckless princess last night, we asked her to expand on that, and she drunkenly slurred her way through a speech about how three ways were the way of the future. ‘Monogamy is out,’ the princess announced, ‘and DVP is in.’”

Who the fuck ends an article like that? And why the fuck do I feel hard thinking about Delaney in that type of situation?

Delaney inhales sharply and closes her eyes, tension bleeding out of her. That’s weird.

I work on getting my thoughts under control as I process how fucking out of line this sham of a news company is.

Fuck. “I mean, at least no one will have any misguided ideas about what you like. It’s basically a free dating profile,” I joke, probably too soon.

She stares at me for a minute, then starts laughing so hard that she has to run to my bathroom so she doesn’t pee herself.

When she comes back out, she is patting her face dry with a washcloth from my cabinet, because there are no boundaries between us and really haven’t ever been, plopping down on the floor again. “Yeah, I’m a real catch. No wonder Jackson wanted to end things.”

“I’m sorry, excuse me? He ended it? What the hell? Do you have any idea who you are, Delaney? How fucking gorgeous and wild and just like, absolutely perfect you are?” Cory’s outburst startles Delaney, but I just smile.

“That’s sweet. Technically I guess I ended it, but only because I had to. Jackson started to freak when things got serious between us, and I overheard him and August’s conversation. It was when I was on the phone with you Adam, actually, while we were going over room plans. August was begging Jackson to just ‘try harder’ with me, telling him how desperately he needed me, yada, yada, yada.

“I confronted him, obviously, and he freaked out more and told me he was just ‘messed up in the head’ or some shit and couldn’t let himself be happy, which is total BS, I know, and

August told me he wouldn't want to be with me if I wasn't with his brother, so I ended it.

"I haven't talked to them since, so there's a possibility they might not even be coming, but we'll see."

"Woah. That's...a lot. First," Cory interjects, already comfortable sharing their opinion, "this guy sounds like a major idiot. I mean like, MAJOR. Second, why do they have to date you together? They can't do anything apart? They have to love the same person to be happy? How stupid is that? Why would you put such a pointless limit on yourself?"

"Because clearly they don't think I'm worth it. I'm not going to waste my breath or my time trying to convince either of them to be with me. I'm pretty sure they're two of my fated mates, but we all know those don't always pan out." She shrugs like this isn't that important, but I can tell she's shredded inside.

"Come here," I demand, opening my arms. She looks to Cory for permission, because she's respectful, but ends up pulling them into the hug too so she's between us. "Fated or not, they don't deserve you if they're not tripping over themselves to keep you. I know you know that, but I just want to reiterate it. I'm sorry they hurt you, I know you were excited about them."

"I was afraid you were going to rub it in my face and be all like, 'I told you so,' but I should have known better. It hurts, but for once I'm actually in control of myself and my magic. There are some roadblocks, sure, but I'll figure something out."

"If they don't come, can you even stay?" I ask, scared that she will lose this opportunity before it even really starts.

"That depends on a few things," she explains somewhat cagily. "Things I'm not ready to talk about, but I guess the answer for now is, we'll see. I've got another avenue I need to look into, and research about lion shifters to accomplish—"

"Lion shifters?" Cory asks, just as confused as I am. I have no idea why this is relevant other than the fact that she can shift into one. "Like professor Wilder? What do you need to know?"

I TA for him, he's a lion shifter. He talks about stuff a lot, maybe I can help."

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," she mumbles, pulling her phone out again. She does a search for him on the Academy's website and starts cussing up a storm when she sees his picture.

"You TA for him? What do you know about lion shifter culture? Specifically relating to bites?"

We both look at Cory, sitting there looking cute with their head propped up on their hand, t-shirt rising to show off their midriff I love so much. "Bites? Like, claiming, mating bites? Or like, eating habits?"

She sits up and faces us both, looking nervous. "If a male lion bit a...lioness, hypothetically, in order to, as they put it, 'protect them', or maybe 'claim', would be a word that could have been used, I don't know, what would that mean, exactly?"

"Well everyone knows there are hardly any lioness shifters right now that are unmated," Cory says like it's common knowledge. Well, I guess it is now. "But in a 'hypothetical' situation like that, that's a mating bite. He'd be claiming her as his mate, permanently. You know they mate for life."

She actually hasn't started class yet, isn't supposed to even be here until tomorrow, yet when she sits there and starts screaming obscenities to my ceiling, I know that this semester with her is probably going to be either the greatest adventure we've ever been on together, or the most entertaining.

"Why the fuck..." she finally cuts herself off, pushing her sleeve back. It's red and irritated, the outlines of three mating marks raised on her skin like they were just tattooed.

"Woah, those don't look so good," Cory says, trying to be helpful. Bless their heart.

"Really goddess? I have to admit out loud to someone that they're my mates in some form in order to get the marks for them? THAT'S SO STUPID! What about...I suppose I didn't

actually announce that out loud, just sort of conjectured. Good call, you sneaky bitch.”

Cory scoots back from Delaney, because let’s be honest, she’s giving, mentally unhinged.

“You mated someone and didn’t mention it, Delaney?” I ask, actually kind of amused. I should be irritated that she didn’t confide in me, but I know she’s figuring this all out as she goes.

“He bit me and promised it was ‘for my safety’ then fled. AFTER,” she exclaims, “a long-winded speech about how his dick may or may not be the size of a gherkin.”

“Like those tiny cocktail pickles? Oh honey,” Cory sympathizes.

“Like those tiny cocktail pickles,” Delaney agrees.

“Wait, back up,” I beg. “Who? Without your permission? Whose ass do I need to kick? Who the hell bit you?”

She points to her phone. “Him! Right there. That guy, on the screen, conduit-nabbed me at the leadership mixer, and after a story about his evil father, he bit me as I was trying to walk out of that goddess forsaken tent, while pinning me to the ground. Though in his defense, he did seem sad when he left.”

“YOU’RE MATED TO PROFESSOR WILDER?” Cory gasps, hands covering their mouth.

“No. He bit me. That’s it,” Delaney clarifies.

“Oh my fucking gods,” Corey says, mumbling something about how they knew something had changed with the teacher he works with.

“Well, at least I don’t have to track him down then,” Delaney says. She’s taking this remarkably well. I’m sure the meltdown is imminent.

“I think I’m fucked,” she adds a few seconds later. We all sit silently for a minute, processing, and then Delaney very calmly walks to my bed and starts screaming into one of my pillows.

There it is.

* * *

THANK YOU dear readers, for supporting me. It's a dream come true to get all these weird stories out of my head, and I hope I get to do it for years to come! As a treat, here's a sneak peek at a new project coming sometime this year:

My new and Improved Alien Lovers

"I just really think we need to get back to those days, you know?"

I stare at my cup, wondering how it got empty so quickly. I'm pretty sure this cocktail was full just a minute ago. The silence at the table has me realizing that I missed something that my date said. Shit. What was the last thing he said? Oh, he was droning on about how women aren't very feminine anymore. It appears I'm getting another vodka soda. I see our waiter across the room and hold up my cup, motioning towards it so he knows exactly what I need right now to get through the rest of this date.

I start wondering exactly how many cocktails it would take me to agree with any of the bull this guy is spewing out of his mouth. "I've gotta be honest with you Aaron," I say, choosing not to suppress the big belch that has worked its way up to my sternum. He thinks women aren't feminine anymore? I guess there's no point in trying then. He's got all of us figured out.

"The problem isn't the women," I assure him. "Do you know how much effort I put into this date tonight? Do you know how long it takes to shave every inch of these legs? No, no forget that. Do you know how difficult it is to shave your crotch when you can't even fully see it? The angles you have to twist yourself into to make sure that the razor reaches everywhere without shaving off any necessary bits? And for this? Do you even eat pussy?"

"Excuse me?"

"Pussy. Do you eat it. Because based off this conversation, I'm kind of getting the feeling that you probably don't. And this is

a big fucking waste of my time if that's the case. I give phenomenal head, but if you're not going to reciprocate, then this is going to end like any other date I've had. With me unfulfilled." Shit. What the hell did they put in that drink? Truth serum?

"I have in the past, yes," he utters, looking very not confident with his answer. Then he gathers his courage. "This is exactly what I'm talking about. It is highly unattractive to hear a woman speak thusly."

I get a spark of inspiration. "Let's call up one of your exes. I'm gonna need a review before I can continue this date. I need to know exactly what I'm getting myself into, to see if it's worth dealing with the irritation of your voice." I get my phone out "What's her name? Phone number? How long were you together?"

Aaron sputter. "Are you serious right now? How the hell do you think this is appropriate date behavior?"

The waiter blessedly drops off a refill of my drink, and I'm quick to slam it down. The alcohol goes straight to my bloodstream, leaving me so much happier than I was just a second ago. "Do you realize you've been droning on for close to forty minutes now, extolling the virtues of a strong male? Do you know how many times you've belittled women? How many misogynistic remarks you've made thinking they're opinions and that they're okay to say? Because I've been keeping a tally. I've got to say, you not might not be the worst person I've gone out with, but you very well might be the last. This might be the date that turns me on to women."

"I think we're done here," he says. "Dinner's on me; enjoy." He throws his napkin down.

"Wait!" I yell. "I've been in this situation before. I will pay my way, because if I don't, you're going to think it's okay to call me up next week and remind me that you bought me a meal, and you're going to think that I owe you something for it. I'm not I'm playing that game again." I thrust some bills back at him and he storms off. Good riddance.

And then I'm left at my sad little table for two by myself, and I'm just over it. All I feel like doing now is getting shit faced and making bad decisions.

Why can't I be attracted to women? Surely all of my problems would be solved.

I've done everything they say you're supposed to do; I've gotten my career in a stable place, I own a house, I exercise three times a week, I eat right, and I go on date after date after date. Every time I think I've met the worst the single men, I'm proven wrong.

Remind me; what does it take for a girl to meet somebody that will show up on time and put forth a little effort into their appearance? Why is it so damn hard to find somebody interested in an actual relationship, and not a quick hook up?

Well, that alcohol is really...Yep it's working. My waiter stops by to drop off the bill. "He seemed like an interesting fellow..."

"He wasn't, I promise you."

"I've seen you in here a few times before, and you're always with somebody new. No look finding someone you connect with?"

Is this guy a waiter or therapist? "To be honest, I think I've lost hope for the male gender as a whole."

"My wife always says she took the last good one off the market," my waiter replies with a wink.

Great another happy person. "She might be right about that," I mumble, counting out some bills for a tip and dropping them on the table.

He doesn't leave quite yet though. "Hey this really isn't my business, and it's pretty crazy, but have you heard about that new program the government rolled out? I only say it because I've heard my cousin complain about dating, and she's about your age as well. She snapped and signed herself up. She says those aliens are nothing like human men."

Did not see this going there. I stand up and collect my things, wobbling only slightly from numerous shots of alcohol consumed since I sat down. "Great. Thanks for the advice?" If even the server is recognizing me and telling me my life is a shithole and that I'd be better off seeking love somewhere other than earth, I think I might have hit rock bottom. "Tell your wife she's a bitch," I say as I start to walk off.

He looks at me, shocked. And I can't help laughing. "I mean for taking the last good guy," I amend. "I'm going to leave. I'll pick a new restaurant next time."

I stumble out of the restaurant, completely drunk now. I decide to interview a couple people on the street on the way home, asking them if I should give up all hope and go bang an alien instead.

* * *

Please note that the date on Amazon for the next book in the new Hemlock series incorrect: that is a place holder, and it will be out hopefully within a few months of Hemlock or Bust's release.

If you want more characters like this, go read my Hemlock Academy and Territory Walk series if you haven't already!

Follow me on social media to stay in the loop with everything I have going on: linktr.ee/KelseySolizAuthor

You'll find all my social media handles, a link to join my patreon, see what book signings I'll be at, order signed copies, and more.

The rest of my damn catalog:

Stand-Alones:

Monsters In my Bed

Like Father, Like Son

Under the Magnolia

Getting Back Me

All of Santa's Reindeer

Gobble, Gobble

Theirs to Claim
Hidden
Lowlife
My New and Improved Alien Lovers
Hemlock Academy Series:
First Addition
Second Glances
Three to Find
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Lost Wolf Pt. 2
Tamed Wolf
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Four Betrothals
Four bonds
One Family